**Chapter 14**

**The Anvil and the Warhammer**

**Lord Edmure Tully 6**

After the Battle of the Red Tears, Edmure had come to the conclusion he had been far, very far, from honouring his father’s legacy over the Riverlands. Hoster Tully had not been just his father, but the Lord Paramount of the Trident and the Rivers, and his son was sworn to tell him the truth in all circumstances, no matter how painful or disastrous this might be.

And the young man who was now Lord of Riverrun had rarely revealed nothing but the truth when the time came to report what he had done to his liege, and his father had closed his eyes upon it, because with Catelyn lost to the Northern heretics and Lysa an Arryn by marriage and not answering a single letter, Edmure was the last Tully to carry on the name and continue a millennia-old prestigious House, unless their uncle the Blackfish decided to marry a woman and sire children, something he had refused to do for as long as anyone could remember.

Meagre consolation, Uncle Brynden wasn’t here today. Edmure had not asked, but he presumed the old veteran of the last war against the Blackfyre pretenders and multiple bandits’ hunts was with the second echelon of the Vale muster, soon to come out of the Bloody Gate to reinforce Crownlands levies, the Reach vanguard, and the columns of Stormlands cavalry and Dorn pikemen. So he wouldn’t have to justify his disastrous choices these last years. No lies to one of the people he was still able to call ‘family’.

Not that ‘truths’ were permanent like the way they used to be. When Edmure had discovered the fields around the Twins, it had been totally flat ground, and he had told as much to the other commanders. The Green Fork was a blue-green colour, more a dark blue than green but he wasn’t an artist or a bard, and the Twins had stood like an unmovable object blocking the way any invader foolish enough to come here. The bridge, the source of constant irritation for so many Noble Houses of the Riverlands, had been so defended Lord Walder had boasted fifty thousand men would not be enough to take it.

“What in the Seven Hells have the heretics done to the plains of the Twins?” Tristan Ryger was the first to blurt out when a hill which had definitely not been here the last time stopped blocking their view.

Edmure, past the initial moment of shock, was forced to acknowledge there was something extremely wrong with the entire scene, and the most troubling thing was not necessarily the one everyone thought about.

The grand army which had marched north to face the Northerners and their allies-in-heresy the Ironborn was still in great part on the Kingsroad, and contrary to what one might think, this project of stones and long labour had not led to the Twins in the first place. It was coming close to it, yes, but you were forced to leave it if you wanted to enter on the lands belonging to House Frey.

This was frightening, as this implied demonic powers the Lord of Riverrun felt uneasy at the mere mention of. And this was just the first thing which worried him, like it spread confusion, fear, and anger in the ranks of the people who had been with him the first time they ‘enjoyed’ the ‘hospitality’ of House Frey.

“The water is wrong,” a Charlton knight declared.

“The water? The clouds are wrong!”

“Have you seen these hills? How by the Father Above were they able to elevate it like that in less than a moon?”

There was a lot of noise, and Edmure didn’t listen to each word spoken. With his eyes, he could see the truth as well as everyone. The tumultuous waters of the Green Fork, blue when they left their camp the last dawn, were now a vibrant green and roaring in fury. The vegetation was changing. In this part of the Riverlands, there had only been green grass, fruit trees, and the harvested fields, but now this ‘truth’ has suffered radical changes.

Instead of flat ground perfect for a cavalry charge, a hilly expanse welcomed them. And while there was grass, it was...chaotic. Some parts looked like they had received enough water to last twenty moons, while in patches several feet away, the colour was yellow and sick. Large trees bearing fruits Edmure had never seen before were presenting their branches, while others had no trees and could only be described as frail, sickly, and without leaves.

This was wrong. The no-longer-flat plain was still visually pleasant, but every time his horse came closest to a detail, the problems multiplied. Several plants were presenting thorns, like they felt the need to discourage some predators. The wild animals a Piper captain had informed to be ‘goats’ looked like no livestock of any civilised realm, having horridly distorted necks, large fangs, red eyes, and most had to be shot down with arrows.

“The heretics’ foul sorcery is corrupting everything their treacherous feet touch,” a septon announced in a tone that brokered no debate. “We must expel them immediately from the Riverlands and burn demonic altars and their fell machines.”

“I completely agree with you,” Edmure said as the skies over the Twins continued to present all the sign of two storms, one blue, one green, fighting each other for dominance. More than a glance staring at this heretical phenomenon gave an headache and hurt the eyes, though, and instructions rapidly went on to avoid looking at one more evidence of the Starks’ perversion and crimes against the realm. “And the moment we can launch a cavalry charge to dislodge there heretics, the spears of Riverrun and the Trident will slay these evil beasts. But it doesn’t look like the traitors and monsters want to offer us battle today.”

The enemy army was clearly waiting behind large moats and a small-sized swamp. With the eastern fortress of the Twins in their hands – Edmure felt a twinge of guilt at that thought – whoever had won the Battle of Red Tears had turned his troops around and inundated the land closest to the fortress.

Now there were three large obstacles of water and mud to reach if one wanted to attack the heretics’ camp...as far as he was able to see from his current position. There might be others.

As the thousands of men continued to ride, the mood rapidly turned to loathing and oaths of revenge. The heretics had crucified, impaled, and dismembered many loyal soldiers of House Frey on the road.

A road everyone proceeded to abandon when its shade turned to ivory and black, and like in an impossible nightmare, the paving stones turned into grinning human skulls and the black was the soot of burned victims, as large signs painted in blood informed them.

And over the ruined dungeon of House Frey, countless murders of crows were waiting, their unbearable screeching agonising for human ears. Edmure had known intimately the black birds and other carrion birds were following every army in existence, knowing that soon their hunger would be satiated, but this was something else. These birds, he couldn’t say how he was aware of it, were agents of the heretics, and no friends of House Tully, Piper, Ryger, and all others which continued to serve faithfully the Iron Throne.

“My Lord, I bring Lord Elbert Arryn’s compliments for the quick march of your men,” a young man in Arryn colours saluted him while removing his helmet. “A war council has been summoned, and your presence is required.”

Edmure gave a last glance at the fallen fortress of the Twins. Truly it was a severe defeat to see a castle of the Faithful brought so low, and he couldn’t even say that the western castle resisting was a balm for his pride: the Vale forces with them had not the stones and all other materials to erect a makeshift bridge or any other method to bring a portion of their combined army on the western bank. Defeat or victory, they could not touch the Ironborn and all the other horrors the Northern traitors had brought to besiege House Frey from Seagard and the Neck.

“I thank Lord Elbert Arryn for his generosity and I am on my way,” he replied to the messenger. One way or another, the Lord Paramount had a feeling this assembly wasn’t going to be boring.

**Lord Elbert Arryn 2**

“The first defences of our camp are completed and the sentinels are ready to sound their horns at the first sight of something wrong, my Lord.” Lord Benedar Belmore reported and Elbert nodded before thanking him.

“If the heretics try once again a night raid, we will slaughter them,” Lord Jon Lynderly was never humble at the best of times, but today his voice was truly soaked in arrogance and self-satisfaction.

“Lord Lynderly, please make sure to stop this kind of thought right now,” fortunately the River and Storm Lords present in the army had already left. “Our allies during the first night assault had no idea what they were truly facing, and learned the hard way how nasty the sorcery and the other surprises of the demons could be. For all we know, the monsters and their heretic masters have kept hundreds of evil traps in reserve, so we will stay calm and prudent. Because I can assure you, Sers, if we suffer the same indignity and humiliations after the Tullys, their bannersmen and their septons have explained to us the heretic’s tricks and deceptions, the reputation of the Vale arms will be dirt under our horses’ hooves for the next ten generations.”

The smiles disappeared and the expressions returned to the level of seriousness the Heir to the Vale wanted. Good; competent warriors and clear-headed commanders were more difficult to surprise and overwhelm than arrogant men already thinking how to exploit their victory.

“Lord Coldwater?”

“No soldiers are sick for now, my Lord. The water is boiled and purified by prayer and all the means we have at our disposal, and the men have been told ten times before sunset to not touch anything growing from these lands. So far, the men and the camp followers have complied with your edicts. They know the sorcery of the demons will do horrible things to the insides of a loyal man...and they don’t want to be executed either. But all these precautions are arduous and can’t be kept up for too long.”

“Yes, we are already keeping more than two thousand spears and swords to simply guard water convoys and supply columns,” Lyn Corbray in his usual belligerent tone let them profit of his bloodthirsty voice, one hand caressing the scabbard of his Valyrian sword. “At this rhythm, there will be more knights protecting carts and barrels than there will be warriors of the Faith fighting.”

“You have something to say, Corbray,” Lord Horton Redfort replied coldly. “Say what you have to say.”

“My knights have been refused the honour of leading the charge against the heretics.”

“Because if you were listening to the battle-plan decided at the council, there will be no cavalry charge,” Symond Templeton intervened. “Have you seen the large moats the heretics are hiding behind? No horse of ours can jump that far, and in the water, we will make splendid ducks for the ‘Tyrant cannons’, the corpse-throwing siege engines, and all the corrupted and malign devices the traitors have spread behind their defences!”

“And the honour of leading the first assault has been given to my House,” Lord Yohn Royce didn’t spit at the wielder of Lady Forlorn, but there was no respect or trust in the look he watched the knight of House Corbray. Any other man, and Elbert Arryn would have told Yohn to moderate his speech, but this was Lyn Corbray. The man was not a heretic, but his deeds and many rumours of his preferences were hard to tolerate even during calm and peaceful summer. “If you wanted to go first, why didn’t you say it in front of Robert Baratheon and Edmure Tully?”

This time it was the turn of the dangerous swordsman to take a sour expression, but didn’t utter one more word.

His attempt to spread division and lead the most prominent Lords to insult each other and discard some of the obligations they had already agreed upon had failed.

And since the second son of Lord Corbray had tried to sabotage his authority and the unity of his Lords, Elbert had the perfect task for him.

“During the war council, no one volunteered to take command of the right’s wing covering force.”

No one had even considered raising an eyebrow to that; obviously such a duty would pull you away from the real battlefield. The right wing of Lord Edmure would not be in the thick of the battle by any means, but at least they were going to be fighting and killing, even if they arrived after the other four-fifths of the army. But the right’s wing covering force would not be engaged against the heretics.

Its role was vital. Much like the knights and the men-at-arms staying south of their camp were securing their supply lines, preventing raiders from making a carnage on their smiths, merchants, and unarmed smallfolk, this group of two thousand men would ensure no reinforcements from the Neck or beyond it arrived to save the trapped force camping in the ruins of the eastern Twins.

There had been no sight of a new enemy force coming down the Kingsroad – the real Kingsroad, not this abomination of skulls and bones the traitors had somehow materialised in the Northern Marches. And as far as the Riverlanders and the other surviving knights of the region had been able to ascertain, the hosts on the western and eastern banks were truly the heart of the host the Starks had sent against them. By the banners and numbers alone, Elbert could tell this couldn’t possibly be the true strength of the North. Hell, the thousands of reavers staying on the other side of the Green Fork weren’t the core strength of the Ironborn. There weren’t enough of them, for all the weaknesses, the flaws and the lack of numbers the pirates had when they abandoned their longships on the beaches.

“While we make our preparations at dawn, you, Ser Lyn, will make sure your men are forming a shield against any beasts, demonic horrors and new hordes of evil which might threaten us while we avenge the brave souls of the Twins and Sentinel’s Stand.”

“You’re not serious!” There was no scream, but the disgusted expression of the Corbray knight was worth several name days’ presents. “This is the sort of things a glorified nursemaid should do!”

“Then consider yourself the nursemaid of the right flank,” Elbert retorted, more and more annoyed at the sheer disrespect shown by Lyn Corbray. While he didn’t insist upon every tiny part of the protocol like his Uncle did, there was such a thing as respect of the hierarchy of the Noble Houses, and this sword-swallower was trampling them every day. “I’m sure that with a warrior like you leading them, not a single heretic will be able to threaten the rear of Lord Tully and Lord Darry’s horse.”

If it happened nonetheless and the wielder of Lady Forlorn didn’t face a greater force than his two thousand men, Elbert would have his head. For all his noble birth, Lyn was only the second son of Lord Corbray and there was one younger man than him waiting behind him in the succession. The aggressive knight was, in other words, perfectly expendable if he failed this simple duty.

“We will attack at dawn,” the Heir to the Vale repeated as Lyn Corbray stormed out of the tent and several Lords chuckled. “While I won’t force anyone to do so, I urgently encourage you to multiply your prayers to the Seven, both for protection against the demons in the battle to come tomorrow, and to increase the strength of the Faithful defending their home on the western Twins.”

“We will do so, my Lord,” promised Symond Templeton. “The Frey and the Faith banners on the western fortress still stand, and there are no treasons or sorceries vile enough to breach the walls of the Faithful before we charge to their help and offer them hope and salvation.”

**Lothar Frey 5**

They said the arrival of reinforcements was supposed to bring you tears of joy.

Lothar felt many things as the fires of the huge loyal army on the eastern bank provided a much needed source of light in this darkness born of evil and demonic sorcery.

Relief and joy were not among them.

Of course, it wasn’t really a reinforcement army for him, was it? Before sunset, he like all the sentinels on top of the wall had been able to recite the names of the Houses which had made their forced march to arrive so quickly. Arryn, Redfort, Royce, Melcolm, Grafton, Templeton to name only a few of them, the flower of chivalry of the Vale, the steel fist of the Eyrie, coming with spear, runes and light to smite down the heretics. There had also been plenty of Stormlands banners, supported by dozens of banners of the Crownlands and the Riverlands, including the Tullys. It seemed ‘Lord Edmure’ was still alive and in command, if the massive trout banner was any indication.

It was a splendid army, obviously. Unless the sons of Lord Walder had all forgotten to count, the Lords of these different realms had brought at least forty thousand infantry and seven thousand cavalry, and there were more probably coming from behind, if they had learned something from the previous disasters. Once counted all the necessary scouts and independent detachments, this was an extremely powerful force of fifty thousand soldiers, and since the Vale knights were toughened up before taking their spurs by the raids of the Mountain clans, this was no inexperienced force.

But they were on the wrong side of the Green Fork.

This was an irony Lothar cursed all the demons of the enemy for. The castle he was the warden and the commander of still stood, but there was no army to break off the siege, or if there was one, it was too far to matter. And the relief army which had managed to get here in time had no castle to save, since it had fallen two days before.

If it had, the Arryn army could have played the role of the hammer, and the Frey would have been the implacable anvil, waiting patiently for the perfect moment to sally out, slamming into the enemy’s rear and changing a severe defeat into a complete rout.

If.

In reality, Lothar supposed, there had never been any luck it was going to work out. Since the Ruin of Sentinel’s Stand, the Lords of the Rivers and the Trident had never stopped reacting to the heretics’ offensives and stratagems.

It was galling to admit, but with the benefit of hindsight, Lothar didn’t see any need to close his eyes and lie to himself. The Northerners knew their own strengths and weaknesses, and the defectors and traitors fleeing to the cold wastes had told them much about the rapidity of muster of the Seven Kingdoms. The Starks had brokered an alliance with the Ironborn, significantly increasing the number of warriors and ships they could bring about, and devastating the naval trade of the Sunset Sea.

What had the Tullys and the other Noble Houses like the Freys known before this Crusade about the danger represented by the Northerners? Not much, not much at all, and now they were all paying for it.

“There hasn’t been any fighting today, be it on our side or theirs,” Perwyn spoke by his right side.

“I expected as much for the eastern bank,” Lothar confessed in an exhausted tone which was becoming the norm for everyone in the Twins, everyone who was still alive naturally. “When our ‘reinforcements’ arrived, they had less than three hours of sun left. Trying to launch an assault at that hour would have been the mark of a very dim-witted commander.”

Thank the Warrior and the Father Above, the man commanding this army – or the men, with the ravens all dead, his communications with the outside were limited to the heretics’ demands of surrender – was smart enough to realise that.

“And the forces against us?”

“I don’t know,” Lothar said, “they may be suffering from the Ironborn’s attacking southwards.”

But somehow, this explanation was insufficient. The demons did not require Ironborn’s help to launch more assaults. And even the contagious monsters and the diseased engines had stopped firing, generating more anxiety and stress among the defenders.

“Whatever they’re planning, I hope it will take fortnights, that way the Vale army will be victorious on the other bank and we may be able to evacuate our non-fighters to safety.”

“We will need fortnights to have something river-worthy,” they had no river barges left or much of anything able to float, and even if they had, Lothar had seen the size of the lizard-lions waiting in the Green Fork – which had taken an unnatural green colour now. He wouldn’t send his family or any other on this river when these monsters were ready to crush the embarkations and feast upon the flesh of children and women.

His fist slammed against the stone...or at least it tried to. Instead, it hit something soft, and at the light of the nearby torch, Lothar saw it was a magnificent rose...except he had never seen a rose so big, with so many thorns...or with a corona of things looking like fangs. It was red and green...and it was pulsing.

“ATTACK! BRING YOUR TORCHES, THE HERETICS ARE SENDING US-“

The flower exploded, and in a heartbeat, Lothar’s world became agony. A heavy perfume was arriving to his nose, leaving him confused and exhausted, but something was inflicting terrible pain to his face. This flower had projected acid on him. It hurt! It hurt!

“My Lord!”

The castellan of the Twins heard Perwyn’s voice in the distance. But it was muted, weak. It was covered by songs.

The world was dissolving into green. There were choirs of women singing into the distance. Flowers were blooming. Tens of thousands of flowers were erupting around the walls and the chambers, the world was only flower.

Flowers were coming from everywhere.

The son of Walder Frey struggled and tried to fight the sorcery afflicting him and his men.

When his sight cleared, it was to see the gates of the fortress he had sworn on his life to defend be opened by creatures covered in flowers.

Something struck him in the head, and his part in the defence of the Twins ended there.

**Lord Rodrik Harlaw 6**

The Northerners enjoyed battles and slaughters. There was no other explanation Rodrik could find why the assault ordered by Meera Reed had been such a butchery and a massacre of innocents, not to mention the killing of so many surrendering men-at-arms.

The storming of the western Twins had been pure murder on both sides. While the initial sorcery onslaught had decapitated – in some cases literally – the leadership of the Freys, the rest of the soldiers had fought and died hard, taking with them plenty of demons – which were replaced by many others – and hundreds of Ironborn, beasts, and Northerners, all of whom were far harder to replace.

If only his men and himself had been allowed to remove the corpses from the fortress and clean up a bit, maybe the Lord of Harlaw could have felt something approaching pride.

But Meera Reed had laughed when he had proposed it, and it had not been anymore question of it.

Besides, this part of the Twins was not really the work of men and women anymore. The stones were disappearing under a mass of carnivorous or poisoned flowers. The courtyard was shifting like it was a carpet of swamp insects, grass, and animals of the Neck.

No one would ever mistake the Twins for a fortress. But if the purpose of this citadel stayed the same, its appearance had nothing in common with the ancient household of Lord Walder Frey.

Already, it had not been half a night the location had fallen by force of arms and sorcery to the Reed forces, but it was painfully evident. The holes in the wall had disappeared, and this was not an illusion. Everything smell of pungent odours of flowers and plants, and the effect was so powerful Rodrik had to place a scarf imbibed with wine over his nose regularly to keep his mind clear.

Some of his vassals had told him that already a second circle of walls was literally growing from the very earth itself one hundred feet away from the ‘inner’ walls. The very landscape was changing to be more defensible and more in accordance with the will of their Reed commander.

Rodrik was disgusted by it. But there was nothing he could do to stop it. There were so many demons flickering in and out of existence that the first gesture of defiance would result in his demise, and that was if it was lucky. A few Freys who had the ill-luck to be captured alive could tell you what happened when you weren’t.

“Cheer up, Lord Rodrik,” Meera Reed returned from whatever endeavour she had been busy with, and dismounted her gigantic lizard-lion. “The Twins have fallen, and now the fortresses are in the process of being properly blessed for Grandfather **Nurgle**.”

Rodrik shivered, as the very name called something from the depths, and suddenly the environment around him seemed far more dangerous and mysterious than it was a turn of hourglass ago.

“You call what you are doing a ‘blessing’?”

“Yes, of course,” the gesture made by the trident in her hand was an ‘invitation’ to follow her which was impossible to decline. The walk did not take long, since the red-haired woman led him to the eight-pointed star carved in the centre of the courtyard. It was shining with baleful green energies, and at the heart of it, a single rune was beating like it was a heart. “For too long the narrow-minded fools Lord Walder Frey were content denying us our ancestral lands.”

Some of his surprise must have been expressed on his face, because a giggle was voiced by Lady Reed.

“You didn’t know?”

“I was thinking the enmity between your two Houses was more about a conflict of borders and resources provided by the Green Fork,” the Lord of Ten Towers said carefully.

“In recent times, these are the new excuses Walder and his brood found. But we are of the North, Lord Harlaw, and the North remembers. Long ago, so long none of your books remember it, we Reeds were the Kings of these lands. And the Andals of the lineages which would one day take the name of Freys attacked us under the cover of false alliance and night ambushes, burning our homes, forcing us to flee northwards, and exterminating those who weren’t quick enough to escape. But we never forgot. And now the cycle of life and death is complete.”

It had to be prepared, for at this moment the seven young women wearing only ridiculously thin rags stopped their singing and the sorcery ceremony. The changes in the fortress accelerated, and immense cracks and loud explosions echoed in the distance.

On the ramparts filled with flowers, demons and other things it was best not to name, seven other sorcerers began their own ritual, bringing more of this green energy and spreading corruption, foreign vines, distorted flowers. Everything was both beautiful at first sight, before the rot was revealed underneath. It was like an eternal cycle of beauty and ugliness, except in his opinion, the former was not lasting long, but the latter was everywhere.

“Walda, Roslin, Arwyn, Alyx, Serra, Sarra, Zia,” one by one, Meera Reed called the young women, and one by one, they took a step forwards and curtsied. One by one, Meera Reed touched them, and as green sparkles danced, the women’s clothes changed, turning what had been ugly beggar’s attires into robes fit for prestigious young Ladies.

Rodrik shivered again. He had thought the Starks and their bannersmen had a few agents inside House Frey, their knowledge of its defences was too accurate for anything else to make sense. Knowing there were *seven* daughters of House Frey corrupted mind, body and soul to Chaos before a single blade was drawn was beyond frightening.

Moreover, the forces of House Stark and Reed had just not corrupted the ugliest women they could find. No, Rodrik was an old man, but even he could admit that here in front of him were some of the fairest maidens of this part of the Riverlands. Their now deep green robes seemed to accentuate every curve they possessed, and they possessed plenty. Simple bronze diadems the colour of autumns and decorated with fallen leaves decorated their heads.

“You have done well,” the female commander of the western bank’s army told them. “Thanks to your secrets, our conquest was swift and certain. Thanks to your allegiance and your dedications, this fortress will belong to **Nurgle** for thousands of seasons. Thanks to your pledges and rituals, magic and the legacy of the Gods can advance further our reach across the Riverlands. Walda.”

The tallest of the young women advanced to clasp her hands with Meera Reed. Thanks to his genealogy books, Rodrik knew this was the daughter of Ser Walton Frey and Deana Hardyng, sometimes nicknamed ‘Fair’ Walda, and one of the most sought-for hands of the suitors who were ready to endure Lord Walder’s sarcasms these last years.

“Per our agreements, this fortress once known as the Twins is yours to rule over in the name of **Nurgle**. The enmity between our Houses will end as our two lines will unite in the cycle of life and death. My brother will marry you, and the blood feud will be declared null. Have you chosen a name?”

“Yes, Warlord,” the maiden smiled in a way which managed to be both seductive and sinister. At that moment, with her luxurious brown hair and her long green robes which had nothing underneath, she looked like a corrupted icon of the Maiden converted to the chaotic flora of the North. “I am Walda Thornfork, and this dual fortress will be known as the Greenthorn.”

Rodrik frowned but did not speak a single word, even as blue flashes erupted on the other side of the Green Fork, and screams came from his Ironborn messengers that somehow, the bridge sunk during the first part of the siege was rising up from the depths of the Green Fork, excepted corrupted and sickly green of sorcery. Suddenly, Meera Reed ‘gifting’ both sides of the citadel when the sorcerers on the other side were convinced they would have the eastern one made a lot of sense.

Rodrik also stayed silent as one by one, the six other ‘Nurgle Priestesses’ forsook their own House’s name without any hesitation and took new ones. The woman they bowed to promised them that in due time, they would have castles of their own to spread ‘extraordinary boons’.

There was a scream and an exclamation of joy coming from the world covered in sorcery and darkness.

“MY GOD!” Meera Reed screamed, her eyes blazing in joy like the fanatic she truly was. “THIS CASTLE IS YOURS!”

The flowers in the courtyard suddenly tripled in size, letting escape flies bigger than his head. The perfume went from intriguing and smelly to suffocating. More demons materialised, and the sky over the fortress became green.

“**For the Grandfather**!” strange hybrids of flowers and men sang. “**For the Grandfather**!”

“Leave, Lord Harlaw,” the soft voice of the maiden who had once been known as Roslin Frey broke the enchantment upon his thoughts and his body. Her eyes were a beautiful brown...and a black wine was writhing in her left hand. “Your destiny is not to stay here at Greenthorn. You have more to do in the service of the Gods.”

Rodrik ran out of the shifting and pulsing gates. And he didn’t turn back a single time.

**Jory Cassel 6**

Dawn had come, and with it new victories...but also new headaches.

Many of his plans had just collapsed by the fault of the Nurgle sorcerers. And now he had several Tzeentchian covens screaming bloody murder in his hears.

“May nine Horrors torture the souls of this bitch for all eternity! The lives of nine of their children, grandchildren and their cousins will be cursed by the will of the Changer of Ways! Nine pacts will be broken for this insult and stab in the back! Brandon, turn our sorcerers against the Twins! We have some mud-walkers to bring to heel!”

“Certainly not,” Jory interrupted icily.

“Lord!” Robin Flint’s expression could only be called mutinous and extremely disrespectful. “You have seen what the Reed sinner and her Frey whores have done! They have broken their word and as we speak, their sorcery is taking hold on our wards and ruining all our rituals! This wasn’t part of the plan!”

As satisfying as it was to listen to one of the arrogant practitioners of the Art learn a modicum of humility, Jory wasn’t going to gloat right now.

“Meera Reed and Bog Boggs have done that and many things which I have not given my approval,” the Black Spear conceded as thousands of stones and debris parts of the former Frey bridge were expelled from the Green Fork, strengthening Nurgle’s victory over Tzeentch. One might easily forget if one wasn’t a sorcerer, but the God of Life and Death was fundamentally tied to the element of the earth, and Tzeentch was symbiotically the water, like Khorne was the fire and Slaanesh the air. Obviously, it made the humiliation worse from all perspectives. “And I can assure you, they will be severely punished. But for now, we have a little problem ahead of us.”

The little problem was of course the tens of thousands of unbelievers brandishing axes, spears and swords leaving their fortified camp and coming in this direction. Even setting aside the peasants they had given a rusted bit of steel and hoped for the best, there was a large core of veteran warriors in this army, maybe thirty thousand of them, and most of them were born in the Vale.

Jory had known from the start it wasn’t going to be the one-sided slaughter of terrified Riverlanders, especially as this enemy force wasn’t led by an idiotic coalition of Lords hating each other’s guts. And since the Northern army he had the command of was outnumbered five-to-one, it promised to be a difficult battle.

Even the victory feelings of his men and women under him weren’t worth as much as he wanted. The Valemen had plenty of Riverlanders by their sides, and they could see the devastation wrought on the Twins. There was no need to be in favour with all the Gods to acknowledge the men of the East and those following the falcon’s banner were eager for vengeance.

And with the ‘surprise’ engineered by the followers of Nurgle, many contingencies in place to turn the tide of the battle were broken. The fact he had now a bridge to retreat to – or he would have one soon, if the sorcery continued to rebuild and ‘bless’ the stones like it did – was a very poor compensation. The favour of Tzeentch was lost for this battle, and it was going to be a hard task to regain it. Khorne and Slaanesh’s followers weren’t that pleased too.

“Only the blood of the oath-breakers will satisfy Lord Tzeentch! I want nine Freys and nine Reed sorcerers delivered to my tent!” The Flint warlord commanded peevishly like a spoilt child who had lost his favourite toy. Jory cursed Meera Reed and all her allies, not liking at all to be placed in a situation like this one.

But for now, there was nothing he could do to exact a painful retribution against House Reed. Howland Reed wasn’t present, and even if he was, the man wasn’t in command anymore of the two Hosts on the other bank; his daughter was.

A part of him burned to utter the command which would turn the full might of his army against Boggs and Reed. Ten words at most, and the Twins or whatever name Reed’s had accepted to rename the fallen citadel would learn the terrible cost of defiance. Jory served the Four, not Nurgle alone, and right now, the Three were not happy with their joyous brother.

But if the troops which had broken the accords on the western bank would pay dearly, his army would not survive this. No bridge to retreat, no great spells to turn the tide of the battle, and only moats and walls to prevent the Valemen from using their large numerical superiority, the Northern Hosts trapped around the stormed castle would not last two days before a general massacre occurred.

“Prepare your warriors to repel the Vale’s assault,” the Cassel commander ordered to Jonelle Cerwyn, and Fyron Amber. “The Tyrant cannons are in position?”

“Yes,” the Slaaneshi commander bared his teeth in a very satisfied smile before darting a tongue far longer than anyone among the warlords had. “Between the halberd-slammers and these weapons we will turn the water red with their blood.”

“It isn’t going to be enough,” Jonelle Cerwyn intervened, mortally serious for once. “A good part of our north-eastern circle of defences is incomplete, and I see many Royce and Baratheon banners coming this way.”

“The sorcerers will boost our numbers.”

“Not as much as I want,” Jory admitted out loud. “With the Nurgle’s chosen champions played on us, many great servants of the Gods will not answer our call today.”

And unless he decided to butcher half of his army in penance-sacrifices, it would stay that way for several days.

“Motivate your troops. If retreat is necessary, rally your best warriors and make sure this battle doesn’t turn into a rout.” As soon as the bridge was rebuilt, he was going to transfer all his supplies and rearguard followers to the other side of the Green Fork.

The power of the Gods was rising. Jory felt it in the earth and the air, the fires and the water. But it was uncontrolled and unfocused.

The Southrons could inflict him a defeat, and seeing the endless ranks of armours and spears march to confront his defences, he wasn’t stupid enough to believe they were going to be fleeing for their lives at the first barrage of spells, not with all the runic armours the Valemen had transported on their horses for this Crusade.

The senior warriors and warlords of the Hosts departed, leaving him alone with a creature pretending very had – and failing – to be a raven. With eight eyes and a red beak, the illusion was unconvincing, but it was not what the creature had been ‘loaned’ him for.

“Go find Lord Eddard Stark. The plan has suffered a large setback, and the jaws of the trap must close before the Vale army force us to retreat on the other side of the Green Fork.”

The worst part was that with all these perturbations, he completely ignored if his liege was going to arrive in time. The last night had broken many communication spells, and those would need time to be repaired or be rebuilt anew and reach the complexity of the old ones. And even for Northern Hosts using portals and spells to accelerate their march, it wasn’t possible to move an army of over twenty thousand warriors like a small company, Gods or no Gods.

“I am going to delay the Arryn’s and their allies’ attacks for as long as I can. I remain Winterfell’s obedient servant, in this world and the next.”

Another messenger was summoned as the no-bird took flight, and for this one, the message to deliver was far less polite.

“Meera Reed and Bog Boggs will send one thousand warriors to reinforce us immediately upon reading this message, or I swear I will ask Lord Eddard to cut their hands and feed them to their own lizard-lions.” Giving them to the direwolves’ would have not been a good idea, as the poor animals were not immune to all the poisons and mixtures of the Neck. “And if they try to be slow, I will personally tie eight hundred and eighty-eight of them to the altars and sacrifice their souls to reclaim the favours of our Gods.”

**Ser Robert Baratheon 1**

The first assault on the heretics’ lines had failed, but the second one carried his Stormlanders and the Valemen accompanying them through the moat and the last muddy defences.

“OURS IS THE FURY!” Robert screamed his House’s words while pulverising the skull of a goat-faced monstrosity and smashing his shield into a sort of large rat-like creature. The tales were definitely true where the ugliness of the heretics’ pet monsters was concerned. “STORM’S END AND THE SEVEN KINGDOMS!”

Thousands of men shouted back his words baying for blood and victory, and they plunged warhammers, blades and every weapon at their disposal into the flesh of the traitors and monsters.

The whole world became war, and Robert knew deep inside he was where he excelled. The frustration of going on foot like a poor guard had disappeared so fast it was as if it had never existed. The days of long waiting were over. There was battle. There were so many heretics to kill and slay on this battlefield, and it was making his heart beat faster. It was not the boring jousts of the last decades, with their complicated rules and their fancy armours and ridiculous helmets. It wasn’t even the dangerous melees organised by Stormlords and steel-hardened Lords who wanted blood and great deeds.

This...this was war. It was war in its deadliest and harshest form. It was a no-quarter struggle, and the enemy was truly inhuman.

“KILL ALL THE HERETICS! THE WARRIOR WILL KNOW HIS OWN!”

The air became darker and there was a sickening sound. In less time than it took to bark a warning, the moat behind them became pink and the thousands of soldiers trying to cross began to scream and get out of this boiling cauldron of evilness by increasing the pace – the water wasn’t that deep after all.

The screams paused. The water became a darker shade of pink. And in a tide of madness nothing had warned them, the Valemen trapped inside this artifice reeking of sorcery and madness began to fight each other, turning their swords and their will to slay those who mere moments ago had been their allies.

“STOP! STOP THIS MADNESS!”

“My Lord! Without the ranks following us, we are vulnerable here!”

“**DREAM SEEKERS! KILL THEM**!”

At this instant, Robert acknowledged Elbert had been right. He shouldn’t have gone in the first wave. The enemy had waited for him and the Royce men to take a foothold on the first line of defences, and break some beasts, but now there were no reinforcements, and the enemy’s reserves were now unleashed.

The demons came, and behind them were tall and cruel human-shaped forms in pink plate armours and sickly silver swords.

“**SLAANESH! GLORY TO THE GODDESS! THE HOST OF DOMINATION COMES**!”

“OURS IS THE FURY!

“WE REMEMBER! FOR HOUSE ARRYN AND THE VALE WE WILL BE VICTORIOUS!”

“THE VALE AND THE SEVEN KINGDOMS!”

The two armies charged against each other, and in all honesty, Robert didn’t know which side lost most men in this terrible melee. Three times he was forced to discard his shield as a cursed blade shredded his equipment, and three times he took another from one of his Stormlander who didn’t need anymore, before returning to the killing of demons and heretics. To his relief, it was hardly as difficult as the Riverlanders had told him. A good strike of his warhammer, and these ghostly abominations dispelled like the vermin they were. The problem was in numbers, and their heretical masters were terrible opponents. Worse, many of them were mounted on carnivorous beasts or parodies of horses which were carnivorous too.

Robert saw many good men dismembered, their limbs devoured, armour unable to protect them from fangs and poison. They were losing their warriors too fast, and while they were more men crossing the moat now, too many guards and men-at-arms were fighting each other because of this Seven Hells-damned sorcery!

“HOUSE BARATHEON AND STORM’S END! OURS IS THE FURY!” All around him, men rallied to his banner and his war cry, but too few. And as he struck down one of these ‘Chaos knights’ in pink armour, Robert could feel his strength decrease and the moves he made with his warhammer get a bit less perfect, a bit more slower. For all his experience in tourney melees, this battle had not allowed them a single moment of rest, and he was beginning to be thirsty. “THE FATHER ABOVE SMILES UPON US!”

“**AND SLAANESH WILL DEVOUR YOUR SOULS, FOOL**!”

The demon tide stopped and the mounted troops of the enemy attacked again. His men and those of the Royce were caught into an evil grip; to their left, the Hersy infantry was decimated, and to their right, the few Lynderly knights who had accepted to dismount and go with their men were falling like flies.

Robert pushed forwards. Instinctively, he knew that letting the heretics push the army into this cursed moat would be their death. The traitors had siege engines, and while they had not fired a lot today, if the forces were thrown into the water, it would be no great challenge to kill entire companies in droves.

Pink or red, the flow of enemies dispersed when it met his warhammer. No demon stood against him anymore. Was it the runes of his armour carved during his stay at the Eyrie or something more miraculous? Robert didn’t know, he just continued to smash and crush the skulls of the Northerners and the Ironborn, allies in heresy and evil treason against the laws of the Gods and the realm.

The air became thicker with a smell which was particularly horrid, and suddenly one of the heretics’ commanders was there. Like so many of his ilk, his armour was a brilliant shade of pink decorated with heretical symbols, spikes, human tongues and more disgusting things.

“Robert Baratheon. Yes, your head will make a fine cup once I will have removed it from your shoulders!”

“Come and get it, heretic!”

“I am Lord Fyron Amber, of the Host of Domination!” A spear of pink sorcery missed Robert by mere inches. “And I worship **Slaanesh**!”

Unlike the other warriors, the enemy commander came at him with two longswords, and rapidly Robert was on the defensive. Whoever ‘Fyron Amber’ was, he was fast, far faster than any swordsman Robert had trained against. In twenty exchanges, the Baratheon warrior was able to hit once the pink armour in the chest, but unlike other opponents, it didn’t hurt the opponent for long, and the heretic caught him twice, fortunately his armour groaned but endured the blows.

But in the end, it was not a duel; they were in the middle of a battle, and as hundreds of men managed to return to something looking like sanity, more reinforcements arrived to separate them and change defeat into victory. The heretic hissed and killed many Melcolm men, but he rode away to rally his reeling forces.

“ADVANCE! PUSH THEM INTO THEIR OWN MOAT!” It would only be fair to annihilate them like the heretics had tried to destroy his men and himself.

This was when he heard the horns sounding in the distance. At first, he dared to hope it was Elbert who was exploiting a breach in the defences of the traitors and launching his own attack with the horse and hundreds of Vale knights.

But as thousands more horns began to howl, Robert swore many curses his father would not approve of.

These were not Vale horns. These were no war horns of any loyal House, and as if to accentuate the scale of the threat, real howls of wolves resonated lengthily, a feat not unconceivable as the wind blew southwards. The faces of his men went from half-victorious to worried and panicked.

The reinforcements had arrived, and they belonged to the enemy.

**Ser Lyn Corbray 1**

He had not been supposed to win any glory, or to fight at all today. Lyn knew it, and he was sure all the Lords and the knights in the Vale army knew it too. Seven Hells, it was likely the cooks and the dumbest squire were aware of his disgrace!

This had been the plan forged by his commander, Lord Elbert Arryn. While more than forty thousand men tried to break the mud walls and the moats of the heretics, Lyn and his two thousand men were staying idle in the north-east of the battlefield, close enough to stay in contact by mounted messenger, but too far to take a part in the monumental clash of arms against the despoilers of the Twins.

And while the Heir to the Eyrie had voiced his orders like he was really convinced there was a risk of enemy reinforcements descending the Kingsroad at any moment, there were many other Lords, a lot of them Valemen, who had scoffed and mocked him for his rude words and the disgrace of not being granted a role in the certain victory ahead of them.

These loud-mouthed imbeciles had been wrong, once more time.

“New message to Lord Elbert!” the wielder of Lady Forlorn barked to a boy who was far too young to have learned to shave himself. “So far, our scouts see at least twelve thousand enemies, with two thousand ‘Chaos knights’ mounted on giant wolves. This is only part of their strength; we have seen new river barges descending the Green Fork and other columns land from the Bite.”

Several of the wisest commanders like Yohn Royce had wondered where the main strength of the Starks was, since the meagre thousands around the Twins could not represent the core of the Northern Houses, not with so many banners and cavalry absent. Well, they had their answer now.

“I count at least three thousand of their infernal mounted ‘not-knights’,” Ser Rolland Ruthermont declared in a weak voice. “And the banners of Stark, Karstark, Flint, Mormont, Manderly, Umber and all the principal Houses of this land of heretics and traitors are there.”

If the situation had not been so serious, Lyn would have amused himself mocking the fear of the young knight.

But as the land north of them was blackened by the immense size of the enemy army, as the sky burned red, and the very world they lived in seemed to change and twist to turn the Northern Marches into an hideous parody of what the Seven Kingdoms stood for, destroying the pride of his second-in-command was not among his list of priorities anymore.

“Three thousand and five hundred, they may have four thousand in that mess,” the heretics were riding hard, but they weren’t in a formation which allowed to easily count them. It was a barbarian horde in all but name, and yet Lyn noticed few flaws and weaknesses to be exploited. For all the apparent ‘savagery’, there was an experienced man in charge of this army.

“Can we delay them?” His younger brother Lucas asked next to him.

“Maybe,” Lyn answered, knowing all the while the truth was a grand ‘no’. He had two thousand men in command, and barely three hundred were archers. The enemy had easily five times that many beasts and monsters, and too many of his men were either idealistic summer knights who had rode ahead of their Lords in search of glory or Riverlanders who had survived the Red Tears while their masters didn’t.

They were all going to die, and the only question was if Elbert Arryn and their allies could retreat in good order from the battle around the Twins’ ruins before the heretics smashed them, caught between the hammer of their great army and the spent force garrisoning the hideous and nauseating green stones.

Lyn had been on enough raids in the mountains to know that in a fight, it was often the biggest army which won the day, so if the Arryn army could withdraw and reform on positions two days south, there was a good chance they might stop and vanquish the Starks. It wouldn’t be easily and cheap in lives, not with thousands of those beasts which had to be the infamous direwolves, but it could be done.

But it required Lyn and every one of the two thousand men under his command died against the horde. The knight of House Corbray gritted his teeth before drawing Lady Forlorn and handing it by the hilt to Lucas.

“Lyn?” Not brother, eh? That was fine, Lyn Corbray had never really believed in the ties of blood being greater than those of friendship pas their father’s death. And in a way, he could understand the surprise of Lucas, his words had always been that the Valyrian Sword would only be released when it was taken from his cold dead hands.

Alas for his oaths, Lyn had not imagined fighting against demons in a real Crusade was something he would have to do.

“Your sword, Lucas,” obediently, his younger brother handed him his average blade, though at least it had the raven and golden decorations.

“But-“

“I fear that if Lady Forlorn was to fall in enemy’s hands today, House Corbray would need many years of war to retake it from a Northerner’s bloody hands.”

Assuming it could be purified from the evils of sorcery and demonic rituals.

“Go now. Find Lord Elbert, and urge him to accelerate the retreat.” Obviously the force they had been fighting in the moats and the growing swamps was not letting them go, firing dozens of siege engines, including their dreaded ‘Tyrant guns’, but the efficiency of these heretical machines seemed to be lesser when their target wasn’t a fortress. “We are going to give them a taste of how Valemen fight. Archers! In position!”

Lucas turned around his horse and fled like the Seven Hells were in pursuit, which was not far from the truth, really.

His bowmen began to unleash their arrows at the enemy, but it didn’t seem to do anything. The gigantic direwolves and the other beasts were either protected by sorcery, or invulnerable to mere arrows, and the heretic vanguard was coming fast at them.

“TODAY WE TAKE THEIR HEARTS!” Lyn Corbray roared, and he grinned as the men who had sworn themselves to him shouted ferociously a couple of heartbeats later.

They charged. On an open terrain like this one, with no defences to speak of, staying where they had observed the battle was not going to do them any good.

There was a sufficient distance between the two forces for Lyn to almost regret having let go Lady Forlorn, as the black-armoured warriors had many swords shining with terrible glyphs of evil and some were even burning in blue flames.

And then he was busy to kill and try to not be killed to think more on his choice of weapons.

**Lady Asha Stark 7**

Compared to the race from Winterfell to the Riverlands the army had been forced to endure, the battle had been really easy. Of course, Asha wasn’t even sure ‘battle’ was appropriate to describe the one-sided slaughter of the Vale forces which had tried to block the progression of the direwolf cavalry. As it stood, she had barely the time to kill two men!

Unfortunately, as the vision in the distance made clear, the two thousand Easterners who had sacrificed themselves had accomplished their mission. They had given the alert, and the Arryn banners were in full retreat long before the Northern army could take the opportunity to fall upon their undefended rear.

“This must really disappointing, no?” She asked her husband who was watching with a stony expression the long snake of metal and weapons the forces of the Vale and the Riverlands were forming as they rushed southwards.

“Yes, it is,” Torrhen agreed after a long moment of silence, “but I could have accepted it if we could blame it on a competent commander on the other side and a lack of coordination on our part.”

“The Arryn commanding this big army is competent,” Arya remarked on top of her direwolf. “His first attacks hammered badly the four Hosts commanded by Jory, and he would have forced him to retreat on the other side of the Green Fork and destroy the bridge again if we hadn’t arrived in time.”

“Yes,” her old brother approved. “And I haven’t missed that the covering force we just destroyed was made of good but totally expendable troops. We killed Lyn Corbray, the Heir of House Ruthermont, and several knights of little importance. In other words, we removed warriors no one cared about. The chivalry of the Vale is still intact.”

Asha nodded, as did Arya. But then, it wasn’t exactly like a surprise. The shining cavalry of the Vale had not been fighting in the moats by the time they were in sight. Obviously the Lords had been waiting to throw some improvised bridges and waiting for their infantry to collapse all resistance on the other side. This must have been a great boon for the defenders, who had the terrain advantage, but it also meant the Arryns had not used their horses and their plate-armoured knights shining under their brilliant banners in futile charges and they could now protect the retreat of their forces.

“But if Meera Reed hadn’t wasted fortnights of effort in a single ritual for the greater glory of her God, we could still have inflicted them far more casualties than we did and maybe force them on a decisive battle before they fled with their tails between their legs.” Torrhen continued in a very unhappy tone. “As it is, we will be only able to unleash hounds and raiders on their flanks to bite their heels and lessen the spirits of their men-at-arms. This army is not destroyed; it is not even seriously weakened!”

Asha had not memorised by heart every secret Torrhen had confided her into, but the consequences of this failure were obvious once you looked at a map of Westeros.

“As long as this army is intact and unchallenged, the road to the Trident and the Bloody Gate is unusable.”

“And they can threaten the Twins or whatever name the servants of **Nurgle** have given it the moment they want to launch raids northwards.” Arya finished. “This isn’t good, Torrhen.”

“For your information, they decided to rename it Greenthorn, and erase both from memory the castle’s name and the House which ruled over it.” Torrhen revealed in a calmer tone.

“And how are they going to do this?” Asha asked curiously. “For the North and the Iron Islands, I suppose your decrees have the strength of the law, but for the South...”

“Unless I have misunderstood what my sources have whispered, the Reeds and the Boggs will let nature itself enforce their decree, nature in this case being empowered by their patron deity and the power of decay applied to memories. In a couple of moons, I wouldn’t be surprised if no one save a dozen or so souls in Westeros could remember the former name of Greenthorn.”

“Father won’t be pleased,” Arya said, and Asha knew this was more a statement than a gamble of how the son of Lord Rickard would react. Evidently, all the Stark leaders were convinced there was better uses than transforming a conquered fortress into a holy citadel for your God.

“No, he won’t,” Torrhen agreed, watching the long column of Arryn, Tully and other banners of Noble Houses abandon their camp and the battlefield with fully loaded carts and carriages saving dozens of wounded. There was little pursuit, aside from whatever winged assets and the siege engines which were still in range to cut down the last elements of the rearguard dying in the blood-red waters. “We can win half-victories like these every day, and still lose the war at the end of the year. The Targaryens won’t be brought low like this.”

**Author’s note**: And so the battles fought at the Twins and nearby are over. While the coalition of the House Starks and Greyjoys has made a neat gain by crushing House Frey and conquering the Twins, most of the military objectives haven’t been accomplished.

The White and Black Crusades will continue, and the North isn’t in the strong position they wanted to be.

More links for the End of Times:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

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