**Chapter 19**

**The Law of Arrogance**

*The first thing to remember, my friends, is that when it comes to their hearts, the demon worshippers are as human as we will ever be.*

*And since they are human, they have in them the deadly sin of arrogance.*

*They can’t escape it.*

*They can’t flee from it.*

*And too often, the heretics embrace it.*

*When they do, their black souls breathe arrogance like I drink wine. And I can drink a barrel before passing out, my friends.*

*I won’t deny they can piss acid and I can’t. It’s also true I saw one riding an abomination the size of the Black Dread while I am lucky to not fall from a pony.*

*The heretics have tainted power at their disposal, but with their arrogance worthy of the Titan of Braavos, these traitors believe themselves invincible.*

*They aren’t.*

*Believe me, Bronn here has killed his fair share of witches, horned beasts, and ugly things, and so far, a strong sword has proved a nice cure when it comes to remove a heretic’s head from his shoulders.*

*The important point is to ensure that it is the Great Enemy who dies, not you.*

*And so you must use the heretic’s arrogance against itself to give you victory.*

*But beware.*

*It cut both ways.*

*And the demon worshippers who do not let arrogance rule them are the most dangerous of all.*

*The Laws of Tyrion Lannister*, a war chronicle supposedly written by some followers of Tyrion the Debauched after the War of the Fall, the Citadel has invested an enormous amount of efforts to locate and acquire all known books, due to the countless incitation to hedonism, anarchy, and proscribed anti-heresy methods found within its pages.

**Lord Elbert Arryn 4**

If one of his friends had told him that after several moons, he would be delighted to hold the line near the Trident, Elbert would have laughed and cheerfully told him it was time to stop the good wine before the rooster announced the coming of dawn.

To be certain, Elbert had not boasted like some fools that they would besiege Winterfell before the end of autumn. But he had been nonetheless confident that, with the sheer numbers of proud knights and enormous companies they were summoning to march northwards, all the fighting would take place on heretic’s soil.

One way or another, compared to his previous ambitions and plans, there was no denying the current situation was a massive disappointment.

And yet, here the armies of the Vale stood, defending the single road which allowed his infantry and the rest of his men to be supplied through the Bloody Gate.

Or it should have allowed a constant flow of supplies, if autumn was not a curse by itself, dropping half a sea upon their heads in the last fortnight.

“At least all our digging in the mud has been good for something,” the blonde-haired commander told the Hand of the King. “We have nice hideouts next to the enormous earthen parapets and trenches...besides our tents and what we have at the camp, I mean.”

“Yes...” Steffon Baratheon curtly nodded, “the problem is that in ‘hideout’, there is ‘hide’. And many great Lords are beginning to...whisper when you are not here to explain why it is a sound strategy, Lord Elbert.”

The Valeman grimaced internally, all the while placing a hand in his growing beard to disguise his displeasure by a form of thoughtful expression.

“I know. And to be perfectly honest with you, my Lord Hand, my heart tells me to attack.”

His blue eyes watched the wall of new forts and defensive positions which hadn’t existed a moon ago. In better times, their creation would have been deemed too expensive, and no Lord Paramount in his right mind would have paid for such a project.

Today?

When you had tens of thousands of hands and tens of thousands of tools standing idly, it would be a shame to not use them...especially when it protected them from sorcery and some really foul ways to die.

“Unfortunately, my Lord Hand,” and Elbert didn’t try to show his unhappiness this time, “I know enough of war to know our cavalry will be completely useless as long as it continues to rain.”

“Ah yes,” the far older Lord of Storm’s End sighed, “the rain.”

The sigh was well-deserved. Mere fingers away from the small dug-out where they were exchanging their views, water was soaking everything.

One more time, the faithful Valeman wondered what had seized most of the septons and some of the Noble Houses of the Riverlands and the Reach to think waging war in autumn was a good idea.

Yes, obviously, most of the smallfolk and their masters wouldn’t be busy with the harvests and the myriad of tasks the highborn expected of them. Summer was always the most exhausting season for a farmer, on this his Lord and every smallfolk he had asked agreed.

On the one hand, this would have decreased...by at least ten thousand, maybe more, the size of their armies.

On the other hand, this war against the heretics...well, it had undoubtedly proved that hastily mustered levies broke quickly when facing demons and the other abominations born in the hell pits of Winterfell.

“Yes, the rain, my Lord Hand. The road to the Bloody Gate is secure, my Lord Hand, and Lord Tywin’s messengers have confirmed their positions north of the Red Fork have been fortified too.”

It was especially important, for without any stronghold north of the Red Fork and east of the Green one, the loyalist armies would have had to storm the fords with the heretics waiting for them behind fortified positions on the other banks, with their giant wolves, demons, hellish devices which could fire further than a trebuchet...it would have been another slaughter.

“The moment the weather clears and we are granted two days of strong wind to clear all that mud, my strong recommendation to his Grace is to march northwards and force the heretics to another battle again.”

“You are confident you can win the next battle?”

“I am confident we can kill thousands of the heretics the next time we face them. The more our men repel attempts to tear our throats during the night, the more experience our veterans get.”

“Yes,” Steffon said in a very serious tone, “but fighting behind defences, even those walls are half of the size of a proper wall, is not the same as trying to challenge an armoured wolf on an open plain.”

“I know.” The younger man admitted. “But given how slow Mace Tyrell and his host have proven to be, I am reluctant waiting for them before trying to attack the heretics again.”

“The sorcerers of the Great Enemy are powerful, but they don’t have shown so far the skill to bypass a proper army’s fortified camp.”

“They don’t,” Elbert lowered his voice, for he didn’t want the guards nearby to hear them, “but they can threaten our supply lines. Out of all the granaries and larders in the Riverlands, at least one out of five have been destroyed or fallen into heretics’ hands. And the battles fought near the Twins, as galling as they were, confirmed some of our bannersmen could embrace the lies of the demons and drag the souls of their smallfolk and knights into damnation.”

The scion of House Arryn didn’t say more; House Blackwood’s evil deeds had become a dark legend of treachery by now.

“The damned children who have not joined the treacherous Lord Blackwood north are besieged in his castle. And thank the Seven, so far, no one has shown any willingness to support their seventh-damned treachery.”

Elbert didn’t bit his tongue, but he struggled internally not to say that before the Blackwoods began to cut down Bracken and Riverlander knights, there had been little evidence of any treachery save the existence of old marriages with the North.

But with Edmure Tully coming this way, saying this would lead to an unpleasant conversation...another unpleasant conversation.

“That’s why I have urged the commanders in charge of the siege to finish this affair quickly. When the southern Riverlands will be secure and all the traitors marauders will be dead, we will be able to muster our full strength without fearing the enemy will be able to attack supply convoys behind us...provided Mace Tyrell bothers coming, at least.”

“Well,” Steffon said optimistically, “I’m sure the Lords and knights we sent to punish the Blackwoods are doing their best to break the walls...”

**Tyrion Lannister 6**

The Siege of Raventree Hall – admire the capital letters, please – would never have been an easy affair it was summer.

“But it not summer,” the Lannister dwarf complained as he tried to squeeze some drops of wine from his jug, before acknowledging that it was empty and no red liquid would come out before he refilled it...which was going to take a while. “It is autumn, and it rains like I piss the water I’m forced to drink.”

“And all our fucking trebuchets are unable to damage the sorcerers’ walls,” Bronn loudly reminded him, “don’t forget that.”

“I haven’t forgotten that, my loud and snarky sellsword.”

Since there was no wine left – at least, there was none for a dwarf, even if this dwarf happened to be the son of Lord Tywin Lannister; a few Lords were suspicious looking drunk when they gathered in the morning after he summoned them.

“But I swear on my tiny life, I have no idea what it will take to storm those walls...or to make a breach in them.”

Raventree Hall was no Casterly Rock. Seven Hells, it wasn’t even Riverrun!

But neither the ancestral home of House Lannister or House Tully had goddamned *sorcerers* participating in the building of its defences!

That was why the walls shone blue with heretical symbols, in case a moron hadn’t understood what they were facing. And why every ladder broke heartbeats after touching the cursed stone.

And why they were monsters hiding in the moat...though at least he had been able to deal with the problem they represented by frying them. And yes, he spoke of the monsters, of course. The moat was still there, filled with excrements mixed with water and some atrocious substances Tyrion wished he could pretend the nonexistence of.

The men of the Crownlands, the Riverlands, and the growing companies of the Reach that had been sent had tried to drain this awful pit of disease and heresy, but the rain was complicating everything. Every time they believed the poisoned things flowed away, sorcerers intervened, the ‘proud and fearless warriors’ ran away like frightened rabbits, sometimes with the long ears to match the animal...and everything had to be done again, as rainfall after rainfall fell upon this cursed part of the Riverlands.

“Why are we doing this again?” Bronn asked.

“Because the heretics are bad neighbours?” Tyrion retorted with a large dose of sarcasm and bile.

The sellsword grunted.

“Apologies, oh tiny Lord...to ask the wrong question. Why are *you* doing this? You know your father, you know, the one who decided to shit gold because he can’t properly smile, killed your wife.”

Tyrion didn’t speak...but he glared at the selfish and grinning killer.

Who didn’t receive the message it was better to shut his damn mouth, for all the evidence they were alone on this hill, watching the heretic’s lair that was Raventree Hall and the unending autumnal rain.

“Oh, you could say he didn’t kill her himself, but that because the gold-shitter isn’t one to dirty his hands. And you’re the rightful Heir of the biggest pile of rocks of the West, but he won’t give it to you. You have every reason to change sides and murder him in his sleep.”

A few years ago, Tyrion would have reported Bronn’s treacherous words, and likely smiled when they hanged the lowborn swordsman before the next dawn.

This had been before...this had been years ago.

“I could have.” The most famous dwarf of the Seven Kingdoms – and in his humble opinion, Tyrion had worked bloodily hard for the title – agreed. “I could have killed him, at least. And the Starks and all their cohort of pet demons could give me a throne, if I pledged myself to their cause. After all,” Tyrion chuckled joylessly, “if they’re willing to accept some of the girls of Walder Frey’s brood, they would accept a dwarf.”

And a dwarf who had dabbled in forbidden lore...two out of the four self-proclaimed ‘Gods’ would welcome him cheerfully.

“So...why?”

“Because I don’t want to live in a world where Chaos rules.” Tyrion declared bluntly and truthfully. “No, they were not guilty of corrupting my wife, since my wife was not a heretic, only someone who was trapped with some counterfeited manuscripts and accused of sorcery and other unspeakable horrors when the evidence was flimsy...at best. No, it is not a Stark or one of his bannersmen who has made my life the farce I live every day from dawn to dusk.”

Regretfully, he emptied half of a jug of water. By the Tits of the Mother, it was really awful to be sober in this sinful world.

“But while the comedy is awful for me, the heretics are transforming their conquests into true hellholes, Bronn. They will create a world where you can be transformed into a pig for offending a sorcerer. They will spread diseases and plagues just for the fun of it. There will be mountains of skulls, and an eternal season of war and massacre. You think you could resist, even after what you have seen so far? They would rape your memories until you slept with little girls and pustules-covered cultists”

His sellsword...sellsword ‘ally’...had the intelligence to shiver and look very afraid by this hypothetical future...as he should be.

“And of course,” Tyrion finished in a whisper, “that I think Chaos needs to be fought doesn’t mean I forgive *him*.”

“Oh?”

“He killed my wife, as you forced yourself to ‘remind me’, Bronn.” Tyrion smiled, and though he hadn’t a mirror, he knew it was an ugly, terrible expression. “He had the gall to lie to my face, and use my brother in his schemes. He wronged me. And as the old saying says, Lannisters pay their debts.”

He was Tyrion Lannister, son of Johanna Lannister, legitimate Heir to Casterly Rock, first in line to inherit the Paramountcy of the Westerlands. He was dangerously sober.

And for all he was a dwarf and his father bannersmen would strangle him without order if they learned of his intentions...Tyrion was ready to swear it on the name of Malal, in this world or the next, he would have his vengeance.

The idea warmed his heart and his head...and suddenly he had the idea which had eluded him for ten days.

“Bronn...I know how Raventree Hall will fall.”

“Wonderful!” His second replied. “You have found something to convince our men to fly and kill the sorcerers on the ramparts by vomiting upon their heads?”

“No,” Tyrion faked a hurtful expression. “I’ve found better. We’re going to let the enemy open their main gate for us.”

It was very bad weather, and his boots were likely going to need days to dry, but Tyrion laughed at the expression Bronn was making right now.

“Fine, if you don’t want to tell me-“

Tyrion laughed harder.

**Brynden Blackwood 1**

The Southron blasphemers feared those who had ambition.

Brynden had always known it. The blind fools continuously tried to close their ears and eyes when the glory of Tzeentch was presented to them, and when one head rose above its ‘betters’ and proved it was not irredeemably stupid...well, there was a reason the King and his Lords Paramount paid executioners to be nearby.

It had not begun with the Targaryens, but Gods, the blasphemers loved wallowing in their self-imposed mediocrity.

Honestly, did someone seriously wonder if there wasn’t something wrong with the Riverlands and the realm as a whole?

They were content to watch the Forks flood the lands and harvest their fields season after season, decade after decade, until Lords and smallfolk alike went to fertilise the fields where the latter had worked all their lives.

No, correction, the Tullys didn’t fertilise the fields. They preferred to fertilise the rivers.

Brynden didn’t see why it mattered for them to have their ashes swallowed by a trout, but he supposed some ancestor had made a stupid tradition by dying in a ridiculous manner and now each and every descendant followed his example.

Bah.

What was the subject of his meditations again?

Ah yes, ambition.

The dearest wish of the Iron Throne and all those who ruled was to keep the Westerosi in chains.

They could call it the King’s Justice, the tenets of the Seven-Who-Are-One, the debts you owed to Casterly Rock, or something else, everything in the miserable Seven Kingdoms was built to keep the ambitious from opening their eyes and realising they could change *everything*.

Minor addendum: this didn’t apply if you were a Khornate. Once a brute, always a brute, as the proverb said. If you were good at smacking your enemies around while a blasphemer, the God of War wasn’t going to turn you into an artist or a poet...unless you wanted to invent new songs while joyously opening rib cages and playing the beating hearts of your kills.

“Some of the blasphemers’ knights departed during the night,” his younger brother Edmund remarked. Lesser eyes might have needed spyglasses, but the sorcerers of Raventree used their ravens’ sight to have a perfect view of the battlefield...or as perfect it could be given the circumstances. “At least, I think they’ve departed.”

Brynden grunted in silent acknowledgement.

“It doesn’t change anything. Not with our enemies receiving several companies of Reacher spearmen in the last three days.”

This was the problem with the Iron Throne: you killed a couple of armies, yet they were always more coming to replace the mountain of corpses you made. Brynden was sure he had killed at least five hundred blasphemers before the enemy commanders realised the futility of their efforts. Unfortunately, those five hundred dead were nothing compared to the seven or eight thousand the strange assembly of Lannister, Crown, River, and Reach banners presented to his superior senses.

“They may try a new assault upon our walls soon.” Edmund told him as he broke the connection with his ravens and his eyes returned somewhat closer to unchanged human irises.

Brynden snickered.

“If they’re willing to try, I will have several nice surprises to greet them warmly before sending their souls straight to the Gods.” His hilarity didn’t last. “But I don’t think the enemy commanders will risk them. We may not be able to tap deeply into the aether so far, but our castle has been prepared for years to break the assaults of the Targaryen’s lackeys. And that means this siege will continue...and given how tight the siege is now, there’s nothing we can do to raise our importance in the eyes of the Gods.”

“We must obey the orders of our Lord Father, brother. Ambition is all well and good, but-“

“I know!” The Heir to Raventree Hall exclaimed, touching the ninth-blessed necklace he had powered with nine souls of Tully bannersmen. “I know. I am just frustrated that-“

Many war horns sounded extremely loudly, and Brynden’s mood, already not the best, grew increasingly angry.

“I thought I told our guards not to sound our horns without my orders or-“

“Lord Sorcerer! Lord Sorcerer!” One of his acolytes galloped on the walls like his life was at stake...which it might well be if he didn’t have a reason for this....

“What it is?”

“The dogs of the enemy are under attack from the north! And Vyr believes he saw several Stark banners, Lord Sorcerer!”

Brynden stared for a moment...then he bared his teeth and grinned. The aether had been too hazardous a method to warn Raventree of the Northern armies’ victory, and a little warning would have been nice, but their reinforcements were there, at last.

“Ha! It seems Lord Stark and our Lord Father have progressed far deeper south than anything the Iron Throne thought possible!”

“Indeed, brother,” Edmund nodded several times. “And now we are granted a golden opportunity to break this siege and offer thousands of souls to **Tzeentch**!”

“Indeed!”

Edmund cast a messenger spell to his servants.

“Gather the garrison, while I am going to don my armour! We are going to sally and destroy the feeble forces of the snakes pretending to be dragons!”

**Ser Hugh Ball**

“Ser! We’re under attack?”

“What? Why didn’t our sentinels warn us the heretics were going to sally out of their damn castle?”

An arrow missed his head and Ser Hugh screamed...before seeing one of his Captains fall down, and realise that the projectile hadn’t missed him at all.

“They’re coming from behind us!”

“And the heretics inside Raventree are opening the gates!”

“Curse the dwarf!” Hugh snarled.

He had warned again and again the creature Lord Tywin Lannister should have drowned at birth. He had warned him their rear-lines had not enough men patrolling behind them...

Hugh gritted his teeth. With the heavy rain falling upon armours and helmets, the Reacher knight wasn’t really able to estimate the number of heretics who were attacking the besieging army from behind.

He just knew they were coming right behind him...right as a long column of Blackwood riders came out to support their foul allies.

“We must stop them from uniting their strength!” The knight of House Ball ordered, hoping his stance was as ferocious and determined as the one the great Ser Quentyn Ball. “Men of the Reach! We are not going to let the chicken outsmart the foxes! We will not suffer the heretics to live!”

“Ser, I don’t think it is-“

“Are you going to let the heretics kill our men and destroy fortnights of work?”

Tents burned in the distance, and silhouettes holding wolf and various traitor sigils rushed between them, slaying loyalists right and left.

“MEN OF THE REACH! WE ARE THE HEIRS OF FLORYS THE FOX! FOR THE KING!”

“FOR THE KING!”

Hugh ordered the charge, and near immediately, everything went wrong.

The heretics sent an enormous barrel via trebuchet in his cavalry’s direction, and when it slammed against the grass, there was a massive explosion of blue sorcery.

Horses panicked. Knights and free riders were unhorsed, and sometimes they were trampled by their own mounts afterwards.

And the rain, this damn autumn rain, had transformed the plains of Raventree into a mud see...and it slowed down his charge.

Seven Hells, for all his screams of encouragement, they were barely trotting. Faster! They had to ride faster!

The next breath he took was one of pain, as a bolt of night darkened the already feeble light.

Hugh heard himself screaming in agony, and his horse if anything was in a worse state than him.

Mere heartbeats later, it hurt far more, as something incredibly heavy hit him. His eyes couldn’t see anything...until they could...but by the Father and Warrior, it hurt!

“Damn you, dwarf!” Hugh cursed as he desperately gathered his last forced to roll on his back, while slowly his vision returned. “If I had been in command from the start-“

“I think my Lord **Tzeentch** would have delivered into my hands the mighty victory I wanted days ago.” One voice he had never heard before today commented idly.

The descendant of Ser Quentyn snarled as his eyes recovered enough to give him the dreadful sight of one of the ‘Chaos Knights’ towering above him.

The armour was so dark it couldn’t be darker than the soul of its owner, and in nine emplacements, runes of eldritch blue shone....no! Hugh looked away, but not quickly enough to not feel the tears of blood running on his cheeks.

Hugh summoned all his strength and drew the blade from his side.

He was a knight of the Seven. He was going to slay this monster and-

Why was he holding a chicken by the throat in his sword arm?

“I couldn’t help but hear...let’s call it your desperate battle-speech, shall we?” The heretic gloated. “And I have to disagree, my poor Ser Hugh. You aren’t a fox. You are a chicken!”

Hugh dropped the squeaking bird and searched for a weapon, anything that could serve as-

The banner of House Ball burst into flames.

“The Father Above will punish you harshly, oath-breaker!”

“Your ‘Father’ is no true God, so you will excuse me if I am not that shaking in my boots,” the dark-plated Blackwood monster replied. “But I suppose it is as it should be. Pitiful knights for an inexistent God.”

“LIES!”

A dark laugh was the answer he received. And though the rain obscured his vision alongside his blood, Hugh could see the long trail of the men he had led...they were all dead. Dead, and for many, burning in abominable blue flames.

“You are going to have all eternity to apologise to them, don’t worry,” Hugh knew at this moment he really, really loathed the sound of a heretic gloating. “My name is Brynden Blackwood. And I am sending you to **Tzeentch**, a real God, who will be able to educate you how everything you did was blasphemy against him!”

“DEATH TO THE HERETICS!” Hugh tried to run to grab a spear...but his feet tripped in the mud.

“Pathetic to his dying breath, I see.”

There was an ugly sight of nine swords descending...and then the true pain began.

**Brynden Blackwood 2**

Brynden had known a sorcerer of his talent could easily slay one hundred blasphemers effortlessly when they did stupid things, but even by these standards, the Reachers had been *weak*.

The Heir to Raventree Hall threw a disgusted look to the corpse of the Ball knight. Everything his enemy – if he was so generous as to grant him this lofty status – had done today was ill-advised, panicky, and stupid.

As Tzeentch was his witness, the man deserved to be enslaved and be taught the error of his ways...but there wasn’t time. The siege of Raventree Hall had to be broken, and his host had to do it now, before the thousands of blasphemers rallied.

“GLORY TO THE CHANGER OF WAYS!” The Blackwood sorcerer roared, turning his flame blue and pushing his horse forwards. “CHANGE IS COMING FOR WESTEROS! AND WE FLY!”

“WE FLY FOR THE CHANGER OF WAYS!”

United with eight other sorcerers, Brynden exerted the Art where his God favoured him so much.

They were the masters of the aether, and the kings of the Art.

They were sorcerers.

Their mental prowess rippled across reality, and at last, the elements answered their will.

The wind pushed away the rainy clouds, and for the first time in days, when lightning thundered, it was not because of the weather, but truly because it was the will of Tzeentch.

The fog and the torrential rain diminished.

The horse-mounted riders of the Stark banners approached...

But as the awful weather turned into something far more bearable, Brynden felt something wrong upon his skin.

He didn’t know what slimy sensation it was, what foul sorcery was in effect...but it felt wrong. It felt very wrong.

And suddenly as their ‘reinforcements’ were at a javelin’s range, many things were wrong to the raven he had just borrowed the eyes of.

The banners were half a shade wrong. The banners were of a wolf painted white, not grey, and the runes were painted in a manner which would not summon any magical favour.

It was-

Brynden froze...and he took a couple of heartbeats for him to react and shout new orders. The enemy was going to be aware of his intentions, but escaping the trap was the utmost priority.

And yes, it was a trap.

It was a trap, and by his arrogance, he had thrown himself and all his men straight into its cursed jaws.

“THIS IS A TRAP! THOSE ARE NOT OUR ALLIES! THE ENEMY HAS TRICKED US! RETREAT! RETREAT!”

There was a monumental battle-cry from his right, and suddenly, hundreds of arrows came from one of the hills where the enemy had been believed to abandon its positions.

The tents, the Blackwood Heir acknowledged, had not been burned because of some deep panic among the blasphemers’ warriors. It had been to convince him there was no danger coming from this direction.

His sorcerers erected shields and began to protect them, of course.

But there were a lot of arrows...and then the ‘disabled’ siege engines of the Crown revealed themselves perfectly intact.

And as if it couldn’t get any worse...three large columns of infantry began to run towards the gates he had left mostly undefended.

“RETREAT!” Brynden screamed in panic. They had been baited with two hundred fools of the Reach, and he, like everyone else, had fallen for it. There was-

A scorpion went through Edmund’s shields, and his younger brother was impaled by the enormous thing, before throwing more of their sorcerers into disarray.

“RETREAT! TO THE GATES OR EVERYTHING IS LOST!”

**Bethany Blackwood 1**

Mastering the Art, in several aspects, was a lot like racing against the most violent storm imaginable.

The same could be said about life, of course.

Philosophical matters aside, Bethany had been the first to realise what was happening with her sorcery sight.

It was why she had ordered the war horns and all aetheric alarms to blare...except those had been muffled by some counter-magical disturbance.

It couldn’t be a coincidence it happened right at that moment.

Someone had decided to oppose the will of Tzeentch, and that someone was incredibly knowledgeable about the Blackwood defences and the Art.

This was not pleasant news, not when over seven hundred warriors and sorcerers of House Blackwood had plunged into the middle of a well-executed trap.

If they were in the North, where the Art practitioners were all taught, it wouldn’t have been a problem. Everyone would have used levitation or floating incantations to escape.

But this was the South. For all the efforts of the Black Crusade, the influence of the aether absent proper rituals was weak. There was a reason Brynden and Edmund had sallied out with true horses rather than summoning mounts worthy of a sorcerer.

“Lady Sorceress, we have a problem-“

“I see that, thank you Captain!” The sole and only true Blackwood sorceress guarding Raventree Hall hissed. And yes, part of her anger stemmed from watching her favourite brother die from a damned scorpion bolt of all things. They were close in age, and thus their true lessons and their northern Apprenticeship had started the same year.

And now he was dead, because Brynden had been too stupid to realise it was a trap, and she had been so busy with her own experiments that she hadn’t bothered to verify if his confidence was justified or not.

“How many men do we have left not counting Brynden’s force?” The young Tzeentchian sorceress asked as the columns of the enemy charged towards the nearly unguarded entrance of the castle, all the while her brother’s bodyguards and pet mages did their best to retreat...except their best was incredibly bad.

The enemy had sprung a near-perfect trap, and the followers of the Architect of Change were on the receiving end of hundreds of arrows and scorpions bolts, plus a few trebuchet-launched rocks for good measure.

“Fifty, I think, Lady Sorceress.”

Fifty. To hold against the forces standing outside, the only way to keep the ancestral home of House Blackwood standing would be to seal it away from reality.

Bethany knew she had the strength and the talent to do it...but it had never been part of the plans left by their Lord Father. Nor had it been ever mentioned by Lord Eddard Stark, except as one of the direst contingencies in case of disaster.

Said disaster should have been impossible, except-

“DEATH TO THE HERETICS!”

“DEATH TO THE NORTHERN BASTARDS!”

“DEATH TO THE WOLVES!”

“WE WILL BURN YOUR BLACK TREES!”

“REVENGE FOR LORD BRACKEN!”

The battered formation Brynden still led was too slow as it continued to erect shields after shields to protect itself from being shredded by the arrows.

And as the withdrawal was too slow, one of the infantry columns bearing the banners of the red dragon finally managed to catch them...all the while the two other prongs manoeuvred to cut their retreat.

And suddenly, Bethany’s choices were brutally simplified.

“Close the gates.” She ordered.

“Lady Sorceress?”

“Close the Gates,” she repeated, the words tasting like she was forced to eat maggot-infested flesh for eight days. “We can’t save the forces which sallied out, and I won’t be the one who will announce to Lord Stark that we lost both the Heir to Raventree Hall and the castle itself on the same day.”

“But Lady Sorceress, Lord Brynden is a formidable warrior and-“

The Captain interrupted himself as one of the two columns which had been flanking her brother’s survivors, filled with Southron soldiers determined to let no one escape, went to add over five hundred or six hundred more spears and swords to the already greater numbers of enemies fighting this butchery.

Brynden and a couple of the most dangerous sorcerers were still alive, but one glance was enough to acknowledge this was a fight no lone sorcerer could wield on his own. Not when the power to be drawn from the Gods was so weak here. Not with so few men against over three thousand enemies

“Close the gates, Captain! I will seal the castle before the enemy will be able to reposition its siege engines and bring forwards its ladders again!”

“Yes...yes, Lady Sorceress. By your will!”

The young Blackwood woman heard the fear in the man’s voice, but this wasn’t important.

What really mattered now was to save what they could from this catastrophe.

House Blackwood had played its role perfectly so far, but today was the day the Gods and House Stark would find them wanting.

Bethany had to protect the castle, or her life would not be worth a copper coin when the time came to prostrate herself before those who could kill her in the blink of an eye.

Shortly after this thought crossed her mind, the familiar growl of the enchanted gates arrived to her ears.

“SISTER! DON’T DO THIS!”

Bethany watched emotionlessly the battlefield the approaches to the drawbridge were about to become.

Her orders had been executed just in time; ten heartbeats more, and the enemy would have been able to use this hole in the defences of Raventree Hall to enter it.

“SISTER!”

Brynden was very loud, and fought ferociously with his sword shrouded in blue flame. There were over fifty, maybe sixty warriors around him, though some were only forming a circle to prevent the dozen of survivors to come to his help.

Bethany watched him silently...and didn’t answer.

She didn’t hate her brother, no.

But there was a choice to make.

The castle of her ancestors, or her brother.

Bethany had not enough magic to save both.

And if she expended too much of her strength saving the latter, it was possible that in the end, the black-haired sorceress would not be able to save anything.

“SISTER!”

Brynden was powerful. He was more powerful than her. Obviously. He was far older, and had gone several times to the North. Unlike her, he had completed his Apprenticeship to renowned masters of the Art before the Black Crusade began.

None of those advantages mattered when an axe finally overwhelmed the runes of his helmet and a large halberd bit deeply into his flesh.

He fell.

Bethany turned her eyes away from the tragedy.

“I am going to seal away Raventree from reality.” She told the remaining men. “Hold the walls and all defences until I’m done.”

“Yes, Lady Sorceress!”

“Those gifted in the Art are to study the enemy commanders. I want to know who is responsible for the trap we all fell into today.”

Bethany wasn’t foolish enough to believe she could avenge the seven hundred or so deaths this day had already cost them. But by being able to relay it to the Starks, maybe some good would come out of it...

Defeat. Truly it smelled fouler than her teachers had warned her in years past.

**Tyrion Lannister 7**

Raventree Hall was burning, and it was absolutely not his fault.

“I’m warning you, commander,” his second-in-command chose this moment to make him remember his presence, “I’m not going through that, even if the heretics offer us a drawbridge to cross the moat!”

Tyrion rolled his eyes.

“First above all, Bronn, I doubt any drawbridge, heretic-made or not, can resist the power of the cursed flames currently protecting Raventree Hall.”

More than ever, when this spectacle of sorcery and madness had begun, the scion of House Lannister had wanted to drown himself into a barrel of wine. A castle whose very air was burning in the abominable power of one of the Chaos entities laughing behind the Veil...this was the kind of nightmares you preferred having a cousin’s cousin report it to you, not watch it in person.

But there was no barrel of wine nearby.

Yes, yes, this was unfortunate and all of that.

“As for my second point, well...” the smaller commander of the Seven Kingdom’s armies waved in direction of the heretics’ lair. “The Great Enemy went so far as to make a shroud of fires and damnation to stop us from sacking their castle. I very much doubt they are going to open their gates again as long as thousands of our men are in position to attack.”

“That assumes we were in a position to sack their castle...”

Tyrion shrugged.

“Bronn, I know House Blackwood duped everyone as to their allegiance and betrayed the Crown, revealing their treachery while stabbing the Brackens in the back. But there was no way to disguise the fact their Lord took a lot of heretics with him to join up with his heretic masters. And when it comes down to it, the Blackwoods have a middle-sized Lordship. They could field a lot more sorcerers than us,” not surprising, since none of the loyalists hired sorcerers in the first place, “but in knights, archers, men-at-arms, and other troops, they couldn’t gather more than five thousand without attracting attention they didn’t want. And we killed seven hundred and twenty of them today.”

“At the cost of two hundred and forty-two Reachers,” The ungrateful sellsword snarked back.

This unhidden reproach didn’t concern Tyrion at all.

“Ser Hugh should have attended the war council, that way he might have learned his part to play in the grand plan I imagined.” The knight of House Ball was to be given the choice of voluntary bait or ignorant bait. The idiot not attending the war council had decided for him, in the end. “And none of the other commanders will protest. They hated Ser Hugh too.”

That was what happened when you were a moron loudly proclaiming your eagerness to follow into the steps of your famous ancestor.

An ancestor that was famous for only one thing besides his mastery of arms: his undying loyalty to the Blackfyre usurpers.

No, no one would try to take revenge for the death of Ser Hugh Ball...even his relatives were certainly going to be very relieved once a messenger rode to their holdfast.

“So you’ve won. Congratulations...oh my dwarf commander.”

“One day,” Tyrion shook his head, “your insolence will be your downfall, Bronn.”

“It was a bit too easy though, to corner the heretics.”

Tyrion opened his mouth to give a vicious retort...before closing it again. Because, damn him, Bronn had a point. The Blackwoods had two dozen sorcerers before they killed them, but all save one or two had been either young or weak. This was not a force which could destroy hundreds of convoys by demolishing the Westerlands and the Stormlands’ supply convoys.

And seven hundred men, plus or minus one or two companies, could not ravage ten Lordships at will.

Any Lord Paramount could easily free twice or three times that number of men to deal with any potential threat.

“You’re right,” the Lannister dwarf conceded seriously. “It was too easy. The heretics, unless they were delusional, couldn’t believe what the Blackwood left here were going to be a problem from Maidenpool to Deep Den.”

And if that was the truth of the matter, that left an interesting question. Where did the heretics truly intend to strike?

**Ser Eddison Tollett 1**

This year was a bad year.

Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. So far, they had a King’s death, the end of a long and pleasant summer, the arrival of an autumn which drowned them with what fell to be seven rivers worth of water, and evidently, war.

It was bad.

The moon which had yet to end was calamitous.

His father told him he would be part of the second wave of the Vale men leaving for war. The rumours of the first defeats suffered by the armies mustered by King Rhaegar Targaryen arrived. Then days after his company learned there were no more rumours; the Small Wall, the Twins, and the rest of the fortresses of the Northern Riverlands had fallen.

Thanks the Seven for small favours, the Vale was protected by the impregnable Mountains of the Moon, and Edd didn’t think the heretics could cross that, even with their hellish sorcery.

But that was a series of defeats. The glorious Crusade, which should have seen them storm the walls of the Northern traitors in short order, was fighting skirmishes not far from the crossroads leading to the Bloody Gate.

It was a bloody catastrophe.

The heretics were supposed to be alone, divided, and easy to beat, given how many men were armed and trained for the greatest conflict of their age. Instead the Ironborn had joined the Starks and the other heretics, the Free Cities were not in any hurry to help the Seven Kingdoms, and most of the Reacher Army was shining by its absence. Some Houses had found their way into the Riverlands, but the great host of Mace Tyrell was nowhere to be seen.

The last fortnight had been bad. Never-ending rain in big muddy holes the Lords had ordered them to dig. Loud and inhuman things were screeching while it was night, and the heretics sometimes attacked with one or two of their siege engines spitting hell-flames and left before you could do anything to kill them.

But at least once the proper fortifications had been digged, nearly all soldiers had been able to wait for the enemy somewhere away from the rain.

It couldn’t last.

Oh, Edd had known it wouldn’t last.

The situation was too tolerable, and the worst was yet to come.

“This is your fault, Dolorous!” one of the Melcolm men exclaimed as their ride got more and more difficult, the badly maintained road becoming a sea of mud as the never-ending rain renewed its assaults against their helmets.

“I’m not the one who volunteered to patrol the Riverlands in search of invisible heretics!” The grey-haired Vale knight snapped back. “And I was perfectly fine staying bored in our little cavern! I was just saying everything was happening too well recently...”

“Father Above, Dolorous! Next time you will explain to us you’re a prophet and you have announced the end of the Seven Kingdoms!”

“I never told any prophecies!”

“And we can thank the Crone, the Mother and the Maiden for that,” one of the old swordsmen of House Grafton among their column bitterly told him. “We would be in a far worse situation if you did!”

Edd tried to protest. It didn’t do any good.

“That’s old woman’s tales! And the maesters call that superstition!”

“Well, you super-things or whatever you call them are always coming our way after you open your damn mouth, so please, Dolorous...keep them in your head where we can’t listen to them...and where they can’t curse us!”

“The disasters will still continue, band of ingrates,” Edd gritted between his teeth, but in a whisper. He wanted to have his full ration of food and mead tonight, and the Captain was not one of his friends...assuming the ugly bastard House Corbray had found somewhere had any.

Their patrol continued. Obviously, they didn’t find any heretics.

And yes, it was predictable. After watching personally how bad the weather was south of the Trident, Edd was convinced the honest and dishonest people were waiting in houses protected by a good roof until the rain stopped.

Who would be so stupid as to try to raid and pillage when your loot had no chance to be transported anywhere easily? Horses could do miracles, but with this bad road and the mud, it was close to certain the wheels of the chariots would break, or that some of the animals towing the loaded transports would hurt themselves.

And you had to transport the food and everything a horse needed too!

“Captain! I don’t see anywhere the Stormlanders we were supposed to join!”

This was a bad omen, and Edd opened his mouth to tell them so...but half a dozen glares convinced him to reconsider.

His company really didn’t want to hear his wisdom, it seemed.

But it was just bad news. They were wet, exhausted, and now the very people they were supposed to wait for had not arrived.

Meaning either they were going to wait in the middle of...in a place which had no mills and no villages nearby, or they were going to turn back to see if they hadn’t missed the other patrol.

“They must have pushed ahead!” The Captain barked to his relief, and for a moment, despite his truthful nature, Edd wanted to hope for the best. “I think we will find them at Harrenhal!”

The grey-haired Tollett whimpered.

Harrenhal? The Captain wanted to lead them to *Harrenhal*?

They had towers called the Tower of Dread, the Wailing Tower, and the Tower of Ghosts, by the Seven Hells!

“Yes, Dolorous?” Ah...damn it, he had said the last part aloud.

“I don’t like that name, Captain.”

“No one likes it,” the older and higher-ranked warrior shrugged. “But it is the closer castle...unless you want to return to Darry under this rain?”

 No one spoke for Darry. Not when it meant the rest of the day, and likely spending a good night, under this deluge of wind and water.

“Harrenhal it is...”

**Author’s note**: The End of Times will continue in the next chapter, tentatively titled *The Black Towers*. And yes, Westeros will continue to be plunged into an era of fire and blood...

More links for the End of Times:

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