**Chapter 20**

**Bats of Damnation**

**Tyrion Lannister 8**

There had been some knights who had openly doubted the heretical fires burning to protect Raventree Hall would last long.

Two days after the battle had been won, these very loud mouths had had the good sense to stop speaking about things they didn’t understand.

The unnatural blue fires were still raging. There would be no final assault. The victory remained incomplete.

Despite the latter point, the mood remained excellent inside the different camps. As some ancient Valyrian Strategos of old had said, victory had many sires, but defeat was a bastard. And the forces besieging the ancestral home of the Blackwood heretics had emerged victorious, smashing the deadly sally of the besieged.

Tyrion honestly didn’t know how long it would stay the case. There was more rain coming for the next days, he could feel it in his bones. And of course there was the letter which had just arrived, courtesy of an exhausted messenger. The words had been written by his Uncle Kevan, but the orders had this implacable taste of steel that every soul born in Casterly Rock for the last few decades was familiar with.

“I don’t see any compliments,” Bronn disrespectfully commented after grabbing the letter he had by all means no right to read. “You might think we lost the battle reading *that*.”

Tyrion snorted.

“If we had really lost the battle, I wouldn’t be in command here, Bronn. I’m sure my Lord Father would have found other duties for me. I would neither be the first failure nor the last to be commanded to clean the sewers and playing rat-catcher into the depths of the Rock.”

Even Bronn was a bit more humble after that, though it didn’t last.

“Do you think the letter is as uncomplimentary as it is because your Lord Father almost lost *his* battle?”

Tyrion grimaced.

“For the love of all the Seven, Bronn, please do not shout something like that here.”

“We’re in your tent, oh little Lord.”

“We’re in the middle of a war camp, surrounded by many Lannister men, and I’m willing to bet my Lord Father has hundreds of his own men reporting on me.” Hundreds may be a bit of an exaggeration, but Tyrion Lannister was sure they were at least four scores of them, and they included all the important knights and captains. “Many men and women were whipped in the Westerlands for far less.”

“Right,” Bronn drawled, before adopting a more serious expression when Tyrion glared at him. “Right. I will watch my words. But this,” the offending letter was thrown on the table, “is a mistake. We don’t need more men around Raventree Hall. We need heavy siege engines to destroy the castle.”

“I happen to agree.” The most famous dwarf of the West – not that there was a lot of competition in that regard – replied in a mild voice. “Alas, no one asked my opinion when these orders were written.”

It was even more galling because those men would be placed under his authority, but with so many privileges that he would end up essentially powerless if his Lord Father sided with his ‘reinforcements’.

“I could live with that as long as it doesn’t get anyone killed, of course. Alas, I’m pretty sure that the one thousand men mentioned in this letter are here to convince us to launch a general assault and storm the walls of Raventree Hall.”

“What?” Bronn reacted poorly, as any sane sellsword would when listening to these words. “This is stupid! Our men can’t cross the moat without being turned into mutants or corpses, and the fires behind it burn like the Seven Hells!”

“Yes,” Tyrion nodded, “but it seems my Lord Father and plenty of Lords have not yet understood that the rules of warfare have changed, courtesy of the heretics.”

“They damn well should,” the insolent sellsword grunted, “the Ironborn nearly drowned them in a lake of blood, from what the rumours say.”

“Yes. And that’s why if one day the order comes to storm the walls, our proud reinforcements will get the honour of being in the vanguard.” If they really intended to die, who was Tyrion to deny them? It might also give his father a clue or two that no, killing a bunch of heretics when they were cornered was no simple business. “But enough about that. The heretics we besiege aren’t going anywhere.”

“The same can be said about the Northern heretics,” the sellsword replied. “West or east, the result is the same: they were stopped before the Red Fork, and in a few cases, they lost ground when the Royal Army counter-attacked.”

Tyrion grunted unconvincingly. In reality, most of the ‘counterattacks’ in question had worked because the Starks and their chaotic acolytes had realised their advanced positions were impossible to defend. Everywhere their sorcerers and their pet monsters were convinced they could bleed the Westerners, Valemen, or Stormlanders, the Northerners had not made a step back. And the counter-attacks ended in hundreds of dead men and horses, torn apart by demons and giant wolves.

“There is still something we’re missing.”

“The heretics can screw up like a lot of stupid Lords we met.” Bronn shrugged. “The sorcerer we killed here was powerful but his arrogance was his downfall in the end. It’s entirely possible the Starks screwed up like the Blackwoods.”

This was the kind of arguments which were getting more and more popular in the last days. West and east of the Green Fork, the Crusaders had won important defensive victories. The litany of disasters that had led to the successive fall of Sentinel’s Stand and so many other fortresses had stopped as the Seven Kingdoms mobilised and faced the onslaught of demons.

“No.” Tyrion said at last. “I refuse to think that the great heretic warlords out there were so stupid they didn’t realise the loyalist armies would outnumber them ten-to-one when the swords were drawn. Their spies, unlike ours, knew exactly where to direct their marauders to ensure the first invasion ran from victory to victory. They may have thought they would reach the Red Fork before we managed to regain our wits; it is true they could have been that arrogant.”

And then he shook his head.

“But I don’t see how they could have stormed Riverrun without beating all the armies of the Rock and the West. The home of the Tully is a tough stronghold to crack, and once the Riverlanders have transformed it into an island, you need to divide your army into three to properly besiege it. Eastwards, demons or not, they would have to deal with the knights of the Vale until snow buries the high passes. South-east, they would have to build bridges over the Trident and hold them against the full might of House Baratheon and House Targaryen.”

And the heretics didn’t have that many men. Demons, yes, that they could summon in vast numbers, and Winterfell sorcerers weren’t shy about it. But the terrifying riders in black plate mounting direwolves or other man-eating beasts? Those were few and far between. And Tyrion was very thankful for that, otherwise this war would have already been lost.

“It isn’t glorious to say, but if the war is fought like it was done in the last moon, we are going to win, despite all the mistakes and bad assumptions.”

“Because the Gods are on our side?” Bronn asked drily.

“Because we simply have more bodies to train, equip, and send to the battlefield than the enemy can.”

It wasn’t glorious, and the price to pay in blood, broken limbs, and men turned insane by the abominations was a nightmarish one. Many Houses would need decades to recover, if they ever did.

But past the lies, the heretics couldn’t afford a long war. They would fare far better in winter than them, but winter wasn’t eternal, and when spring arrived, the first major offensives would begin against the North. Before that, the marauders and the other horrors would likely have been repelled in the fetid swamps of the Neck.

And that made him worry about what he could have possibly missed.

Tyrion asked exactly that to Bronn a few heartbeats later.

“We agreed the heretics of Raventree couldn’t do enough damage by themselves.” The sellsword spoke, his usual grin or insolence for once nowhere in sight. “If they could, their Lord and most of the Blackwood veterans wouldn’t have gone north. If they really wanted to be a problem behind our lines, the seven hundred we killed two days ago would have been sent to the Battle of the Red Tears, and the five thousand which betrayed Lord Tully would have attacked and burned Stone Hedge and other castles.”

“Yes. Besides, everyone from the King to my Lord Father would have found it suspicious that Lord Blackwood didn’t answer the call-to-arms of the Crusade. And Riverrun would have kept several columns of men to make sure Raventree Hall didn’t try something treasonous. So the raven banners of the heretics definitely couldn’t have dealt a death blow to the loyalist armies, no matter how hard they tried.”

The Starks had known that, and they had ordered Lord Blackwood to rush north and stab the back of his Lord Paramount – of course they had loved the orders to decapitate Lord Bracken – winning them a great victory on the battlefield.

“Let’s say you were the heretic commander, Bronn.” Dangerous words, assuredly. “How would you try to stop the deadlock we’re currently into?”

“I would try to push all the armies of the Vale, the Stormlands and the River Lords against the Trident,” was the answer he received with almost no hesitation. “Break the earthworks with as many horrors as they can, then force Lord Baratheon, Lord Arryn and their men to retreat, all the while another army comes from the south by the Darry road and burn the barges, boats, and everything that floats. The autumn rainfalls have been bad; thousands of men would drown in the Trident trying to cross it. With the armies on both sides cornered on both sides of the river, the men would starve in short order or be butchered by the thousands. That would cost the kingdom, what, about sixty thousand men?”

“Maybe seventy thousand, not counting all the camp followers like the smiths, the bakers, and every pair of hands which have accompanied Westerosi knights since the Andals landed on these shores.” Tyrion replied frowning. All in all, this ‘plan’ would indeed result in the loss of almost one hundred thousand men, women, and children. Everything west of the Green Fork and north of the Trident would be lost in the disaster. Saltpans itself would be essentially defenceless in front of the heretics, with all the atrocities and panic it would create. Control of the bay, something incredibly vital for the supplies all armies desperately needed, would be contested by whatever sea demons the heretics could conjure.

“This would be indeed something the heretics would love to do.” Tyrion admitted after a good hourglass turn of silence. “But fortunately, they can’t do it. They would have to magically transport one of their hordes to Harrenhal, take it without raising the alarm, and then hurl every demon, traitor Northerner and beast towards Darry, all the while fending off the reinforcements we’re receiving from the Crownlands, the southern Riverlands, and the Reach.”

“Why Harrenhal?” Bronn asked, turning his eyes towards the large map representing the Riverlands in detail.

“Because it’s the largest place where we can store the grain, the meat, and everything the armies we need before spreading carts and donkeys across the Riverlands, Bronn. And of course, with how tall the walls built by Harren the Black are, we don’t have to worry about them being taken by storm. If needed, the sixty thousand men we spoke earlier could take refuge here-“

Tyrion’s voice faltered when he realised what he was saying.

This was just too crazy to work.

A voice inside his head, a voice which he tried to ignore most of the time, chuckled.

But the heretics were insane and had the means of their fell ambitions. They didn’t care about sanity, and they certainly didn’t care something as ridiculous as the laws of chivalry.

And when it came down to it, heretics or not, how many fortresses had fallen in the past because betrayal had caught the loyalist defenders unaware?

“How strong is the Harrenhal garrison?”

Not enough, and Tyrion was sure his face indicated it all too clearly.

**Ser Eddison Tollett 2**

The Hall of a Hundred Hearths, a Whent smallfolk had told them with an air of self-importance that should be the privilege of Princes, was one of the marvels of the Seven Kingdoms.

Edd hated it.

To begin with, the name was a lie. There were thirty-five Hearths, not one hundred.

The young Vale highborn was willing to acknowledge it was a vast, cavern-like hall. You could field an entire army there.

But it was a damp, dark hall.

Maybe if all of the Hearths had been lit with good fire, Edd would have felt comfortable, but it was not to be.

There were exactly eight fires lit in the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, and it was not enough. Everyone had kept furs and as many layer of clothes as they could, but it still felt like most of the rainfall’s humidity had followed them here.

“We should rename the kingdom ‘Rain land’ instead of ‘Riverlands’,” Edd grumbled, before masticating what was in his plate. There was meat, some bread, and things he had no idea of; and in the penumbra, there was little hope to find an answer save asking the cooks. Minor salvation: it had been served reasonably hot.

“Dolorous, you know it rains in the Vale too, right?”

“Not like this! It feels like half of the Trident has suddenly decided to pour upon my poor head.”

“You were the one who wanted to avoid Harrenhal, remember.”

“It will give us a roof to protect us from the rain,” Edd admitted very, very reluctantly. “But I don’t like this castle. I don’t like this castle at all.”

“Our hostess is a beauty,” Robin mentioned with one of his usual leers. “That has to count for something, right?”

“Well, we will have to trust you about that,” Edd said a skeptical tone. “From where we are seated, she could be a crone, and we wouldn’t be able to say no.”

“Isn’t Lady Shella fifty or something?” Kyle asked with a frown. “A crone she shouldn’t be, but I’d heard her beauty had faded. She wasn’t the Queen of Love and Beauty for more than seven years.”

“Nah,” Robin shook his head. “High cheekbones, the grace of a Beauty Queen, and as far as I saw, her hair remained red, not grey! Lord Whent is a very lucky man...”

“It would have been more convincing if you hadn’t grimaced at the end, Robin.” Edd commented before emptying his cup; the ale was very bitter, he really didn’t recommend it, but there was nothing else.

“It’s nothing against the Lady’s beauty. It’s just that her robes seem...old. They have not been made recently, if you know what I mean.”

This brought many winces around the rectangular table they were sitting at.

“Everyone knows Harrenhal was built by the Black to crush with an iron fist the Riverlands. It is way too big. And of course the dragons burned it down several times.”

“That’s the curse which frightens our dear Dolorous, surely? Harrenhal will beggar every House which holds it.”

“If you know the legends, you will remember no House which claimed Harrenhal ever died a beggar,” Edd began darkly, “they suffered far worse fates.”

“Oh, please, Dolorous, don’t tell me you believe all these ridiculous stories.”

“There was nothing ridiculous about the downfall of House Lothston!”

“That was sixty...no, seventy years ago! The curse is long gone.”

This was something he fundamentally disagreed with.

“There is something wrong about this castle, I’m telling you.” Edd insisted, trying to ignore the fact three young men chuckled nearby. “I saw shadows moving when we entered-“

“The animals are called bats, just so you know.” Kyle snickered. “There’s a reason why they are on the banners of House Whent.”

“This was way too big to be a bat,” he protested.

“What was it then? The ghost of a Hundred Bats? The Black King himself, returned from the dead with his entire army?”

To his sorrow, there was a lot of laughter after that.

“You’re joking, but there is definitely something wrong about Harrenhal.”

“Oh come on, Dolorous! I will grant you the entire thing is dark and has too little light, but there’s no reason to imagine curses where there is nothing. Yes, Harrenhal is damp, filled with bats and the spiders must have had free reign in the abandoned towers. So what? They are poor, and the autumn nights are turning it into something sinister. I wouldn’t want to be the Lord of it in winter either; if they lit eight to ten fires, you must really shiver everywhere once the snowfalls begin. It is dark but there isn’t anything to fear about the night itself!”

Captain Uther, their company commander, chose this moment to return, making sure the conversation about Harrenhal’s curse ended in defeat for Edd.

“Be vigilant,” the older knight spoke. “Captain Colin told me two of his men have deserted last night. They certainly bribed some guards to leave through the gates while it was copiously raining, but keep your eyes open nonetheless.”

There were a few whispers about the fighting skills of the Reachers muttered after that. Edd would gladly admit he may have been one of them. Reputation of chivalry or not, no one had missed that so far, the tens of thousands of men promised by Highgarden, Oldtown, and a lot of the South were nowhere to be seen. Swords had been drawn, battles had been won or lost, but the presence of the Reachers was limited to a trickle of freeriders, lesser knights, and some light spearmen. The great chivalry of the Tyrells and their mighty bannersmen had shined by its absence this autumn.

“And the missing Stormlands patrol?”

Captain Uther shrugged.

“Lady Whent and her captain of guards told us they left three days ago, and I don’t see why they would be lying. We must have missed them in the bad weather, and as for the raven messages...it is likely Darry and Saltpans were warned of their return before we decided to take refuge from the rain here.”

It was all said in a very reassuring tone. But Edd couldn’t help but think at that moment the two Tarly men had been victim of the Harrenhal Curse. All these Houses which went extinct when there was great turmoil of the Seven Kingdoms...it was a curse, Edd was certain of it.

**Ser Arthur Dayne 3**

Had it been in his power, Arthur would have made sure the conversation would not happen here.

The Sword of the Morning would not describe himself as a superstitious man, but there was superstition, and there was good taste. Speaking in front of the gallows where eighteen souls had just been sent to the Seven Hells was definitely not something he would have done if it had not been an order of his Prince.

Unfortunately, the order had been given, and worse, Arthur agreed with the logic underneath.

It could have been avoided: the conversation, of course, not the deaths. These beasts hiding their true nature under a human skin had deserved their fate.

“You mentioned a problem, Ser Arthur, but you seem to have things well in hand. The heretics have received the punishment they deserved.”

These words were why Arthur hated dealing with Lannisters.

Yes, the man before him was not Lord Tywin. But the Lord of Lions had ruled long enough to transform his House into something terribly unpleasant.

“Seven days ago, Ser Kevan, those men were part of your army.”

“A red armour does not make a loyal man of House Lannister, my Lord, and many armours, cloaks, and weapons were lost when-“

“Gregor Clegane,” the Sword of the Morning snarled, putting an end to the ridiculous excuses of the Lannister. “Surely you remember your pet monster?”

“I remember him, yes. He turned traitor after disappearing in a mission where he was supposed to discover the enemy positions. And during the last battle, we had to face the monster he had become.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that?” Arthur said derisively, before continuing and leaving no chance for the Lannister to retort. “Clegane was a monster. He always was one. The only difference between before the Crusade and now was that before, he was *your* monster. During the last battle, the heretics turned him to their service.”

“Nothing was ever proven.”

“I have at least twenty knights of the Riverlands who want vengeance for the rapes and murders he committed while he was in your service. Try again, Ser.”

Long ago, a young man who had yet to become the Sword of the Morning had found it all right and proper that the Lord of Starfall was given the privilege of low and middle justice upon his lands, leaving the high justice to the Prince or the Princess of Dorne.

This had been before learning how a man like Tywin Lannister could make sure some of his enraged dogs never faced justice, no matter how much blood they had upon their hands.

“Then they are going to be disappointed since Clegane died on the battlefield.”

In common language, this meant there would be no apologies of any kind, or any admission of guilt, no matter how few witnesses there were next to these improvised gallows.

“I am running out of patience, Ser Kevan.”

“I don’t understand, Ser Arthur.”

“You and your brother, you think that terror is the only way we can properly defeat the enemy. You are making a dangerous mistake.”

“There are procedures and courts-“

“Ser Kevan, the men and women of the Rivers and the Trident have seen their daughters and wives raped and killed by your men! For moons the septons have clamoured the Crusaders are here to defend them from the heretics, and here your monsters come, burning villages, stealing livestock, cutting down families whose only crime was to live in peace!”

The Kingsguard was not going to say the armies of the Stormlands and the Vale had behaved like saints of the Father Above. It would be a lie. But overall, the armies of the Crownlands, Riverlands, Vale, and other companies sent from all loyalist Lords of the Seven Kingdoms had marched to war in proper order, and while there were problems, the highborn in command punished the crimes as soon as they were aware of them. It helped that unlike the Lannisters, they had hired very few sellsword companies from the other side of the Narrow Sea.

But the Lannister Army now waging war in the western Riverlands had not followed their example. The behaviour was appalling, and some of the things Arthur had seen reminded him of bandit pillages and massages. Lord Tywin’s dogs were acting like they were on lands they were conquered, with all the killings and other crimes it involved.

“These men turned heretics when captured by the Northern heretics.”

“Ser Kevan, the smallfolk, for the first time in centuries, know that the devilry of the Northerners can grant them power.” Every Lord and knight had tried to suppress the information about the demons and the heretical powers their enemy served, but it was a losing battle. There were too many witnesses, and you couldn’t fight the gossips of several armies from Darry to the Golden Tooth. “But at least in most armies, the camp followers and all loyal souls oath-bound to his Grace King Rhaegar know deep in their hearts that we are truly the Shields of Light against the Dark. With your killers burning villages and stealing what these poor souls need to survive, many families have come to me and asked exactly why they should fear the heretics, when your army is doing exactly what the septons warned them against?”

At least this time, the Lannister had the good grace to look slightly ashamed.

“These crimes against the smallfolk end here and now.” The Sword of the Morning commanded. “If there are more Gregor Cleganes in your army, take their heads and burn their corpses. We are fighting a war of Good against Evil, of true and loyal men against demons. By the will of Prince Aegon, the smallfolk of the Seven Kingdoms are to be protected from all evil.”

“We did not control Gregor Clegane, what make you think-“

Arthur Dayne glared.

“Please don’t repeat the same lies, Ser. I am the Sword of the Morning. I am not one of the bannersmen you are so proud to terrorise while repeating every fortnight the songs explaining in gory detail who you killed every man, woman, and child of Tarbeck Hall and Castamere.”

With the benefit of hindsight, it was too easy now seeing the pattern of Tywin Lannister’s deeds: a desire to appear strong at all costs. Oh, the Tarbecks and the Reynes had been unruly bannersmen and deserved severe punishment for their defiance, but the total destruction visited upon the two Lordships should have warned everyone that there was something deeply wrong about the new Lord Paramount of the Westerlands...

“You are going to fight the Enemy,” the Kingsguard spoke coldly, “the *true* Enemy, and stop making an enemy of the souls we are oath-bound to protect. Or these monsters will be merely the first of your men to dance at the end of a rope.”

**Ser Eddison Tollett 3**

“Why are we here exactly?”

“We are here because Captain Uther decided to help the Tarly men find their deserters.” Kyle said with an exaggerated roll of his large shoulders. “You know, in the unlikely case some of them would be crazy enough to stay inside the ruins of Harrenhal and hide.”

“No! I mean, yes, but by ‘here’, I wanted to ask, why the Tower of Ghosts exactly?”

“Oh, that? I have no idea.”

“Someone must have annoyed Captain Uther. Probably Dolorous and his dark omens.”

“Hey!” Edd protested. “I didn’t even speak with the Captain this morning before he gave his orders.”

“That’s true.” Robin conceded. “And it was Robert who annoyed him for two evenings straight.”

“And still we got the Tower of Ghosts.”

“To be fair,” Edd watched carefully his surroundings before making two more steps forwards. “There aren’t many pleasant places to search in these dark ruins.”

“Most of the Whent didn’t even bother honouring us of their presence at dawn,” Robin mourned. “Only Lady Whent’s beauty could have replaced the sun’s feeble light!”

“The sun is there! Just hidden behind all the grey clouds!”

Edd sighed and removed more spider webs which were blocking their progression. There seemed to be nothing but that in the lower levels of this great tower...this great ruin. The spiders were the true mistresses of the Tower of Ghosts.

“We should rename it Tower of Spiders, given how many of them there are.” The young Valeman highborn declared.

“Or Tower of Rats,” Kyle argued back. “Have you seen how many of them there are?”

“It would be difficult to miss them, there were so many in the ruined sept outside when we arrived that I thought we had disturbed their prayers.”

“Oh come on, it is not AAHH!”

Edd reacted promptly, and it was lucky for Robin, because plenty of stones had just collapsed under his feet, and catching him by his right arm was the only thing which prevented his friend from falling one floor below. His arms began to burn, but fortunately Kyle and the others were already there, and dragged Robin to safety.

“Not saying it was the Curse of the Ghosts, Dolorous?”

“Please,” Edd rolled his eyes. “Did you see the stones? They were all cracked and in an even worse state than most of this tower. No wonder some broke when you stepped on them.”

“We should turn back,” Kyle proposed.

“Captain Uther’s orders-“ Edd began.

“Oh come on, Dolorous, there’s no one there.”

“No one save the spiders and the rats.” Someone pointed out drily behind them.

“Don’t forget the bats!”

“Yes, the bats too. They must have a lair somewhere higher in the tower. Anyway, given how many spider webs there are, it’s clear no one visited the Towers of Ghosts in the last days. The deserters fled somewhere, and it wasn’t inside this ruined castle.”

Several turns of hourglasses before, Edd had insisted along several others to keep searching, but this time he had enough, and he wasn’t the only one.

Whether they came from House Melcolm, House Tollett, or any other Noble House from the Vale, the risks had been made clear with Robin’s near-fall. This wasn’t a battle where you gloriously raised your sword against the Arch-Enemy of everything Good. No, what was awaiting you inside the ruins was a long boredom and then the black stones could trick you to a stupid death the moment you didn’t pay attention.

“The castle is most likely going to collapse one day.”

“We will likely all be dead by then,” Edd shrugged.

“Another of your dark omens, Dolorous?”

“The Tower still stands after three hundred years and several dragons setting it aflame,” he retorted. “I think it will endure for some decades more.”

The monument to Harren the Black’s arrogance would not fall so easily. Edd couldn’t say he was sure where the thought had come from, but he was convinced of it now.

“Let’s return to Captain Uther and tell no deserter or heretic is hiding inside my least favoured tower of Harrenhal.” Kyle added dramatically.

“Why do you think there was a possibility for heretics to hide here?” Edd yawned, removing more spider webs. Honestly, it was like there was no end to them...Harrenhal was invaded by them, the rats and the bats. With all this vermin, you could wonder if it was such a good idea to build new things for the armies there. Yes, Darry was too small, but it could be made larger, right?

“Dark, dreary, and no one ever comes there, my friend. Bah, it was just a ridiculous idea, Dolorous, don’t look at me like that. Let’s hurry up, perhaps the Captain won’t find another boring thing for us to do before we return of the Hall of One Hundred Hearths.”

Edd sneezed the heartbeat after that.

**Lady Shella Whent 1**

Her throat was in fire.

She had been warned this would happen, but the sensation of thirst...nothing could have prepared her for it.

Nothing could have prepared her any mortal to it.

Shella had already called it the Thirst. She had been told it would protect her from the Curses of Harrenhal.

As always, the Starks had spoken true. It protected her. With every sip taken, her youth was returning.

Strength flowed in her body, and knowledge which had never been hers was at her fingertips.

The Thirst was burning her throat more painfully and at shorter intervals now.

It wouldn’t be long now.

Was it what Danelle Lothston had felt so many years ago?

Was it why she had tried to take blood baths, failing to realise the Gods had already provided an answer for those willing to listen to them?

It didn’t matter. Danelle was no more. She was here.

She was the Lady of Harrenhal.

The door creaked and one of her Grave Guard entered.

“What is it? There is still some time before sunset.”

The days were losing against the night, but winter was still far away.

And today the rains had stopped.

Fortunately, none of her ‘guests’ were really clever. It was easy to fool them with some minor excuses.

“There has been an unforeseen development,” croaked the Grave Guard, its appearance behind the black armour. “The dwarf has left the siege of Raventree Hall two days ago. And now he is on his way. The sorcerers sent the warning.”

The Starks must have called it an unforeseen development, yes. Riverlanders would simply call it bad news.

“The dwarf is coming here.”

The Grave Guard didn’t answer; now that the message was delivered, he wouldn’t speak as long as she didn’t command him. And it had to be said, it was for the better. His conversational skills were rather...lacking.

The Thirst was joined by something else in her throat.

Feeling the urge burn in an unbearable manner, Shella poured the rest of the bottle into the golden chalice and once it was done, emptied the former holy object of the Faith she had used in such a blasphemous manner.

“Damn it,” the Lady of Harrenhal muttered.

Catelyn had warned her that the son of Tywin Lannister was more than he appeared to be. Since the dwarf had enough brains to compensate for the empty skulls of his older siblings, this was a very dangerous combination.

And worse of all, he was literally on her doorstep.

Raventree Hall was but a few days of ride on horse away from Harrenhal. Or at least it had been in summer. When the bad road had been transformed into a proper river of mud, which was what had happened in the last days, the travel would take closer to twice that time.

But that just meant the enemy could arrive at her gates next evening at the latest. Earlier if the Lannister and Crown columns decided to risk riding for many hourglasses’ turns during the night.

“One fortnight,” Shella whispered, cleaning the last drops of red from her lips with a handkerchief which alas had lost most of its charm and pristine appearance in the last decades. “One more fortnight, it was all I needed. The ranks of the Ghouls are getting larger, and my little friends have been greatly strengthened by all the sacrifices.”

Many deserters had been brought to the crypts underneath Harrenhal. In the first days, the first defeats of this floppy trout of Edmure Tully had made sure there was enough to play more than her part of the plan. And when this flow began to wane out, it wasn’t difficult to seduce men. Her youth had returned, and Reacher or Stormlander, Shella could convince young men where and when she desired.

But it appeared she wasn’t going to get one more fortnight.

“I could hide everything,” the Lady of Harrenhal whispered to herself, before shaking her head. “No. If the dwarf comes here, it is because he suspects enough to ruin the part Harrenhal is supposed to play in this war. He won’t be satisfied with one short visit of courtesy.”

Unlike the Valemen who had thought some deserters may hide inside the Towers, the son of Tywin Lannister would certainly think of inspecting the tunnels under Harrenhal. In the case he didn’t, this wouldn’t necessarily be a relief. Many of her guards and servants had been transformed to serve the great role she had planned for them. For now, they were kept out of sight of the scores of soldiers who had not yet been converted. It was not really difficult, with all the patrols coming and leaving every couple of days.

Alas, it relied very much on the soldiers being completely unaware of what they had to look for.

“Anyway, I have my orders, I suppose.” Catelyn had been very clear that Harrenhal had to be denied to the enemy, and especially Tyrion Lannister.

It was too bad for the grain, she supposed. One more fortnight, ten days if the luck favoured her, and all the food supplies to prepare the coming of the Reach Army would have been in her claws.

Nevertheless, there had been enough time to make some preparations.

“Prepare two convoys for the tainted grain and meat. They will depart after sunset.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“And send the orders to my Knights. It is vital all our gracious guests are to be present inside the Hall of One Hundred Hearths for supper this evening.”

The dwarf may have found out some of the traps they had ready for the Riverlands.

But he would arrive too late for the first part of the plan.

Harrenhal was hers.

It was hers for this night and all the other nights.

**Ser Eddison Tollett 4**

Ed sneezed. Again.

“Are you sure you didn’t get a cold or something else, Dolorous? You’ve been sneezing all afternoon!”

“I’m telling you, it’s the smell of those horrible spider webs!” Edd complained. “I began to sneeze while we were leaving the Tower of Ghosts! I’m fine!”

And he sneezed again.

“I’m sure a warm supper will do you some good.”

“Assuming the supper is hot tonight,” the young Valeman retorted as they went to claim an unoccupied table. “I’m seeing only three fires lit tonight.”

“And yet you supported the Captain’s decision to stay here for the night.”

“It was beginning to rain when we left the tower, Robin,” Edd reminded his friend.

“It didn’t seem to stop all these smallfolk of House Whent to line up before the northern gate.”

“Someone must have woken up late and finished loading the carts too late,” Edd shrugged. “I suppose they thought it better to leave late than to explain to Lady Whent why the job wasn’t done.”

“Makes sense,” Kyle nodded. “Do you know why the Captain of House Tarly and his Reachers are shouting at the Whent knight?”

“No, but they’re-“

“TWO MORE MEN! TWO MORE MEN WENT MISSING! AND REMOVE YOUR HELMET WHILE I’M SPEAKING TO YOU!”

“Okay, now he’s really furious.”

“That must be the Marcher’s blood. I’m told Lord Randyll is a man who tolerates no weakness in his officers.”

Looking at the Reacher, Edd could very well believe it. Captain Colin was a good head taller, and he looked twice as large as he was. And his face had two big scars that were certainly received facing Dornish raiders.

It said quite something that the men of House Whent were all smaller, for all they were wearing their dark armours.

“Do you think it is going to come to a fight?”

“Nah, it would completely be against the laws of-“

There was the sound of steel falling against the cold hard floor.

And then there were gasps of horror.

Everyone turned at once, and the screams began.

For in the confrontation, several helmets had fallen. The helmets of many Whent armsmen and knights at fallen, and suddenly the reason why they had hidden their faces was revealed in all its horror.

They were monsters. Some heads were nothing but the skulls of the dead, while others were fang-grinning abominations with livid skin.

“Treachery!” Captain Colin voiced in a horrified voice.

“*Treachery, yes*.”

Lady Whent had arrived, followed by over two scores of armoured warriors...who were all busy removing helmets and some parts of their armours. They all had been turned into monsters too.

Surrounded by them, the Lady of Harrenhal looked like a rose encircled by darkness. And then she opened her mouth, and fangs that had no right to be here were shown. Her hair became an unnatural white, and an armour of red materialised in a pungent odour which reeked of heresy and sorcery.

“*You will serve me. The only question is if you are going to do it in life or death*.”

Captain Uther’s reaction was simple, loud, and very clear.

“MEN OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS! DRAW YOUR SWORDS AND KILL HER!”

Scores of swords and axes sang in answer.

The monster which had been once a Queen of Love and Beauty laughed.

“*I thank you for that. My servants have great thirst for your blood*.”

This was the moment Edd and everyone else heard the wings. It was like a terrible storm coming. It was like an omen brought by hundreds of crows and other large carrion birds.

But it wasn’t birds.

From behind the monsters of House Whent, they came.

More monsters, but these ones were flying...and Edd swore he would never joke for the rest of his life about bats.

“GIANT BATS! WE NEED ARCHERS!”

“FIRE AND BLOOD!”

“FIRE! MAKE MORE FIRE, THEY ARE TRYING TO EXTINGUISH THE FIRES!”

Edd didn’t know who had screamed it, but the man was definitely right. The pale monsters had prepared buckets of cold water ahead of time, and now they were trying to plunge the Hall of A Hundred Hearths into darkness.

And if they did...the highborn swallowed heavily as he plunged into the melee and hacked two skeletons before plunging to avoid one bat.

“WHEN ALL IS DARKEST!” Sometimes, he really, really wished his House had chosen other words.

Two more things fell to his blade, and Kyle by his side arrived in time to prevent more water from being thrown onto a fire. Then they used that to light torches and fight back.

The fangs, claws, and other weapons of the monsters flinched for a moment.

“MORE FIRE!” Captain Uther next to them screamed. “THEY FEAR THE FIRE!”

It was happy, Edd thought in shock, because it seemed the bats weren’t afraid of anything else! And there were thousands of them!

What had been supposed to be a calm supper had turned into butchery. There were corpses everywhere lying on the tables and on the floor, and the monsters were gathering in large groups to feed upon flesh and blood.

“FIRST IN BATTLE! FIRST IN BATTLE!”

The Tarly men had rallied. There were but a score of them, but for a few heartbeats, Edd felt hope watching them hack their way through skeletons and other horrors. Their fury was such that the giant bat abominations went away for easier preys.

“FIRST IN BATTLE! KILL THE WITCH!”

The charge was heroic. It was charging into the fangs of death, straight at the monster who had once been Lady Whent.

But with every moment spent fighting, Edd could see with horror that each time a Tarly man went down fighting, he immediately rose back to fight on the side of the enemy.

And when Captain Colin’s sword was swung at the heretic ruling Harrenhal, the steel of the Reach met nothing but shadows.

“*I am not a witch. I am far, far more than that, Captain*.”

Suddenly, there was one more abomination inside the hall, one which made the giant bats look like the runts of the litter. The new monster looked vaguely bat-like and-

“MONSTER!” Colin screamed, trying to strike again.

“*Prey*,” the female abomination laughed, and she carved his throat open before beginning to gorge himself on his blood.

The rest of the Tarly men who had followed their commander were killed in short order, and everything went to hell afterwards.

Many fires were extinguished, and soon the only source of light were the Hearths the loyal soldiers were guarding with their very lives, and the torches they had managed to find or to make in the middle of the bloodshed.

“HOLD ON!” Captain Uther screamed. “HOLD YOUR POSITIONS!”

“CAPTAIN! THE SKELETONS ARE BLOCKING THE GATES!”

The dreadful news were more cold water in their face, or they would have been, if at that moment a Melcolm warrior had not been sized by many, many bats and eviscerated before his eyes.

“FIGHT! FIGHT YOUR WAY OUT, THE LORDS MUST BE WARNED OF THIS TREACHERY!”

“WHEN ALL IS DARKEST!”

“AS HIGH AS HONOUR!”

“WAR!”

Somehow, Edd wouldn’t be able to remember how no matter how hard he tried, they fought their way across a sea of fangs and claws, rusted swords and what had to be all the monsters of the Seven Hells.

The bats were so many they obscured the lights of the fires they had left just now.

But they were fighting. They were bleeding, they had to be on guard for every part of their body, for the bats were trying to bite everything that was not protected by chainmail or some hard piece of metal.

They were almost at the gates when Robin stopped running with them.

“What are you doing? ROBIN! KEEP MOVING!”

“She’s so beautiful...”

“*Why continue fighting, brave heroes*?”

The enormous bat had disappeared, and Lady Whent was smiling at them as darkness fell.

“ROBIN! DON’T LISTEN TO HER! COME BACK!”

But nothing he screamed or shouted had any effect. His friend’s face looked like he was dreaming...except the surroundings were very much a nightmare, and there was no reason to smile in this god-forsaken place!

They were pressed hard. More men were killed. Edd had to retreat. He couldn’t grab his friend, Robin was too far away.

He remembered sobbing and screaming.

“Dolorous! Dolorous! You can’t do anything for him! GO!”

“Yes, Captain!”

When the gates of the hall were shut down, it still felt like death itself tolled for them all.

**Lady Shella Whent 2**

It was so good when her Thirst was temporarily quenched.

Blood was truly the nectar of the Gods, and blood had flowed in rivers of crimson in her Hall.

“Not everything went perfectly,” Shella admitted to the new Blood Knights she had kissed. “But a few Ghouls and Grave Guards are a small price to pay for what was won here.”

“Many warriors escaped, Mistress.”

“They escaped the Hall.” The Lady of Harrenhal smiled and bared her fangs. “They are soon going to realise that they are not out of danger. All the Crypts have been opened, and the Bats of Harrenhal are now on the hunt.”

Many of them were now Fell Bats, greater and more dangerous than any other bat on Westeros, for they had fed upon the great sacrifices for them. Their wingspan, their fangs and their claws were largely sufficient to battle knights in plate armour. The servants of the False Seven would soon rue the day they had embraced the lies of the Light.

“And the columns which approach, Mistress?”

“Randyll Tarly and Tyrion Lannister,” those two souls had already proved annoying, and Shella understood perfectly now why Catelyn had told her to be careful. “Send all the Grave Crossbowmen we have on the ramparts. They have only five hundred men in two separate columns; they arrived far earlier than I predicted, but they have no siege engines to break my walls. Kill enough of them, and their own men will rise again and tear them apart by my will.”

“Yes, Mistress!”

In the grand scheme of things, it was more than an irritation, of course. The tainted grain and meat had been sent to several villages past sunset, but not enough to change tens of thousands of smallfolk and collapse the entire defence of the Riverlands. And the army which was now rising couldn’t stand on the battlefield against the massive forces mustered on the Trident.

This was irritating, and with her annoyance, the familiar burning sensation of the Thirst came back.

“Prepare my Black Coach nonetheless. Many have underestimated the dwarf; I refuse to do the same thing. The Riverlands will bleed...one way or another.”

“It will be done, Mistress.”

“Let’s fly and remember these mortals, that now they’ve lost the protection of the dragons, the bats are ruling over the night skies!”

**Ser Eddison Tollett 5**

It was a nightmare.

But when it was a nightmare, you could wake up. Here it was impossible.

And the armoury of Harrenhal felt terrifyingly real.

It reeked of corpses and other atrocious smells once they killed all the pale-skinned corpse-like monsters which had tried to trap them here.

“Every man who thinks he can hit one monster fifty steps away is to take a bow!” Captain Uther barked. “Take all the arrows you can carry too!”

Edd knew he would miss anything smaller than an elephant of Volantis – his father’s septon had remarked upon his performance like that after a particularly sorrowful archery session. So bows were out for him. But there was a massive warhammer in the armoury, one which looked very ancient, with runes and all.

It was heavy, and his two hands would be needed to wield it, but at least this way, the non-dead and other monsters would feel pain. His sword was good Vale steel, but too often tonight many enemies had risen back after he stabbed them. A warhammer, however? Bones would break against that!

“What are you commands, Captain?” Kyle asked, and Edd tried to not think about the fate of Robin and many other friends which were no longer with them. “If we return to the Hall of A Hundred Hearths-“

“If we return, we will die.” The old knight said with a tone that would tolerate no retort. “This damn heretic is the key, but we have no way to kill her. You saw what she did to Captain Colin.”

The fate of the Tarly Captain brought plenty of scowls and grimaces. The Reacher was not a man you would find easy to like, but his death had been a particularly awful one.

“No, we need to escape. The King and all the loyal Lords of the realm must be warned of what happened here. Lady Whent betrayed us all. It is our duty to warn the Seven Kingdoms that Harrenhal is a pit of evil and fell abominations. Should we fail, more patrols, more good warriors and innocent smallfolk will perish when they will come here and throw themselves into the claws of the heretics!”

“Don’t forget the carts and the grain deliveries, Captain! We all found it strange the Whent men were leaving past sunset and as it began to rain, but after what we just saw...”

Something began to strike at the door they had barricaded in urgency not so long ago.

Captain Uther nodded grimly.

“We need to reach the postern gate of the Tower of Ghosts.”

“Captain, we will have to cross half of the fortress to reach it! And this thing is completely rusted!”

“Yes, but if I was the heretics, I would place hundreds of the same skeletons we just fought above the main gates of Harrenhal. They are so high that by the time we will take to climb and dislodge them, they will have time to slay us with hundreds of arrows.”

A deadly silence welcomed these words. Obviously, that was why Ser Uther was the Captain, and not someone as inexperienced as Edd. But it didn’t bring any comfort when they realised the daunting challenge awaiting them.

“Make as many torches as you can! I know it is going to make us splendid targets but we need the fire to burn as many monsters as we can!”

“It is still raining a lot too,” the soft noise of water drops not far away was impossible to miss. “But since these abominations are part-bat, they must have something to see in the dark.”

“Exactly,” Uther coughed, and this was an ugly cough, filled with exhaustion. Edd hoped it was his imagination, but he swore he saw a few drops of blood. “Archers, keep the giant bats away! Keep them these winged monsters away the time we need to open the old postern! FOR THE KING, LORD ARRYN AND THE DAWN!”

“FOR THE KING, LORD ARRYN AND THE DAWN!” They all shouted back.

Fires were lit behind them. It wouldn’t set the entire castle aflame; the monsters of the Harrenhal had proved they cared very much about fighting the fires when the female heretic gave the command.

But they would delay them.

It would remove a few hundred enemies from pursuing them.

It seemed a lot...until they rushed outside, and the folly of what they were doing hit them like an anvil falling from a window.

Harrenhal was crawling with abominations.

Pits had opened where there were only crumbling ruins.

“Oh, Gods...we were searching in the towers, while they were inside the tunnels under our feet!”

They had been fools.

And now the price had to be paid.

With a shriek that was madness itself, an unending cloud of bats announced its presence.

The twenty-plus archers fired their arrows, and all of them hit their mark; not that it was difficult, Edd was sure that even he would have been able to hit one bat given how many of them there were.

“FIRE! USE THE FIRE TO KEEP THEM AWAY!”

They did exactly that, but the cursed rain limited the damage they could do. The old trees and the bushes which were so common in the immense courtyard refused to burn. Thousands of curses were spat, but the rain of the evening had soaked everything, and now the water which drenched everything was dimming the flames they had lit inside Harrenhal.

It was just madness. At the limits of his vision, Edd could see the gigantic winged monsters, easy ten times the size of a normal bat.

When one man fell behind, one enormous monster fell upon it and impaled him with talons that no eagle or vulture could have boasted with.

But the decision of the Captain had been the right one.

Skeletons and other fell things were rushing behind them. They really had not expected them to head for the postern gate.

Edd felt his heart beat faster and ran faster.

Maybe they could get away. Maybe this whole nightmare was going to end-

The gust of cold wind struck.

It was one of those dark heresies; there had been little wind before today, and the rain was falling vertically.

It was like the Stranger had opened the gates and let a blizzard come through for three heartbeats.

The consequences, however, were rather quick to show.

Most torches and fires Edd and every other warrior had lit faltered and died.

Nine out of ten flames had disappeared, with only embers to provide some illumination.

And the abominable bats shrieked again, but this time everyone could recognise it for all it was: the signal to butcher them and finish this battle.

“STAND YOUR GROUND!” Somehow, Captain Uther had managed to keep his own torch alight. “DON’T PANIC! WE CAN REACH THE POSTERN!”

And then a maw which was terror incarnate closed upon his sword arm, and over six smaller slammed in his face.

Captain Uther screamed in agony, and all the bats of the Seven Hells fell upon them.

“RUN! RUN!”

The column broke into chaos, and the valour of the men of the Vale collapsed with it.

**Tyrion Lannister 9**

Tyrion had rarely met any septon of Casterly Rock or Lannisport he liked. Oh yes, they were ‘holy men’.

They sure were loud and rather proud of that.

But show them a battlefield where it was crawling with demons, and suddenly, there was a distinct lack of septons to banish them.

“No, Priest,” he repeated for the tenth time of the night, trying to hide as best as he could his annoyance. “My decision is made and I-“

“FIRE! ENEMY ABOVE!” Bronn barked, and just in time.

In the next heartbeats, an immense shadow passed over them, and screams of panic echoed across the Riverlands.

But the archers and the men who were now more and more chosen to embrace the name ‘Dwarf’s Musketeers’ were trained and had been warned to watch out for something like that.

They fired.

It was like a small thunderstorm had been conjured into existence.

It was in reality a single volley, and it was going to be hard to have a second. The rain had turned everything into an ocean of mud, and alas there had not been time to prepare adequately the few barrels of gunpowder they had carried with them so far.

But a single volley was devastating enough.

The monsters shrieked in pain.

And then they fell.

Afterwards, it was just a job for the spears and pikes of Crownlanders and Westerners to finish them.

“WHAT ARE THESE MONSTERS?” The facade had cracked, and now the septon was losing his wits. It was...very predictable, to be honest.

Bronn took it upon himself to retort.

“Giant Bats,” the sellsword spat. “I suppose I don’t want to know how the heretics bred them?”

“I don’t think *I* want to know how they bred them.” Tyrion replied half-sarcastically, half-seriously.

Many Lords and Knights wished for horses which were taller and bigger for prestige motivations or for more pragmatic reasons. Sometimes they were successful. But it was a process which took years, and demanded a lot of effort and coin.

Knowing what he knew about Northern sorcery and the curses of the Enemy, Tyrion could safely bet the methods used for these Fell Bats had nothing in common with horse-breeding.

And then the noises of battle arrived to his ears.

For a second, his pessimism whispered he was letting his hopes guide his actions when everything left was bad news.

But the wind unnaturally blew in their face in the next couple of breaths, and with it came loud battle-cries.

Valemen battle-cries.

“DO YOU HEAR IT? THERE ARE STILL LOYAL MEN INSIDE HARRENHAL!” Tyrion shouted, and just like that, the hearts stood fierce, and the uncertainty was banished. “NOW BREAK ME THIS POSTERN GATE! SEND FIRE ARROWS ATOP THE WALLS! HURRY WITH THE RAM! HEAR US ROAR!”

“HEAR US ROAR!”

Tyrion turned again towards Bronn.

“Go find Lord Tarly. Tell him we need all his men here, not at the eastern gate serving as target practise for the crossbows of the Whent traitors!”

For once, miracle of miracles, Bronn saluted and rushed to obey without making an ironic comment. Maybe they should assault traitors’ strongholds more often...

**Ser Eddison Tollett 6**

It had begun as a stampede, it had continued as a rout, and it was ending as a last stand.

For yes, the postern gate of the Tower of Gates had not been cursed by some vile heretic magic or something equally horrible.

It was just a rusted and old gate.

It was an old gate which had not been opened in a decade, and that might be a generous assumption.

Therefore it didn’t matter that none of the monsters of Harrenhal guarded it, with the sole exception of a couple of slow-moving skeletons easily broken by his warhammer.

It didn’t matter, because the gates wouldn’t open, no matter how hard he tried.

Captain Uther’s plan had been simple and easy to follow.

But there was nothing they could do to change it now. The chains and every mechanism to activate the doors were absolutely useless. In the Vale, Edd had seen many Lords suffer short moments of humiliation when their drawbridges suffered what maesters called ‘leverage problems’.

And this was for drawbridges and gates which were opened every day. Here, the postern gate had been abandoned for longer than the heresy had been waiting in the darkness to strike.

“BACK TO THE GATES! REFORM THE LINES!” Edd shouted, and to his surprise, the last of the Vale warriors obeyed.

Maybe it was because he shouted loud enough. Or was it because he was the last knight alive?

There were so few of his friends and fellow soldiers left. Kyle had perished when a near-defeated pale-skinned horror caught him by the heel. The stumble had not been a death sentence by itself, but the many bats which had plunged to feed upon him a heartbeat later had been. Edd was sure he would never forget the screams of his friend. And there had been nothing he could do to end his suffering.

 All his best friends dead...or worse. For at this dark night had proven, dying was not necessarily the most atrocious thing that could happen to your body and your immortal soul. You could join the enemy’s ranks.

“WHEN ALL IS DARKEST, I WILL BE THE SWORD IN THE DARKNESS!”

They came. The hordes of the Arch-Enemy, led by the things they had taken up to call ‘Ghouls’. It was a name straight out of the legends of the Old Night, but it surprisingly fit. Much like the skeletons raised from their graves were the Wights reborn, and the Giant Bats were the Vargheists.

The fragile line of shields and weapons held, the Seven Above only knew how.

Was it because the score of men Edd commanded had nowhere left to run?

Was it because they had sworn oaths and there was nothing else to uphold in the depths of Hell?

There was no time to ask, for death was everywhere.

They were going to die-

A thunderous crack resonated, and for the first time, the monsters of Harrenhal took a few steps back.

“What was that? It sounded like-“

CRACK!

The blow the postern gate received, this time, could not be mistaken for anything else but a ram hammering the rusted metal and the crumbling wood used for its construction.

The gate had resisted easily what they could hit with, for aside from two warhammers and a few flails, no one had anything to destroy it.

But it seemed there was someone else outside.

And as the horrors in the air shrieked in fury, Edd suddenly felt hope again.

“HOLD! HOLD! HELP IS COMING!”

Shrieks and inhuman screams answered him.

The Arch-Enemy had realised the same thing, and it was angry.

“Night gathers, and now our watch begins, Dolorous.”

They had to hold for a few more heartbeats. If they held the gates, the reinforcements outside could seize an entrance, and burn this nest of heretics and monsters. The night was lost, but the day could be saved.

“It shall not end until our death.” He forced himself to utter, between two blows of his warhammer.

“We shall live and die at this gate.”

“We are in the swords in the darkness!”

“We are the watchers of Harrenhal!”

“We are the Fire that burns against the cold of Death!”

“WE ARE THE LIGHT THAT BRINGS THE DAWN, FOR THIS NIGHT AND ALL THE NIGHTS TO COME!”

The ram had never stopped striking. Men fell right and left. So few of them left shouting as they fought...

But suddenly, there was an enormous hole in the postern gate.

There was a large hole.

There were flames and light.

And from the opening just created, many Crown warriors roared their fury. One by one they emerged to take the fight to the Enemy.

They had held on for long enough.

The ram struck again, and the old rusted metal broke completely.

The trickle of Crown and Western warriors became a torrent.

Dragon, Lion, and Hunter banners came, and with them, they brought fire and steel to the heretics.

The world began to be hazy and indistinct.

His warhammer escaped his hands.

Edd laughed madly as he saw a dwarf-sized figure shrouded in flames dance with bats and slay them.

“End the Curse...you must end the Curse...”

Edd the Dolorous laughed, and then exhaustion brought him low.

**Tyrion Lannister 10**

Seven.

Not seven thousand, or seven hundred.

Seven.

This was the number of gaunt, battle-shocked young Valemen who had held the gate on their side, giving the time to his men to use the ram as the bats attacked and the arrows flew.

Seven survivors, and Tyrion doubted half of this number would pass the night. Their injuries were that bad.

But they had held.

If they hadn’t, he would have had to storm the gates of Harrenhal the old way.

And Tyrion was not too proud to admit he hadn’t brought enough men to do that.

Still, seven men.

The Faith would insist it was a miracle.

He had heard already several septons mumble about it in their beards.

The Westerner dwarf preferred it to call courage and sheer bloody stupidity.

They hadn’t seen the numbers; the last loyalist defenders of Harrenhal had not been told it was impossible and how close to zero their chances of victory were.

And because they hadn’t known, they had fought all the way and done it.

“In the history of the Seven Kingdoms, never was so much owed by so many to so few.”

“When you’ve finished speaking to your donkey, my Lord, I think we could benefit from your wisdom. There’s an entire army of Ghouls, a flight of Fell Bats, and plenty of other horrors coming that way. And I would rather enjoy not ending as their meal!”

Tyrion chuckled.

“Ah, Bronn. What would I do without you?”

“You would end up in trouble you can’t handle,” insolently replied the sellsword he paid for sarcasm and wits, but especially the former.

“You may very well be right.” Tyrion cleared his throat. “SEND THEM BACK TO THEIR GRAVES! WHEN DAWN WILL RETURN, IT WILL BE TO LIGHT THE PYRES OF THESE ABOMINATIONS! FOR LIGHT AND FOR THE DAWN!”

“FOR LIGHT AND FOR THE DAWN!”

Several hundreds of men of three different kingdoms stopped the skeleton tide with their large shields. All were united to end the treachery of Harrenhal.

“Rejoice, Ironborn ghosts,” Tyrion muttered, “for I am going once again to burn your Folly and your curses.”

Hundreds of blades and spears sang, and the Battle of Harrenhal truly began.

**Author’s note**: Too many times it doesn’t how impregnable the citadel, if the enemy is already inside.

On the other hand, if the traitors haven’t fully secured the fortress, you can have some loyalists do very problematic things. Holding one side of a gate to enter the fortress might be one of these things.

Obviously, Tyrion’s presence at Harrenhal wouldn’t have been possible if a certain Blackwood sorcerer hadn’t screwed up by their numbers. Quite a few Chaos sorcerers are not going to forget any time soon...

More links for the End of Times:

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

Archive of our own page (updated today): archive of ourown works / 51279877 / chapters / 129566713

On P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444