**Chapter 9**

**Change the Plan**

**Merrett Frey**

The bottle of wine was better than water...barely. Merrett had the urge twice to vomit it more than once over the parapet of the Water Tower.

“Father Above, where did you find this poor excuse for a drink, Benfrey?” He managed to argue once he had managed to swallow his first cup. “I think even the heretics can’t make wine that bad...”

His younger half-brother shrugged.

“One merchant of the Crown Sector wanted to empty his last stocks before the incoming soldiers took everything for one or two copper coins.”

“He was wise,” Merrett gave a dark look to the bottle. “The levies of the Tullys would have broken the bottle on his head.”

“Or they would have forced him to drink his own bottles until he didn’t remember his own name.”

Merrett grunted and went to move away his cup before he was tempted to drink again of this ill-tasting liquid. Wine usually helped with his headaches, but this Crown wine was so bad that not only it was not helping soothe his thirst, it was making his suffering worse.

Mother and Crone, he was almost tempted to descend the two hundred-plus stairs and go straight to the cellars to find something more suitable for his mouth. The problem was that while it might be possible there was a good bottle of Dornish Red waiting for him there, the opposite was very likely. With this senseless war prattled by the septons every morning, afternoon and evening, the wine was flowing everywhere and the Twins had welcomed many prestigious noble visitors this last fortnight. And more were on their way. So far most of the forces mustered on the eastern bank were Riverlanders, Faithful and Crownlanders. The Stormlanders, Valemen, Westerners and the others had yet to arrive...and his father was going to make another of his comments if he emptied the bottles kept for the King and any Lord Paramount who wasn’t a Tully.

And by the Warrior, descending these stairs was long and blood tiring. No, the two bottles of the Lolliston vineyards would have to do for this afternoon. Their banners had barrel on them, right? Their fields were certainly not the shiny Arbor, but Merrett hoped they could distinguish a grape from an apple.

“These dark clouds worry me, Merrett,” Benfrey had not stopped drinking the first bottle and his eyes were beginning to lose their alertness. “We were born in summer, I never saw a sky so...dark and evil, I guess.”

It was lucky for him Merrett had no wish to take advantage of these fears. Admitting such a thing to Black Walder, Hosteen, Lothar or another of their half-siblings would have resulted in plenty of mockeries and damaging whispers throughout the Twins.

“Bah, these are just clouds, Ben.” Merrett moved one of his hands in a move imitating the one he used to swat flies aside. “The Northern heretics must be burning some sort of darkness-weed far in the wastes, and they are using it in a vain attempt to scare us. It’s a clever thing...but it’s just a trick.”

“We can’t make that sort of tricks, Merrett...” He abandoned his effort to open the Lolliston bottle for the moment as he saw Benfrey was not convinced.

“Listen Ben, the heretics can paint the sky black and the Green Fork yellow if they want, it won’t save them in the end.”

Merrett pointed a finger in the direction of the north-east, where Sentinel’s Stand had once defended the Riverlands from the raiders, monsters and marauders. “They have breached the defences of House Sentinel by treachery and their demonic-tainted sorcery, but they have already lost the effect of surprise and the numbers.”

Black Walder was not someone he enjoyed the company of, but the man knew how to fight and many Riverlands captains were listening to his words, so Merrett supposed there was some truth in what he said.

“Even with treachery, the Northerners have paid in blood to take the Small Wall. They can’t have more than a couple of thousand riders and infantry moving south. We on the other hand, have over fifty thousand on the eastern bank and our rear is protected by the Twins and thousands more men marching northwards as we speak.”

“It’s not the North’s entire army.”

“No,” he agreed, “but their damned army isn’t that large to begin with. Their tainted lands are so frozen and corrupt they can’t field more than thirty thousand swords and half of them will be nothing more than bandits, marauders and raiders. Light infantry and light cavalry, no match for our knights in plate armour and the heavy pikes. Thirty thousand, Ben, and that would be if they’re ready to leave all their coastlines, all their fortresses undefended.”

By the Warrior, these explanations were making him thirsty. Merrett ceded to the temptation and poured himself half a cup of Lolliston red. He drank it quickly in three heartbeats.

“I don’t care if the Northerners pretend their Lords are all ten feet-tall giants. Walder and Stevron are right: we outnumber the heretics more than two-to-one...and no Lords of the Reach and the West have yet joined us. Warrior and Smith, even if by some trickery the Starks and their band of traitors were somehow managing to transport thirty thousand starving smallfolk tonight, Stevron has six thousand with him, and the Tullys have thirty thousand. The Faith has twenty thousand. We must have...something like seven or eight thousand horse, heavy and light.”

“So there’s no way we can lose?” Benfrey was looking more confident unless it was the last two cups which were providing warmth and happiness.

“None,” he answered, pouring himself another cup as the headaches returned and his old wounds hurt. “The young Tully is not his father but even I can win a battle with a huge army like that! We have so many men we can simply afford to trade ten of ours for one of them and still win in the end.

Better, the heretics can’t get around our forces. There are armies mustering at the Trident, and we have Seagard and of course the Twins to block their raiders. If they try to assault our walls, our archers will shoot them until they look like hedgehogs and then the River forces will charge in their rear...how did your brother call them...food for the crows?”

Merrett chuckled, imagining the livid face of a Northern Lord begging for mercy as he was dragged to their dungeons.

“The heretics made their worst mistake coming southwards,” the ninth son of Lord Walder Frey said. “Now our armies are going to send them to the cold graves where they belong.”

The problem was that he wasn’t going to be among them. The start of the war had surprised everyone at the Twins, and there was no time to once more train in the courtyards and wait a few moons before he had lost a few stones, enough to wear his old armour. There would be no glory for him...none of the Northern lands the King and the Lords had promised to the Crusaders would ever go to someone like him. Merrett was not a knight, and the chance to gain the ‘Ser’ in front of his first name had once more slipped between his fingers.

“Look at all these cows and livestock passing on our bridge,” there was indeed a sizeable mass of four-legged animals crossing the Green Fork on the great bridge of House Frey. “This must be the third herd today.”

“The armies need to eat,” Merrett shrugged. “Father is going to be happy for all the tolls paid this fortnight.”

The knights and men-at-arms had paid less than what it had been demanded of them, but they had paid nonetheless.

“I think I preferred when the foot and the horse were marching below. Now, that was impressive.”

“Yes, yes,” Merrett signalled a servant to bring him another bottle. “But most of them are already on the eastern bank and most of the other armies won’t use our bridge.”

The armies of the Crownlands, Reach, Stormlands, Vale and Dorne had no reason to travel on the western bank of the Green Fork, not unless they didn’t know how to read a map.

“What is that?” one of the crossbowmen stationed near them exclaimed, making him almost drop his cup of wine. Merrett looked at the sky before giving the man an unimpressed stare.

“This is just a small cloud...”

Really, with the northern horizon darkened by them, there was really no reason to be afraid.

“It advances quickly and quite low...” another archer remarked.

“And the wind comes from the west, not the north today!”

Merrett abandoned his cup to reprimand the men he was commanded to keep an eye on.

“And what do you think it is?” He asked the crossbowman as the cloud was less than a couple of leagues away from the Water Tower.

“This is not a cloud! These are fever flies of the Neck!”

“Ridiculous,” he mocked the lowborn man. “Fever flies are rare in autumn, and they die quickly if they leave their swamps. Now return to your...”

“Light as many fires as you can!” barked a Captain on the rampart just below them. “These things don’t like the warmth and the smoke!”

“Protect the bridge!

“The animals on the bridge must cross faster! Those on the western bank will wait!”

“Archers and Crossbowmen in position! Swordsmen and the other warriors, help our men prepare the scorpions and the burning oil...”

Merrett tried to say something, anything, but his words were lost in the tumult. He ran down the stairs and was nearly killed as score of soldiers arrived from every direction and like the lowborn scum they were, didn’t open ranks to let him pass.

“Damn it, where is my bottle now?” The ninth son of Lord Walder Frey roared, his bad mood increasing as the pain in his head returned five times stronger and everything around him was steel, armours and loud.

“Here, my Lord...” The bottle appeared like a miracle of the Seven. Merrett took it from the hands of the old servant like the treasure it was. He raised it to his lips. He did not complete the gesture.

A terrible pain burst in his chest, and Merrett let the bottle escape his hands. What was that? He had not...

His eyes lowered and he saw the hilt of a knife emerging from his belly. It was an ugly and yet exquisite thing, the material used to craft it had been bone and there was a small gemstone embedded on it...

“What? Why?”

“Don’t you remember, *my Lord*?” the old man he had assumed was a servant hissed as the smallfolk whispered in his ear and held his left arm in an impossibly tight grip. “You raped my daughter five years ago and when I came to demand justice, I received fifty lashes of the whip.”

Pain. There was so much pain, as the knife struck a second time. It was...he didn’t remember.

“Of course you don’t remember. You are just another wastrel, one of these Frey scurrying in the Riverlands and ruining the lives of everyone because you can. But it is over, Merrett Frey. Oh yes, this is over.”

Step after step the man dragged him away. Why was no one intervening? He was the son of Lord Walder Frey! He was highborn! He was...he was...the bigger drinker of the Twins! This man was an enemy!

“Your death will bring me joy...and your corpse will be an excellent host for the fever flies.”

Merrett saw the green lights. His head hurt. His belly hurt. He saw things growling and coming out of the shadows.

Merrett Frey, failed knight and lover of wine, screamed.

**Lothar Frey**

Lothar had expected an attack from the heretics on the Twins, now that the Small Wall was in their hands. It was simple logic, and there was no need to be a grand captain of war to understand it. Some of his half-brothers believed the war was going to be decided in a glorious cavalry charge where the favour of the Seven Heavens made the swords of the Warrior’s True Champions.

Lothar disagreed.

Oh, undoubtedly there were going to be massive battles, though he was a bit ill-at-ease at the sudden decision to invade the North at this very moment of the year. Everyone knew that the further you went north, the coldest the climate was. If there had been a time to invade the lands of the heretics, it was ten years ago, when summer would have reigned for long moons and the blizzards stayed a rarity. It was not when the first autumn rains commenced, to be sure.

But this war was not going to be decided in the end by the great clash of mighty armies. It was going to be decided by the equipment, supplies and everything a host of more than a hundred men needed to continue a long campaign. Did his half-brothers realise that? Of course they didn’t! And yet it didn’t change the reality of things. An army, even one of modest size, needed an unbelievable quantity of food per day nearby if its commander didn’t want it to starve. As such for every score of soldiers present on the field, you needed butchers, servants, and bakers among hundreds of smallfolk. An army needed an abundant supply of clean water. In part to clean the clothes and ensure the soldiers washed at least once per moon, but essentially because a man-at-arm without a jug of water per morning was going to die of thirst before he even met the enemy.

This was just the basic supplies. There was also the war equipment to be concerned about. Unlike the Faith who had conscripted its most zealous partisans in an undisciplined tide of fanaticism, Lothar personally didn’t place much faith in the miracles. This meant giving each humble warrior a sword, a shield, some leather protections, and a helmet. It helped making sure the man would last at least a turn of hourglass against the heretics.

The supplies had to be renewed every day, because food didn’t magically appear in front of your tent. Swords, helmets, chainmail and arrows had to be replaced before they broke in training or in battle, and for this you needed many, many good smiths.

The Lords hadn’t realised for now how disastrous the fall of Sentinel’s Stand really was. Without this fortress, the armies had to be supported from further south, and this meant Seagard and the Twins. Lothar had hired six of his half-sisters to count the numbers for him and one in five servants of the Twins were now helping him transform the twin castles of House Frey into a well-fortified supply depot no enemy could raid. It was...complicated, essentially because a year ago, no one in a circle of ten leagues had imagined there was going to be a Crusade. No effort had been made by the Crown to help House Frey as usual, and the organisation of the Crusade in general was disorderly, miserable and each army marching northwards was using its own methods. If they were all useless idiots like the ones Edmure Tully kept around, they were in big trouble.

As a result, Lothar was well-aware how much the Crusade depended on the supplies crossing the great bridge daily and the warehouses owned by House Frey on both sides of the Green Fork. And how much it would hurt to lose said gain, meat, fish and vegetables before a single battle was fought. He had made several preparations: the archers and crossbowmen Stevron had taken with him in the muster had all been replaced, the defences were all rebuilt as fast as possible, the scorpions and the ballista had been repaired and overall he had over two thousand swords, bows and spears to protect the Twins from anything heretical and dangerous.

Unfortunately, flies had...not been something he had thought of enemies. A demon or a man, you killed it with a sword, an axe or a warhammer. But all of these cutting blades were not that useful against a swarm of little creatures.

“Fire! We need fire to kill these things! Fire and smoke!”

He had been walking on the bridge inspecting some supplies from Pinkmaiden when the alert was sounded, and he had tried to organise the answer the moment the cloud was seen.

It was not good.

Many of his siblings present in the keep on both sides of the river had been left there because they couldn’t be trusted to wield correctly a spear or a sword on the battlefield, and they were adding to the confusion, not helping.

And to make things worse, the swarm was fast. It had arrived with no favourable wind, but it was fast. Some sorcery was most likely at work, but what struck Lothar in the first moments before it struck was the horrid, awful smell.

“Sweet Maiden, we are going to need the perfume of my sisters for the entire fortress after this...”

Lothar went against the stone to vomit. It saved his life, for the steel which had been aimed for his throat came terribly close to end his life. Thank the Seven, his sworn swords were swift with their swords and knew the pay was not likely to continue if he was dead.

“For the Grandfather! For the Lord of Life and Death!” The man in servant clothes had the crazy grin of a demented fool, and these were his last words as an axe removed his head.

The flies descended over the towers and the odours became worse. Lothar had just the time to put his helmet on and then it was swatting insects aside with steel and fire.

Seconds later, the pain he felt in his legs reminded him he was no warrior and that his bad leg had not healed itself while he was forgetting his weakness. Only a monumental effort and a weird move of his sword prevented him from falling. A few heartbeats later, four of his sworn swords formed a circle and then nothing heretical broke through.

Unfortunately, the twelfth son of Lord Walder Frey realised part of their success lied in the point these disgusting flies were not interested at all in him or the soldiers nearby. No, the majority of the swarm had attacked the livestock and the smallfolk crossing the bridge.

The noises made by the dying beasts were particularly horrible and as the battle continued, Lothar saw that flies were coming out of the cows, chickens and sheep’s corpses, their carcasses bleeding green pus and the odour was getting more and more unbearable.

“Captain!” He barked. “Burn the corpses! Burn everything corrupted! We can’t afford to let this swarm double its strength!”

Fortunately, there were plenty of fire arrows and torches ready by then, and the fleas and the other insects sent by the Northern sorcerers weren’t that bad.

“Beware, my Lord!” One of his protectors cut down another false-servant. By the Seven Hells, how many of these traitors were they hidden in their midst. When this damned battle was over, there were going to be changes, Lothar was ready to swear it on a holy book. It was bad enough to know the enemy you faced was damned beyond all redemption, but this...this treachery...waiting for the dagger inside their ranks to strike...

After a good turn of hourglass, the attack collapsed and the last flies began to dissolve into a smelly and nasty green good...at the light of the burning corpses, the fight ended as brutally as it had begun.

Lothar gritted his teeth watching over the devastation. The bridge was intact, not that he thought it had been in real danger when most of the enemy had been disease-infected vermin. Several Frey soldiers had been killed, albeit the incompetent ones: it was difficult to say with the fires, but it looked like most of the dead had rushed in battle without their helmets and armours.

The real problem was the livestock and the smallfolk. Many had to be killed on the spot, a grim task when it came to animals and even more morale-breaking one when it was humans who needed to be put down.

“My Lord?”

“Do it, Captain. Those with minor bites and wounds are to be immediately transported to the dungeons in quarantine. We will bring septons and those ‘Light servants’ with...peculiar abilities to excise the taint. For those who are clearly contaminated, all we can do is ending their suffering before evil claims their souls.”

“My Lord, a lot of these smallfolk aren’t sworn to our House...I think I saw several merchants sworn to the Tullys...”

Yes, their Riverrun liege was not going to like it...Lothar thought about this for a heartbeat before deciding getting rid of a potential epidemic before it even began was more important than making Edmure Tully like him...

“My orders stand Captain. We can’t afford fever, plague and whatever ugly surprises the sorcerers have prepared in the Neck to spread in the Riverlands.”

By order of the Iron Throne, hundreds of thousands men were marching northwards. If a sorcery-fuelled plague spread in one of the most populated kingdoms of Westeros, it was going to be something worthy of a nightmare and the Crusade would probably end before it had even begun.

It took a long time for order to be restored. More than he felt comfortable explaining to his father, really. Messengers came back as the sun slowly set over the twins. They told him the swarm had concentrated its strength against the bridge and caused little damage elsewhere.

It was when he was beginning to prepare his report to his father the last messenger came bearing a first list of the dead and the wounded in quarantine...along with more ill news.

“Your brothers Merrett and Benfrey were murdered, my Lord. We didn’t find Ser Merrett until the battle was over...I fear his assassin escaped...”

Lothar had the urge to say this was not bad news at all, but affirming it in public in front of scores of men and women he was far from convinced they were loyal to him was a mistake he had learned not to do at a young age.

“How awful,” he answered with a fake mourning expression. “Captain, begin the search for my brothers’ assassins immediately. We can’t allow assassins and spies to continue walking and murdering people in our halls and towers!”

“At once, my Lord!”

Something disturbed him, however. But he didn’t know exactly what. It was only at he was ten feet away from the great solar of his father he acknowledged the issue. The attack on the bridge had been brutally efficient and the heretics had lost nothing of value. A few assassins and a lot of flies were gone, but Lothar was sure this was nothing they could replace in a fortnight. By all rights, this attack had been ruthlessly and mercilessly executed.

Why then had the enemy commander chosen to eliminate two of his half-brothers...especially those two. Merrett and Benfrey were commanding the Water Tower because they couldn’t be trusted to command anything else...

Lothar Frey was forced to confront an unpleasant question.

“Was this attack a real attempt to test our defences, or a feint to distract us from discovering the real threat?”

**Ser Kevan Lannister**

Kevan walked silently on the waterfront which had been once the pride and the heart of Lannisport. He remembered a year ago when he had come here to talk to the guildsmen and captains of the slow merchant ships ponderously sailing across the Sunset Sea. He remembered the stalls full of fishes and their sea bounties. He remembered the loud shouts and the thousands of conversations as thousands of souls ran, walked, shove those who barred their way aside or transported large crate of goods on the waiting carracks.

Three days after the attack of Lannisport, it was difficult to remember this tapestry of prosperity and wealth had ever existed. In spite of the powerful western wind, there still was a heavy smell of smoke and fire. That was what happened when Iron reavers went ashore. These pirates had always the same methods: pillage, then burn.

“The priority is to rebuild the defences,” Kevan said with a voice which he hoped didn’t reveal his exhaustion. The company-strong group of Lannister cousins and cadet branches he had spoken nodded in reply with compliant smiles and devoted expressions.

They were useless, truth to be told. The battle they had just fought was proof of that. If they had not been eight thousand men in the eastern hills training for the Crusade, the damage could have been far worse than it currently was.

As he observed the walls and what had been once a neat and well-organised harbour, Kevan acknowledged the devastation was bad enough. The fires had been extinguished, but the vision of the harbour was one of utter disaster. Dozens of ships had only their prows or their sterns emerging from the debris-filled water as they lied on the bottom of the bay. Rare were the hulls which looked like there were not about to sink before the sun set over this humiliation. It was going to take a long time to get rid of these wrecks. The harbour of Lannisport had been transformed into a hall of slaughter. Any other day, it would be the crows reigning on the battlefield’s dead, but in the last three days, it was the sharks which had feasted on human flesh. For every man, woman or child washing ashore dead, there were three times that number the fishes ate in the depths.

“I am going to send the smiths and the artisans to rebuild the Western Gate and the Sun Gate,” Kevan added, naming the two enormous doors the Ironborn had no difficulties destroying, since they hadn’t been closed in the first place. “The garrison is going to be tripled and we are going to build six new watchtowers.”

“Ser Kevan...we are...err...lacking in officers and good warriors. Will you release the commanders you have arrested?”

Kevan stared at the Lantell merchant until the man lowered his eyes.

“No,” the brother of the Lord of Casterly Rock replied. “These men are going to be hanged before the fortnight is over. Smallfolk can be cowards. Without a weapon and some protection, it is not a crime to be scared by thousands of Ironborn charging out of nowhere in the middle of the night. However, these officers of the City’s Watch are paid with our gold to man the ramparts, close the gates and fight when an enemy is trying to raid our shores. We pay them to be brave. We do not pay them to flee with their gold in the opposite direction the moment they learn of the attack.”

“But...”

“Cowardice and incompetence will not be tolerated. Am I clear?” Kevan raised sufficiently his voice to make his displeasure evident.

“Yes, my Lord,” they replied with force bowing and soft murmurs.

He had not finished explaining the displeasure Tywin had demanded to express.

“This battle will force us to change our strategy and keep a large garrison inside Lannisport.” In pure loss, he was sure, since it was unlikely even the Ironborn were stupid enough to attack a target they had already ravaged. “These are over six thousand men which will not join the Crusade. In compensation, a new tax will be levied on the guilds and most prestigious Houses starting next moon.”

“My Lord, this will ruin us!” The exclamation had come from a Lannister of Lannisport, whose name Kevan had not bothered learning the name.

“Given that your cousin was arrested with three bags of gold coins at the Wind Gate, you need to be more careful with your words...” the knight of the Westerlands warned this useless blonde-haired merchant. “Daven, your report.”

Stafford’s son took two step forwards, his gruff appearance in chainmail, leonine helm and fox-fur cloak intimidating further the assembled highborn.

“The harbour and the fleet are a total loss, Ser Kevan,” Daven announced. “Half of our galleys’ crew were killed outright, and one in three of the rest are prisoners of the Ironborn now. And those who managed to avoid these two fates jumped off ship, swam and fled as fast they could before the battle was over...”

Daven made the usual sign on his throat to tell the sentence which was given to these deserters once the horse of House Lannister found them.

“The problem is the wood,” Stafford’s son grumbled. “The Ironborn, damn their souls to the Seven Hells, have raided all of our stores outside the walls and what they couldn’t take in the battle in the streets, they tried to burn it. We will not only need to train new sailors and build an entire new fleet...we will need to purchase all the supplies for it. Ropes, turpentine, anchors, and sails...everything they could grab and transport to their longships, these pirates took it...and what they didn’t take, they set it on fire or they threw it at the bottom of the harbour. I don’t see how we can rebuild something from this...we will have to rebuild the harbour entirely and then the fleet.”

The gaze Daven Lannister sent the merchants and the important nobles of Lannisport was not friendly at all.

“My Lord!” the man who had called him had no Lannister traits, his hair were deep black and his eyes an ugly brown. He had around his neck the golden necklaces with several jewels the Guild Masters enjoyed wearing for momentous events. “I fear building a new fleet is going to be impossible for years...”

“Explain,” Kevan said, silently admiring the courage of the man as his neighbours quickly chose to distance themselves from him.

“It’s the timber, my Lord,” the man affirmed while his fists tightened. “Lord Tywin, in his great foresight, knows the West is not blessed with many forests...and the timber we take from it is of low quality when we decide to use it. Nine out of ten wood planks we prepare for shipbuilding are bought in Oldtown, the Arbor or...from other sources and blessed by the septons.”

Kevan Lannister almost smirked at the very polite way his interlocutor had just admitted they were buying wood from the North.

“Transporting all this wood by land is ruinous and takes too long, my Lord. The timber has to come by ship...and these last moons, the price our contacts in the Reach and the other kingdoms demanded for their ship supplies was increasing massively. Several of our sources are now...unavoidable, due to the Crusade, and with the Ironborn reaving everywhere, merchant ships are unlikely to risk themselves northwards without the protection of the Redwyne fleet. We had reserves for a couple of years at Lannisport, my Lord, but we never thought we would have to rebuild the fleet and the harbour at the same time while our supplies were destroyed or stolen. I don’t see a way we can rebuild the fleet to its previous strength in less than five years, and this is assuming our allies defeat the Ironborn at sea. I am sorry, my Lord, but this is the truth.”

“Five years, you say?”

“Five years, my Lord...assuming we manage to remove all the debris and the wrecks before the first snowfall...the winter does not last more than a couple of years...and the Ironborn don’t return.”

Kevan shuddered in his head. That was a lot of conditions...and the worst part was that they were reasonable. Tywin was not going to be happy at all...thank the Gods the reinforcements had managed to push back the Ironborn before they were entrenched inside Lannisport.

One thing was sure, alas. The initial plan of invading the North by its western coast was dead and it was best to forget it entirely. Neither he nor any Lannister captain knew what the Northerners had proposed to the Ironborn for an alliance, but surely it couldn’t be a coincidence Balon Greyjoy had chosen this time to rebel. And the forces in presence suddenly were not as outbalanced as they had been three days ago. It wasn’t the North against the other kingdoms of Westeros; it was two kingdoms against the other seven...and both happened to erase the other’s weaknesses. This Crusade had already a feeling of precipitation and hot-headed charge before, now it had all the signs of unbridled recklessness.

“Now let’s speak of all the accusations of sorcery your men have on their lips when they explain why they were sleeping on duty...”

**Ser Patrek Mallister**

“They sent us on a senseless patrol...” Patrek was pretty sure the comment had come from the old knight carrying the Ryger banner.

Maybe the grey-bearded warrior should not have voiced it so loudly, though. Ser Tristan Ryger was of good company when Edmure and their friends were around, but he took his duties and Edmure’s commands very seriously.

“Be quiet, Rand! Lord Edmure told us to find these heretic raiders, and we will find them!”

“With all due respect, Ser,” a knight of Seagard under Patrek intervened, “I fear that Rand is right. We were commanded to go east and make sure the enemy wasn’t using the goat trails between the Vale and the Riverlands to move its forces southwards. We obeyed the command. But unless the heretics have been transformed into birds by their demonic masters, I don’t see how they could have escaped all our patrols.”

“Any large group of men leaves traces, Ser,” a knight from the Trident with a sort of spearfish-like banner affirmed, his russet beard giving him a savage air which had to be very appreciated by the Ladies. “One man on foot could have hidden himself from our cavalry patrols in a hole or a grove somewhere. For two, the rebels must be good smugglers and know the region like their purse. For three or more, we would have found the cold embers of their fires, their foot traces and the locations of their camps. It rained five days ago and a lot of these muddy trails are easy to observe. Nothing but a few wild animals took this path. I’m ready to bet one stag on it.”

“You just did,” retorted Tristan, and they pushed their horses forwards in the hills announcing the Mountains of the Moon in the distance.

But as the sun rose, shone and finally descended, the words of the age knights proved true. There were no Northern raiders hiding in a cove with blood in their eyes waiting for them. There was not much of everything, truth to be sold. Rand announced a stag had been drinking in the next river, and nearly drew his sword in anger when one of the southern hedge knights challenged him, proclaiming high and loud it was a big fox.

The landscape was not unpleasant to watch, not with the autumn weather far more tolerable than the hellishly hot summer heat, but there were no humans in sight. There were merely a couple of leagues away from the steep slopes of the first mountains, at the very edge of the Ryger lands, and there were few villages in this region. Obviously a determined hundred or so smallfolk could build a village in summer and cultivate some fields. But when winter came here, harvesting was not possible anymore, and isolated from everything and a prime target for the clansmen of the Mountains of the Moon, the audacious peasants would not see another spring.

But as the brown leaves covered the paths they used in a brown-red blanket, the tempers rose among the group. Many of the young knights like him had volunteered to be part of these patrols because for now, there was no great army coming southwards to challenge them and the idea of fighting raiders while outnumbering the heretics twenty-to-one was not a risky proposition. But as the sky grew darker and the probable future was another autumn rain, the smiles disappeared and the exchanges were more shouted than spoken.

“I’m telling you we must return and tell...”

“There should be some old ruins not far from this hill, Ser. A dragon killed the knights during the Dance, but it could give us some shelter from the storm. I really don’t like these clouds...”

Patrek knew from experience that at Seagard, the bad weather could arrive before you had the time to say your House’s words, and it seemed that so close to the mountains, it was true too. By the time they saw decrepit burned walls, there was so little light it looked like it was a moment before dusk. The sun had abandoned them, and already the cold wind was bringing the hints of the autumn rains.

“Well, if it isn’t a friendly sight,” a Willow Wood knight japed as they lighted the torches. Forced laughter answered him. In this darkness, it was true the sight presented by the ruin was as sinister and unwelcoming as it was possible. But then, it was a ruin, and in the darkness there was no one to make it more pleasant to the eye.

“Come on, best we find some good shelter before the rain drenches us...I don’t think the horses will thank...argh!” One of the men from the Trident had not looked where he was walking, and the large root which had waited there for decades sent him sprawling to the ground.

“Pat, if you aren’t careful, we will have to tell your poor mother you died murdered by a tree...” Tristan emerged from the shadows with two of his men as laughter and japes about Pat’s clumsiness spread.

The laughter was suddenly stopped by the first drops of water and everyone hurrying to mount tents and provide some shelter for the horses. They didn’t make it. Before one had the time to count ten, it was like the Seven Heavens poured a torrent of water of their heads.

It was a miserable night. The fires didn’t last long, they were unable to warm their hands or any part of their bodies and the rain continued long past the meagre dinner they shared together. And of course, they didn’t see anything in this awful weather. The heretics, unlike them, had decided to stay away –wisely - from this ruin.

**Ser Edmure Tully**

“The heretics aren’t coming, lord,” Edmure hid his grimace behind a cup of Gold Arbor. Lord Keath had babbled for days the Northerners weren’t going to rush south in front of the Twins to offer battle, but Edmure and most of the other Lords of the Rivers and the Trident had disagreed.

Attacking fast was the intelligent thing to do for the Starks and their allies, obviously. They were going to be horribly outnumbered – according to his best scouts, they couldn’t have more than five thousand mutants and traitors against his sixty thousand men – but when his southern reinforcements arrived, the Crownlands and the Vale alone would add more than seventy thousand men, twice the size of the greatest muster the Starks could gather on short notice.

Unfortunately, whoever was in command in the ruins of Sentinel’s Stand wasn’t smart at all. The heretical grand captain had let pass his chance, and now not only the defences of the Twins and all the other fortresses on both banks had been strengthened, the other armies of the Iron Throne were less than a fortnight away.

“No, they aren’t,” it had to be said, especially as Lord Keath had been courteous enough not to say ‘I told you so’. “And none of our patrols have seen any raiders or scout bands try to flank us by the east. They are...well, as far as we able to see, they are happy to pillage the Sentinel lands and repair whatever damage they did to Sentinel’s Stand.”

“They are corrupting this blessed citadel with their demonic sorcery...” grumbled the septon the Faithful Crusaders had sent as a representative for this council of war. “We can’t let them continue this desecration any longer!”

“I agree with the Septon-Crusader, my lord,” Lord Jonos Bracken growled. “We don’t know where the main Northern army is, but it’s not south of the Neck. We have lost many scouts in our reconnaissance in force, but our courageous men saw no more troops coming from the Neck. All they have is seven or eight thousand warriors and monsters to fight us with. And none of our rangers saw anything like scorpions, catapults or trebuchets. If they have siege engines, the rock-launchers are not big.”

“Let’s not forget their sorcerers, my lords,” Lord Blanetree warned them with his thin voice and his dark green eyes never fixing on anyone for long. “They may not have a large siege train, but one powerful Riverlands fortress fell in mere days...”

“It was treachery which caused the fall of Sentinel’s Stand! That and House Frey abandoning them was their doom!”

“How dare you...” one of the weasel-faced Freys seethed. “You will duel me for this insult, Vance!”

Edmure opened his mouth, but it was too late. The bickering was already out of control and people were screaming everywhere he posed his eyes. Thank the Father Above, no one was drawing the splendid swords and daggers at the moment...the war council being held under the rainbow banner at least stopped bloodshed from starting. No one wanted to explain to the High Septon why one of the symbols of the Seven-Who-Are-One was discarded like a mere inconvenience.

It took a long time to restore something looking like order, and only with the arrival of a new hundred cups and the wine bottles did calm and silence made a timid return.

“We are in agreement the heretics won’t try to engage us in a battle on the Kingsroad or before the Twins. And they didn’t try to sneak their raiders in the Ryger and Terrick lands. Therefore, our only possible answer is to go at them.” Edmure tried to impose the same tone his father used in the Great Hall of Riverrun. “We need to take the fight to them and reconquer Sentinel’s Stand in the name of King Rhaegar and the Seven.”

There was a moment of silence and Lord Blanetree cleared his throat.

“An admirable feeling my Lord, but why not wait the first Vale horses and the vanguard of the Crown troops? Our superiority then will be utterly impossible to counter...”

“And abandon the glory to the other armies and their knights?” Jonos Bracken asked incredulously. “By the Warrior, Blanetree, if I didn’t know you better, I would think you were a coward!”

As more shouts and whispers followed to support this, House Blanetree and House Shawney’s Lords didn’t speak one more word.

“Yes, my Lord, it will be an easy campaign...we will have five trebuchets and three catapults to break the walls if the heretics refuse to give us battle...”

“We have thousands of chariots to give us all the supplies we need...”

“This is decided then, my children,” the septon said while lighting seven candles in a fluid move. “We march against the heretics! Death to the apostates! Death to the First Men and their demonic masters!”

“Death to the heretics! We will purge them from Westeros!”

“Death to the Starks!”

Edmure too raised in cup. Yes, it was time for House Tully to take revenge after they had been forced to sacrifice a daughter to these demon-worshippers which respected nothing and no one.

“We will take back our lands...and the North will learn there are no True Gods but the Seven-Who-Are-One!”

“THE SEVEN WILL IT!”

“THE SEVEN WILL IT!”