**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 2**

**Cataclysm**

*Humanity had grown incredibly arrogant over the last millennium.*

*For all the cheap holo-series presenting the valiant soldiers in battle-armours in desperate fights against improbable genetic monstrosities, the reality was somewhat underwhelming. Whatever few non-human intelligent species humanity had met thorough history were in all cases completely outmatched by the firepower the mighty fleets mankind could bring to a battle. In the best of cases for the non-humans, their planets were forced to sign accords reducing them to a protectorate of the nation having discovered them and they were forbidden for all eternity to leave their home star system. In the worst of cases...well, many of the ancient Great Powers of this galaxy had dirty secrets and this one was one more added to the list.*

*If a bard asked an Admiral or a General whether the human race’s expansion across the galaxy could be considered endangered, said man or woman was going to be soon under very heavy pressure to find another job. For all the damage done by the Doom of Valyria, the population levels in the Westeros and Essos Quadrants had increased considerably in the last centuries. When Aegon the Conqueror was crowned King of the Seven Sectors, the population of his realm had slightly been under one hundred and twenty billion. The Dance of Dragons killed hundreds of millions and ended an era of prosperity one hundred-plus years later, but the succeeding wars didn’t kill half of this body count. The Blackfyre Rebellions were fought without dragons and except the First, were largely restricted to one or two Sectors. The Last Blackfyre Rebellion, which saw Maelys the Monstrous slain, didn’t reach the planets under the Iron Throne’s rule and cost the realm about eighty-six million warriors. It was a price the Targaryen dynasty could easily afford to pay and the losses of this war ended by Ser Barristan ‘the Bold’ Selmy were nearly forgotten two decades later.*

*The Usurper’s War, contrary to what some Loyalist commanders tried to pretend given the benefit of hindsight, didn’t break this tendency. Close to four hundred and twelve million men, women and children perished in the great conflict to end King Aerys’ reign and depose his crown on King Rhaegar Targaryen’s head. Since by 284AAC the Westerosi population levels had largely grown over three hundred billion, the Seven Sectors had largely the ability to absorb these losses without a heartbeat of pause.*

*No, it was the Greyjoy Rebellion which was the real game-changer. In less than a year, the ill-conceived uprising imagined by Balon Greyjoy caused approximately seven hundred and ninety-eight million deaths. For the first time in centuries, the civilian population found itself in the middle of the inferno caused by a great war, and the casualties were horrendous. The Iron Sector never recovered before the War of the Ten Warlords erupted and made many peace issues completely irrelevant.*

*Now the Iron Sector was small and the atrocities committed post-war could be ignored by the Paramount and Noble Houses. Many Lords and Ladies indeed practised interesting selective policies, publically mourning the cost of occupation while sending the worst sellsword companies on planets which were simply reduced to rubble after years of fighting.*

*When it came down to it, the majority of the factions now vying for absolute domination over Westeros gave relatively little thought to the post-war future of Westeros, pointedly missing entirely the point there were people on certain planets which had excellent reasons to drown their planets into oceans of blood.*

*By 02.09.300AAC and the opening of Operation Midnight, the Seven Sectors had a population estimated to three hundred and fifty-eight billion people. This was a population number which would never be seen again this century. In three days, the Dornish bombs and the Behemoth clashes killed eight million subjects of the Iron Throne.*

*And the worst was yet to come.*

*Unknown to all, humanity was going to be reminded soon the very signification of the word ‘cataclysm’...*

Extract of Prelude to the Great Cataclysm, by Barabo Durvyris, 350AAC.

“*Hear my words. You treat the White Walkers like they are mortal opponents. They aren’t. Fighting this enemy is like trying to kill an elemental force of destruction, one which hates you on such a scale your own emotions are literally nothing compared to it. The beings you call the Others want us all dead. Don’t bother trying to open negotiations or learn their language. These are human methods, and you don’t fight humans. You fight a cataclysm of untold scale, and unless you win, the galaxy will fall into the cold embrace of death*.” King-Beyond-the-Wall Mance Rayder, 301AAC.

**Ygritte of the Crimson Squadron, 05.09.300AAC, Kroc’s Star System**

A decade ago, the Kroc Station and the green planet it orbited had been one of the most prosperous fixed bastions built by the Free Folk. The star system was at a crossroad of no less than six jump points, each of them individually valuable, and best of all things, it had an inhabitable world. As a result, the clans had continuously tried to fight for it before a King-Beyond-the-Wall – whose name had long been lost – had declared this star system neutral ground for all the clans. The new clan of the Kroc had been created to watch over the station and the planet, store food and spare parts and eventually sell them to those who had the means to barter them.

In the last generations, Kroc’s Station and the world it defended had been one of the most secure places on the hundreds of systems the clans used for their own purposes. The station had been defended by over four hundred missile launchers, seven hundred laser batteries and three hundred plasma weapons. Scores and scores of offensive satellites were waiting the order to pulverise any Free Folk captain stupid enough to violate the neutrality of the grounds. There were vast minefields ready to be activated in case the procedures were violated too. If this wasn’t enough, Kroc’s Station had its own mobile fleet and it was formidable: an ancient Ark, nine Barges, hundreds of smaller scouts and as many starfighters as they needed to defeat any raiding party.

Ygritte knew that even the biggest clans would have bled heavily to get past the missiles and the mines. No matter who your name was, Thenn, Giantsbane, Rayder, Lord of Bones or another title, the clan of the Kroc would have been able to teach a very painful lesson to the idiotic leader willing to take by force the supplies they guarded.

It had been a decade ago. Against the White Walkers and their dreaded weapons, Kroc’s Station was just a death trap. So had concluded the King, and there had been no one among the clan leaders to say he was wrong.

The problem was that there were not enough ships for everyone. The population of Kroc and Kroc’s station had grown considerably despite the riots and mini-wars always happening when Free Folk lived together in high numbers. Ygritte had seen the numbers and at first hadn’t believed them: the Kroc captains had told there were near sixty million souls living on the station or the planet. Yes, the King’s fleet had hundreds of millions in its kilometres-long hulls, but it was the alliance of hundreds of clans, not a single system.

The Kroc clan had been able to gather four big Arks and three more Barges somehow, in addition to the hundreds of ships they had already promised to the Queen.

It wasn’t enough. By all rights, there were ten million or so Free Folk left on Kroc’s station and below.

It was why Ygritte and the rest of Crimson Squadron were here. Each local day which passed was a day letting two or three ships finish its return to active status and jump towards the Fist of the First Men System, two jumps away from here. Each ship escaping meant more souls saved from the damned embrace of the Enemy.

And in the mean time, a four centuries-old foundry had churned starfighters like they were pebbles. The majority of the best pilots were with the fleet, but the Kroc had roused his people and the Free Folk were not kneelers. In days they had understood that in this war, there were no sides: if you had a heartbeat, you were prey for the White Walkers and then it was your choice how to spend the last days of your life. You could end your last days waiting for the sky to burn blue, or you could take arms. The local population had come by the thousands to their training grounds and the volunteers even now hadn’t stopped.

The difficulties of the spare parts and the engines were demoralising, forcing them to resort to more and more desperate improvisation. There were never enough mechanics. The fuel tankers were prioritising the ships fleeing towards the Fist. The pilots were totally and utterly inexperienced, with at most thirty hours in the simulators and ten hours in real life.

Somehow, it would have to be enough. Kroc’s Station had to be defended and the Free Folk were not going to abandon their brothers and sisters to the Enemy. Ygritte knew of two barge-carriers who were staying behind near the jump point for them and the survivors.

The hangars were more crowded than in her wildest nightmares as she tried to return to her starfighter’s bay. Despite the warriors, despite the iron demands of the Kroc, panic was spreading everywhere and people who had not accepted their role in the last defence of the star system were panicking. The young woman didn’t blame them. Free Folk were humans, and if someone told her he didn’t fear the White Walkers, Ygritte was going to cut his dick and launch it into an incinerator.

“Has the problem with the thrusters of this fighter been solved?” She asked to a mechanic as one of the units supposed to be under her command was still under repair.

“Yes, Crimson Archer, we will need...”

The alarms began to blare at this moment and it was the alarms everyone had been dreading for nearly seventy days.

Ygritte didn’t wait for any answer and she ran until she arrived to the old tactical display. Several shadowy blue dots had appeared and there were too many for it to be a probe or a raid.

“Talk to me, Urur.”

“They came out of the darkness seconds ago, Crimson Archer. We already count three scores of Tyrant-class cruisers and eleven, no twelve, Carrion-class battleships. They arrive on a two-zero-zero intercept course at six hundred thousand kilometres. We have less than five hours to...”

Ygritte knew she was paling and whatever she could do at the moment was not vomit. Five hours might seem a lot: but to get out the Free Folk slow transports and evade pursuit afterwards they had to go now or they would be easy target for the White Walker artillerists.

As for the opposition, they were well and truly fucked, and not in the good kind. The King had said she could give the monsters a serious bleeding given the numbers she had available, but the Walkers were legion today. The cruisers the Free Folk called Tyrant were already raw murder: able to massacre entire clans in hours. Compared to the Carrion-class, they were just small jokes. These monsters were dagger-like and wielded more firepower in one hull than hundred of Arks combined together.

“Tell the Kroc he must launch at once everything ready. What can’t take off right now must be abandoned.”

Ygritte already hated herself for this, but there was no other choice. Transports which could get away were winning over those which couldn’t.

“Update the last data and give to all commands the orders to expedite fight preparations. All starfighters are to launch in one hour.”

The rest was just desperate decision after desperate decision. When she finally jumped in her starfighter’s cockpit, for the first time in her life she found no joy.

Ten million.

This was the number of Free Folk they hadn’t be able to evacuate in time and it hurt more than she could have imagined a year ago.

Ten million.

And given the approach and the firepower of the Walkers, neither Crimson Squadron nor anything they had could stop the demons coming for them.

“Launch!” And in a fraction of second, the old but sturdy steam catapults sent her in the void. By instinct, her fingers adjusted the last course on the console. And her starfighter answered like the perfect weapon it was. Stolen hundreds of years ago from the crows, Ygritte didn’t know its first name and she didn’t care. For all Free Folk, the oblong hull with two ‘wings’ capable to bear the laser cannons and two missiles was called the Hunter.

“This is Crimson Archer, form on me,” she ordered on all frequencies. “Ignore the Tyrants, priority targets are the Carrions.”

This was contrary to her experience: the Tyrants were the best anti-starfighter killers in this galaxy. Unfortunately, killing them in this battle would serve no purpose. The battleships were the real threat.

The starfighters activating their engines and rising with her towards the Enemy was a magnificent torrent of light. Dozens pilots missed their first manoeuvres and went completely off-course, a problem which would put them minutes away from the main formation. But there were tens of thousands following her. Kroc’s station crunch-suppliers had told her they would be able to give close to two hundred thousand starfighters and so far they hadn’t disappointed. Now if only the fifty pilots of Crimson Squadron weren’t the only experimented spear-pilots in this wave...

The next update was worse. There were now seventy-eight Tyrants, nearly four scores of them, and fifteen Carrions. And since the monsters’ furtive systems outclassed them by five levels, the young female warrior knew they were only seeing what the enemy wanted to see. Kroc’s station began to launch missiles and activate the minefields in the outer system, but the demons contemptuously ignored the shots.

“Crimson Archer, there is something weird on my sensors...”

“It’s true! There’s a gravitic anomaly we’ve just detected behind the Carrions...”

“Shadow Squadron, illuminate the zone!”

The two hundred-plus starfighters carrying advanced versions of the H-47B sensor emitted at full power and suddenly another Walker warship materialised on their consoles’ screens.

Screams of incredulity were on every frequency. The Enemy’s Carrion-class was longer and more dangerous than the kneeler’s ‘ships of the line’. These battleships were thin blades coursing with unfathomable blue energy and unlike the Tyrants, no one could honestly remember the time when a Carrion battleship had been destroyed by human forces.

The colossus they were currently a million kilometres away dwarfed the Carrions like an adult towers over a small child.

The dimensions and the acceleration it sustained were flatly impossible. No kneeler’s ‘Admiral’ had ever been able to build such a large warship. Even the Arks, which were modified colonisation ships were dominated by this newcomer.

Ten kilometres long. About a kilometre wide and three kilometres high.

In spite of the distance, the Free Folk sensors could see the flanks bristling with blue-energy, the unnatural turrets pivoting to track her squadron and the formidable tech-sorcery protecting top and bottom of the impossibly-long hull.

And if this thing was not dangerous enough, the entire hull seemed to serve as support for a terrifying cannon.

No, not ‘a cannon’. THE Cannon. Ygritte estimated it had to be five or six kilometres long and the maw opening was larger than a lot of cruisers. Deep inside at this moment, she knew Kroc’s Station and everything in this system were not the reason this moving fortress had been built.

There was only one target the Enemy could consider threatening enough to invest years of effort in this super-battleship. And it had never belonged to the Free Folk.

The Wall.

“Designate new contact...Star Killer.”

For an odd reason, the very name seemed right for such an absurdly dangerous weapon.

“Crimson, Shadow, Killer, Destruction, Unity, Orange and Freedom squadrons will create an opening by striking the lead Carrion battleship. All remaining squadrons, break through the formation and inflict the maximum of damage you can!”

Kroc’s Station unleashed the defences which had stayed silent for centuries, and an ocean of destruction raced to meet the White Walkers, two hundred thousand starfighters on their heels. Roars of hate and defiance were screamed on every frequency. Whatever discipline and order had existed vanished and the Free Folk intercepted the Enemy formation.

It was a massive slaughter, but for the first time Tyrant-class cruisers began to die in explosions of blue nova. One, two, three and then Crimson Squadron launched its missile in the teeth of the gigantic Carrion battleship. At this distance, they couldn’t miss it...and they didn’t. Over six thousand missiles were shot in sprint mode and at this acceleration speed, even the supernatural reaction times of Walkers’ commanders was not enough. The blue energy shattered hundreds of projectiles and wiped out Destruction and Unity squadrons with a single volley, but when Ygritte and the survivors broke through, the Carrion battleship was wracked by series of explosions.

And then three seconds later there was a new star in the system, whose brilliance overwhelmed all sensors.

“Yes!”

A sound of pure, unbridled passion roared in her ears and Ygritte joined her voice to theirs. They had lost hundreds of starfighters, but the White Walkers had just paid dearly for the first time of the war.

Then the rest of the assault force collided with the fourteen remaining battleships and losses skyrocketed to numbers she never had thought possible. Six more Tyrants and one Carrion were vaporised but over ninety thousand starfighters were wiped out from this galaxy. Added to the rest of the losses, over half of the starfighters were already dead, and then two Carrions began to fire with their main batteries at maximum power.

For a second, there was just a stunned silence. Of the near forty thousand starfighters which had been able to break through, there were only flaming debris as the biggest parts to proof they had once existed.

The last wave attacked the super-battleship, but the monstrous warship’s blue energy screen swallowed missiles and lasers like they were nothing and its counter-attack destroyed the Free Folk pilots with terrifying ease.

“Gods...”

They were breaking off now. She hadn’t given a single command, but there wasn’t simply anything to do. Of the two hundred thousand pilots she had led to this battle, maybe three thousand had escaped the White Walkers’ batteries. There was no way they could do significant damage during a single wave.

“Crimson Archer, the energy levels around the Star Killer, they are...”

It was one of the six survivors of her squadron who had tried to speak to her, but the warning came too late. And it wasn’t like they could have done anything.

The great cannon of the super-battleship fired.

At first, it looked like a thin blue lightning...then the small blue line became a raging inferno of blue energy. They were not the targets, of course. Why would the demons waste their time and their energy on a heavily battered force?

It was like the end of all things and Kroc’s Station was on its path. The young commander of the Free Folk squadron gripped her console in fear but at this moment sensors were showing the same horrifying reality her own eyes were able to discern.

The station which had been their base and their refuge for the last fortnights vanished forever in an explosion making those of the preceding fight tame. The defences, the minefields, the satellites... everything in orbit was exploding or convulsing in blue flames.

And then the planet itself began to freeze. In the first minutes it was like a white wound was hurting the planet but soon it was evident the five-second shot had been sufficient to provoke a new ice age to the sole inhabited planet of the system.

The civilian frequencies were screeching as tens of thousands Free Folk screamed in terror. Ygritte switched back to the squadron’s communications seconds after, unable to listen to this tragedy.

Ten million lives they had failed to save.

“Crimson Hunter, give us a new course for the jump point.”

“It’s not your fault, Crimson Archer.”

“I...No, but...” What else could she say to her wingmen?

“Hunter is right, Archer.”

“We need to get back to the fleet,” Ygritte said after taking a big breath. “The King needs to be informed the White Walkers have that thing to kill all life...”

**Euron Greyjoy, 05.09.300AAC, Nightfort System**

The aether around the Eye of the Woe was not pleasant to study. This was a lesson Euron had learned the hard way when he had joined the Night’s Watch after this little clusterfuck at Pyke.

It had never been the case wherever he went in the Iron Sector and many of the locations he had visited in his reaving days, so the Crow’s Eye had supposed the method the Others had used to create this unnatural breach had also screwed the aether in a major way.

It was like someone had tried to play a symphony with a music instrument as badly as possible, while being accompanied by a thousand singers having no idea to cooperate properly with a band of animals doing their own cacophony in the background.

To say it would be pleasant to hear would be like to say men loved it when they were forced to drink their piss instead of facing insubordination charges. He was certainly not going to make a song of it with the violin he had recently acquired from a Crown bard exiled for some chicanery to this god-forsaken planet.

Coupled with the fact he tired far faster than in his young years with this damned heavy black armour, and Euron wasn’t really paying attention to what happened on the magical side of things at every hour of the day. He had to supervise the renovations of the Nightfort infrastructure and watch over a bunch of criminals. Said men believed they were big boys because they had killed one or two men, raped their first woman and tried to take over a gang at King’s Landing or one in another Westerosi mega-city.

It was a pleasure to explain to them – in music – why they were insignificant ants in front of his sublime greatness. Yes, he was a bit injured but he at least had tried to become a God – notice the majuscule – and millions had perished under his command.

These common thieves, murderers and rapists were just apprentices in front of the Great Master, crime-wise. But frankly, it was a long and unsavoury chore to make them recognise this evidence.

Sometimes, Euron thought the Conqueror had cast a spell to diminish magically the intelligence of those who opposed his line and by a strange hazard of destiny, born-greenseers were immune to it.

 “It would certainly explain why Balon’s reavers were so stupid...” He muttered, the sound of his voice resonating in a sinister manner outside his mouth.

He felt it shortly after. The aether was in turmoil. A storm of screams was singing more loudly than the tumult created by the Eye of Woe. Wincing at the idea of the headache he was going to experience tomorrow, he tried to sense the origin of the new uninspiring music...and was rewarded by an enormous flash of blue, the greatest cannon blast he had ever seen in his life, a planet freezing to death...and iris-less blue eyes fixing him with absolute malevolence.

Euron didn’t wait to see if the creature could harm him and cut the flow of magic faster than precaution dictated. He felt pain in his mouth and every part of his body, but it was better than the alternative.

It took him a quarter of an hour to stop shouting insults after the vision stopped.

“This is really not good,” he rasped after he had finished venting his rage on the skull of one of his deceased subordinates. “Shit!”

The Others were coming faster and apparently they had created their equivalent of a galactic battering ram to storm the protections of the Wall. And by the chorus of screams he had heard, the barbarian wildlings had just been used for the field test of the new weapon.

Euron Greyjoy was a master strategist, but in this case even Balon would have been able to guess their ultimate goal.

“Squire!” He barked. Footsteps echoed in the distance and after a delay which was unpunctual and un-artistic, a young man entered his personal quarters. It was not his last squire, and the Crow’s Eye was pretty sure he had not killed the current incumbent of the post.

A suspicion more than justified by the dirty dots on the black uniform of the newcomer.

“Where is my squire?”

“I’m afraid he fell badly in the stairs...” Euron fixed the arrogant youngster for several seconds. The pale eyes, the arrogant posture and the twitching forced him to conclude he had a rapist, a murderer, a liar, a moron and a sadist all in the same body facing him.

Perfect.

In two steps, Euron closed the distance before striking the young man between the legs with his right fist. As the recruit screamed, he seized him by an ear and slammed him against the wall. Exploiting the moment of shock, he seized an ancient obsidian dagger and cut the other ear of this wretch. He cauterised the wound two seconds after, it wouldn’t do at all for the black brother to die from blood loss.

“Congratulations, vermin,” Euron affirmed conversationally. “You are my new squire. Try to kill someone else without my word and by the next dawn, you will be a eunuch abandoned on the ice fields and I will make you fight a direbear naked. Your name?”

“Ramsay...Ramsay Snow.”

Ah yes, the bastard pretending to be the illegitimate child of Lord Roose Bolton. Since his ‘father’ had never recognised him and he was given the chance between the black and the rope after his crimes were discovered, the troops of the Night’s Watch really didn’t care one way or another. The fact he had been sent to the Nightfort garrison told volumes however on his behaviour.

“Well, Ramsay Snow it is your lucky day,” Euron cheerfully proclaimed as best as his armour metallic carcass allowed him. “I am not going to kill you...today. Now run to Section Eleven and tell them I want a courier to be prepared for Castle Black. I have an important message to deliver to tell the Lord Commander.”

Euron moved his gaze away and was displeased. Now his quarters were in a disorderly state.

“And when your worthless carcass has fulfilled my command, come back here and clean this mess.”

“I am not your servant.”

Euron sighed and trampled the left hand of Ramsay Snow, delighting in the noise of the broken bones.

“You are whatever I want you to be, fleshbag. Now run, before I decide to open your belly and organise an auction for your organs...”

**Melisandre of Asshai, 05.09.300AAC, Pommingham System**

Melisandre of Asshai, Red Voice of R’hllor, had regretted several times in the last years the necessity to use King Rhaegar Targaryen and his allies to accomplish the will of her God. Yes, the King and the group of ‘magicians’ and ‘prophecy experts’ had been easy to dupe. Thanks to them and their narrow-minded views, she and her High Priestesses had been able to create the foundations of a true worship in Westeros, praise the Lord of Light.

That didn’t mean she wouldn’t have preferred to work with other Lords and Ladies. Jon Connington, obviously, had proved more and more difficult to handle and in the last couple of years Melisandre had to dedicate nearly fifty Priests and Priestesses to the thankless duty of keeping an eye on this buffoon.

But if the Lord of Griffin’s Roost had been one of the largest problems, the court of King’s Landing had been full of lesser ones. It was not because they represented a danger for her plans. Indeed, the majority had not a clue how many men and women she had successfully convinced to embrace the light of R’hllor. These nobles and their lackeys were just so busy in their conspiracies that they attacked politically, economically or by force everything they desired. And it had proved inconvenient more than once.

By the nature of their worship, men and women loyal to the Lord of Life and Light were far less willing to plunge their hands in this sea of corruption and treachery. Melisandre had lost more new recruits and agents than she was ready to admit in private save with her High Priestesses.

It was a challenge the will of R’hllor had told her to overcome and so she had, though the circumstances had long pained her. There were many benevolent souls in the Crown Sector, but the unbelievers at the top were not among them.

Fortunately, many of them were no longer dirtying the name of mankind in this galaxy. Unfortunately, her visions in the flames had made clear the high idiots of the council had proven as useless as she had feared.

Melisandre had fully expected the capital to be lost to Rhaegar and his Crown Prince in the first days of war. But the speed and the scope of the defeat Prince Viserys had just handed to the loyalist forces was just exceptional. Not because the King’s youngest brother had made particularly brilliant plans; Melisandre was no military expert but the actions of the new Green King had looked rushed and improvised on the field. His opponents had clearly been stupid, easily manipulated and utterly unable to do the jobs they were paid for. The Spider had also proved a nuisance, though for this one she was ready to admit she had underestimated the eunuch.

But by the flames of judgement, the reality remained: the capital was lost and her priesthood was forced to go underground. While the losses could and would be recovered, praise R’hllor, this was a complication and would cause delays elsewhere.

Melisandre closed her eyes before withdrawing her hands from the flames. Today, she really felt her real age, and not the looks of the young woman she presented to this galaxy. A shook of her head, and two servants bowed before ritually dressing her in the red clothes of the Red Voice.

Fluidly, she stood before walking out of her quarters on the *Lord of Light*, her personal starship built in the secret holy shipyards of Volantis. As the Seven Sectors were plunged into the purifying inferno of war, she had chosen it to be her temporary headquarters as well as her transport to Highgarden.

The corridors and the plazas she walked through were beautiful, decorated in red runes and flame-like decorations. Loud songs of devotion were sung at every moment, praising R’hllor for his guidance and the salvation of their souls.

“May the Lord of Light shine on your path, Red Voice...”

“R’hllor is with you my child...”

Melisandre stopped over eighty times before arriving to her destination, but she didn’t mind. Whether they wanted reassurance, voice their support, debate a theology point or address a request, the will of the children of R’hllor was welcome. The heretical ‘Faith of the Seven’ and its gluttonous septons had cut itself off from the very people it pretended to elevate the souls to the heavens. Worshipping R’hllor was completely opposed to these vices and material corruption. Faith and love in the Lord of the Light was the most important duty of a Red Priestess and Red Priest. It didn’t matter if you were the daughter of a septa, a prostitute, a slave, a merchant or a noble. R’hllor accepted everyone, and it was the Lord of Light Himself who decided the women and men having the greatest skill to speak more than others. Melisandre herself was only Red Voice because R’hllor willed it. Should the Only True God decide her service was best done by lesser actions, Melisandre would accept and another Red Voice rise in her place.

The room she was admitted was guarded by several Red Templars, recently arrived from Volantis at the direct order of the High Priest.

Three Priests and three Priestesses bowed as she marched in and Melisandre smiled to them before ordering the door to close. She had absolute faith in the souls of everyone aboard the Lord of Light, but unfortunately there were certain precautions to take for their ‘visitors’.

“How fared your efforts, Priestess Laya?”

“Red Voice, on your command we attempted to retrieve five souls of the unbelievers lost in the coup of King’s Landing. As you had predicted, many of the attempts suffered...heavy complications and had to be terminated. But in the end, we managed to recover the two prime subjects.”

“Excellent,” Melisandre knew that to ingratiate herself with the new King, these new pieces were necessary. “Is it too soon to reawaken them for the binding rituals?”

“A few hours, Red Voice,” promised the white-haired Priestess.

Melisandre of Asshai could have returned to her quarters and wait, but exceptionally she decided to observe the procedures herself this time. The transformed room was a marvel of R’hllor: great cables, and columns of fluids coursing with red energy. There were sigils and symbols of devotion to R’hllor supplemented the scientific goods discreetly bought in the Free Cities. It had been relatively difficult, as was every genetic-production and cloning facility, but combined with the power of the True God, it gave them an unmatched strength...provided you worshipped the Lord of Light and Life.

Recovering souls if you were an unbeliever was considerably more difficult.

Difficult but not impossible.

The two red matrices emptied slowly of the life liquid and the connections were switched off one by one. Then the two human bodies were slowly expelled from the glassy chrysalis where they had been conceived.

Both males had visages of absolute stupefaction when they opened their eyes and met her. Melisandre savoured their emotions of shock and disbelief. By their limited understanding, what had just been accomplished was just miraculous...and it was not their non-existent Seven who were responsible for their resurrection.

“Rise, Ser Barristan Selmy, Ser Arthur Dayne. Your part in this war is not yet over.”

**King Viserys III Targaryen, 05.09.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

The trumpets clamoured twenty-three times before falling silent and the herald’s announcement thundered over the silent hall.

“Hail King Viserys Targaryen, the Third of his Name, King of Westeros, Lord of the Seven Sectors, King of the Andals, Rhoynar and First Men, Protector of the Realm, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Summerhall, Lord Protector of Dragonstone, Shield of the Narrow Void, Royal Admiral and Master of King’s Landing!”

“ALL HAIL!”

Viserys sat on the throne, never stopping his observation of the assembly in front of him. To his satisfaction, faces of approval and satisfaction were everywhere. Evidently, his decision to move the official crowning in a smaller and more convivial hall was a good choice.

He had decided only five hours ago he was not going to sit on the Iron Throne. His new seat was smaller and had only three steps. It had several rubies and you weren’t at risk to bleed on the thousands of blades.

But it wasn’t why he had done it.

The Iron Throne, as much as no one had admitted in public for the last century, was a symbol of overwhelming power, made possible by oceans of blood and the fire of dragons. It was the proclamation House Targaryen could reign over the Seven Sectors because they were able to massacre on their own any troublesome bannersmen, separately or together.

The last wars had proved the days of the Conquest were long gone. House Targaryen’s dragons were dead and they reigned over Westeros as long as they had a sufficient number of Lords Paramount content with their laws. Pretending anything else was just the dreams of a drug addict.

Viserys had thus decided that his first days had to bring new traditions. Clearly, if he didn’t establish them now, in a few moons the weight of past precedents, political infighting and necessity was going to block everything and prevent him from showing he was different from his brother and his father. It would not be proclaimed on the holo-news in such terms, but Viserys needed to strike the metal of the Crown Sector politics before it became cold and inflexible again.

And so Viserys sat on his new throne as the new ceremony was expedited in record time. Lasting four hours, it had to be the shortest coronation of any King ever done. It was also a model of austerity. Viserys obviously didn’t agree with many of the Starks and Baratheons policies, but in this case he had shamelessly copied their tactics. All his officers, army, navy or marines, had come in their war uniforms. The guards were in pristine battle-armours. The administrators had been instructed to answer their summons in excellent clothes but ones the smallfolk could wear in extraordinary circumstances. The hundreds of green dragon banners on black fields were modest and not accompanied by emeralds and onyx gemstones.

It was in many ways powder for the eyes. It was also vitally important. Viserys was sadly extremely aware his hold on the capital and the rest of the Crown Sector was fragile – an understatement, if there ever was one. It was why the last hour was spent giving amnesties to the defeated and mutinied troops. Neither his father nor his eldest brother had ordered one in the last two decades, and a merciful series of edict would prove he could be reasonable. Lords and their Houses rarely fought to the end when the enemy had no intentions to annihilate them.

“While the Crown has heard awful rumours about the actions of several other members of House Targaryen, I am prepared to extend amnesties to the Princes and Princes currently massing their forces in foreign Sectors. Should Crown Prince Aegon, Princess Rhaenys, Prince Joffrey, Princess Visenya, Princess Shiera, Prince Daeron and Princess Baela accept the new Royal authority, their holdings and properties in the Crown Sector won’t be forfeited and their lines attainted.”

Several of his officers had pressed him to summon all the wayward Royals to King’s Landing, but given the precedent offered by the Usurper’s Rebellion, he had renounced. Instead he was forcing his nephews and nieces to declare their betrayal themselves. Granted, it was something they would probably do anyway. The Prince of Summerhall was not sure if the North was ever considering crowning a dragon; it was far more likely than they were going to rebel and install the Starks as King in the North again. Winterfell was the exception, alas. If the Admiral of Dragonstone had to bet, his diplomatic couriers sent to Highgarden, Sunspear and Casterly Rock were going to meet on their way announcing the crowning of new Kings and a Queen.

“The realm is in danger, but we will not despair! House Targaryen has ruled the Seven Sectors for three hundred years, and we will not let anarchist elements destroy the lights of civilisation our ancestors paid with their tears and blood!”

The torrent of applause was impressive and after several other bombastic announcements, the crowd progressively left the new throne room. The high commanders and the key members of his new rule stayed, forming several little groups ten metres away before him.

“I suppose we best begin with the situation in the Crown Sector. Lord Ardrian, you are now the High Admiral of the Crown Navy and the Master of Ships. What is the situation in the Crown Sector?”

“I think the short answer is...complicated, your Grace,” replied the old man, who had temporarily smiled as his loyalty was rewarded. “In the last hours, our first counter-offensive has forced the surrender of the Bywater Rest, Stokeworth and Driftmark Systems with minimal losses. In the first two cases, the victory was made faster than our most optimistic predictions thanks to certain factors we weren’t aware of. The Masterly House of Edgerton was loyal to Prince Joffrey, but was convinced to side with us as soon as he heard the fate of the capital. I’m afraid Lord Manly Stokeworth preferred to die rather than serve your Majesty. The rest of his family is in our custody.

At Bywater Rest, things were even more confusing. The Masterly House of Farring declared for your cause, my King, but the Knightly Houses led by House Follard went to Prince Joffrey. This created a three-way fighting and we were forced to defeat them decisively by orbital strike. The Noble House of Bywater and the Knightly House of Follard have to be considered extinct, unless they were other nobles sent to the Reach I am not aware of.”

“And Driftmark?”

“The support of House Sunglass and House Rambton proved primordial in subduing the Velaryon units. The last members of the sea horses are our prisoners and the shipyards were captured intact.”

“Good, very good,” and unconsciously most Lords and commanders relaxed. With these systems in their hands, the survival of the coup for the next weeks was all but assured. If another faction wanted to take the throne, they would have to bring a massive amount of firepower to the Crown Sector. It was a costly endeavour, and one which was going to take time.

“Our squadrons are as we speak moving on the Langward, Cressey and Chelsted Systems. Given the low level of coordination and the inexistent preparations made by the Admiral and Generals the former Council left in charge, simulations give us odds of seventy percent to capture the entire Crown Sector. Afterwards we will have to make a long pause to overhaul and repair the existing hulls.”

Viserys nodded. So far they had been lucky, but when this round of conquests was over, the Crown Navy and Army would have to be ready for the next battles, and given its current state, he didn’t fancy its chances against the rest of Westeros.

“Lord Guncer Sunglass?”

“Yes, your Grace?” The Rear-Admiral bent the knee.

“For your loyal service, the Masterly House of Sunglass is to become the Noble House of Sunglass, Masters of the Driftmark System, Lords of the Cosmic Tides and sixty percent of the possessions and the privileges owned by the attainted House Velaryon are yours by law. Rise Lord Guncer, Admiral of the Crown Navy.”

It was not the end of the nominations he gave on this session, far from it. Perwyn Frey was elevated Lord Perwyn Rosby of Rosby by his mother’s lineage, and was given the very indigestible title of Master of Logistics. Lord Baelor Staunton, who had managed to rally roughly seventy-eight percent of the Sector’s armies, was named Crown Marshal and Master of Armies, in replacement of the useless seat of ‘Master of Arms’. Ser Justin Massey was confirmed as a General and commanded to restore the ten Behemoths left to active duty as fast as possible. Lord Farring and Lord Edgerton, while not present today, were given the temporary governing rights of the star systems they had helped him seize.

“We will convene a new war council in forty-eight hours and decide to confirm or stop the next offensives. Ser Sal, please give us your best intelligence on the civil situation.”

The man he had chosen to serve as the interim Master of Laws took a few steps in the direction of the throne before largely bowing. Unlike most, the black-haired knight known as Ser Sal Blackrock had not been born noble and it was his deeds during the Greyjoy Rebellion – he had been able to capture several towns on Old Wyk with little to no damage. But he had proven capable in his enforcement of the law and was fairly popular.

“Your Grace, we are in a perilous situation. The betrayal of the Master of Whisperers has crippled our intelligence and security systems. I will need months to restore them to a fraction of what they were. The same is true for the entire Sector, and for every planet the problems are multiplied for we can’t be sure of if the allegiance of the local authorities to your cause is genuine or faked. I’m afraid that for the next weeks, we will be force to use a lot of stop-gap measures if we want to limit the civil disorder.”

“Name three you intend to promulgate in the next forty-eight hours,” Viserys prepared himself for bad news and he wasn’t disappointed.

“We will have to put back hundreds of thousands mutineer Goldcloaks into service and use them to soak up the casualties in the slums and the urban areas. All the religious fanatics we captured are to be presented in front of a judge and executed before they cause more trouble. The officers and former administrators who refuse to swear allegiance to you must be imprisoned or exiled before they can present themselves as martyrs.”

Viserys gritted his teeth for an instant, wondering if the alternative was not more reasonable...but in the end there was no choice.

“Do it. I want the official edicts ready to be signed before sunset.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

The King on the not-Iron Throne emitted a low groan of exhaustion as Sal Blackrock rushed out of the hall in a hurry. Unfortunately, the day was going to be long and he had several other bad news, pardon several more advisors to listen to.

“Your Grace, for the present time, we are in firmly in control of Galactic Targaryen News and the personnel we have hired for this task is gaining a large public to our cause,” announced Ser Varon Darkwood, the new Master of Information. “Our efforts to purge the scandalous corruption plaguing the capital system are popular, and each hour gives us the opportunity to reveal new treacheries from House Buckwell, House Langward, House Velaryon and several other heads of faction. Per your directives, implacable measures have also been taken against slaver rings we tolerated for far too long in our core systems. I’m afraid though we are just cleaning the surface of this pit of illegality and darkness.”

So far, so good...well, it was not good, because he would have to replace thousands of men who were utterly incapable to stay honest, but at least this was a progress. He was sure that the anti-corruption efforts were going to continue until his dying day, no matter how many days or years he would spend on the throne before this date. The sins and crimes had sunk too deep in the essence of the capital culture and economy. The last King to have made real efforts on this front was Aegon V, but none of his successors had been particularly interested in following his example.

“The economic situation,” Viserys III Targaryen demanded.

Rylian Telmar began his report. Former owner of a merchant company ruined by the avidity of House Velaryon, the brown-haired man and his iconic large beard was the only person in the hall not to have a knighthood title. And for good reason: he had refused all his attempts in the last five years. Rylian considered an honour to be one of the ‘smallfolk’ and refused to leave their ranks – though his personal fortune made him a wealthy millionaire.

“The economic situation is a disaster, your Grace. Your brother’s rule had no oversight whatsoever upon the transstellar companies, the big investors and of course the Noble Houses. Most of the data and figures we have are so false my analysts have laughter attacks when they read them. Taxes were diverted to various ‘secret projects’ for decades and the administration is a maze of contradictions and inefficient procedures. I don’t think anyone realised, and I include my predecessor Master of Coin Lantion Lannister among them, how bad the situation was. We are running a deficit the size of a black hole and the western suburbs of King’s Landing have been razed, generating a crisis among the insurance companies. The coup has forced us to close all the major Sector Stock Exchanges and I don’t think we will be able to reopen it before ten days. The shares of several industry powerhouses are selling under the cloak at a hundredth of their official prices.

For all intent and purposes, your Grace, we are bankrupt and our system is running on negative numbers every second we speak.”

“Solutions?”

“First we have to default every debt we can politically afford to. House Tyrell, House Redwyne and all the banking institutions of the Reach have loaned billions and trillions to the Iron Throne. I say your Majesty has taken the right step. Let’s keep the Iron Throne as a museum heirloom, and we reject the reimbursement proposals of our enemies.”

“The Lannisters, the Martells, the Vale?”

“The latter two factions did not loan to us, and in the case of House Grafton, it was the Crown giving money to them, not the contrary. I have taken the liberty to cut all subsidies the moment I took my post. The Lannisters...well, King Rhaegar and his Council loaned less money in recent years, but there are long-term loans of trillions of dragons and only their interests have been paid...barely.”

Hearing this, it was somewhat a miracle the Seven Sectors had not collapsed economically a decade ago. There was a temptation after that to abdicate and let Aegon and Mace Tyrell handle this mess – they would not be able to erase the debts with a single signature, their own backers would never tolerate it.

“Give me your first emergency scenario,” he braced himself for more disgusting and yet necessary measures.

“We default on the debts of the entire Reach bankers, investors and House, save House Hightower and its allies per your will. We cancel the subsidies to the Storm, Vale and River allies your deceased brother. We declare the debts owed to House Lannister null and void, I’m sure our bards can find several high precedents in history to justify this. We abandon the garrison forces of the Iron Sector. We inflict monumental financial penalties on the corrupt, the slavers and the traitors. We empty the coffers, raid the possessions of Langward, Buckwell and all other attainted lines. We have to force the ascension of the new High Septon which will erase the billions we owe to the Faith.”

“Will it be enough?” He darkly asked. Rylian and his large brown beard had indeed announced he intended to bring the next best thing to an economic apocalypse to King’s Landing and neighbouring systems.

“No, your Majesty, it will not.” Rylian Telmar took a great inspiration. “I will be able to save about two thousand trillions dragons that way and it will give me time to save something from the field of ruins we took ownership. But make no mistake, the economy has just been exsanguinated by two decades of ill-management and unbridled military rearmament. We can’t default the Essossi debts we have, the risk of them sending raiding squadrons on our planets is too great. The Great Stock Exchanges may well crash in a definite manner if we try to reopen them. And...”

“And on top of that, we’re on the eve of another war. Do your duty, Master of Coin.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

The next couple of hours saw more advisors arrive and then rush away to implement the foundations of the next purges and new royal edicts. The Crown Intelligence Agency and the Secret Police were officially disbanded, not his most difficult decision as the loyal had been decimated and the disloyal had disappeared or were now actively operating against his forces.

The Kingsguard was hereby disbanded; its white cloaks had been soiled and tarnished and he didn’t trust them anymore. Barristan Selmy had killed six million Kingslanders in the Behemoth’s Fall because he refused to stand down and Preston Greenfield had certainly decided to follow Prince Joffrey instead of his legal orders. The less said about the rest, the better. For now, Viserys’ security would be assured by the 15th ‘Hellguard’ Dragonstone Line Regiment, one of the elite formations he had constantly nurtured and protected since his ascension at Admiral of the star system.

One by one the supplicants and the councillors left, and to his dismay the day was nearly over. He was tired, he wanted to get drunk after listening to this litany of bad news and he had the awful certainty it could have been much, much worse than the semi-nightmare he was facing at the moment.

“Kingship suits you, husband.”

Like a shadow, his wife had arrived. She was beautiful, as usual. Lynesse Hightower had been born from a lesser family of Oldtown and her mother had essentially climbed the ladder to Lord Hightower’s bed by her seduction skills. Lynesse had golden hairs, pure blue eyes and today she had chosen a gold-white dress from a famous Lysene dressmaker to emphasize her assets.

“I thought I told you to be here for the official coronation.”

Lynesse snorted in her usual suave manner.

“You wanted to make the coronation a small and discreet affair. I don’t do small and discreet.” Long nails caressed his cheek before her faint rosy lips turned into a vicious smirk.

“You have created a hurricane among the ladies of court, husband. I saw thousands of ladies trying to be admitted in my parlour, begging for the liberation of their husbands, lovers, cousins, bothers and so on. They also wanted their money back, by the way.”

“I hope they didn’t disturb too much Rhaella,” his daughter was two years old, and far more precious to him than any of these court turkeys.

“You don’t have to worry on this point, she was far more worried about her next meal...” Lynesse expression was maternal for a few seconds. It didn’t last. “I went to the Maidenvault and spoke to Cersei Lannister. I wanted to see her face when she learned I had replaced her as Queen.”

“How did she take it?” asked Viserys, moderately interested. The Queen – well, former Queen now – had been all but imprisoned for a decade and though her hate for Rhaegar was anything but a secret, the rest of her activities and habits were.

The daughter of Lord Tywin Lannister also represented a sizeable headache. He couldn’t release her; the West would take it as a weakness admission, but leaving her here would make him no better than his brother. Another problem without an easy way out.

“She cried of joy and invited her handmaidens to empty near ten bottles of Red Arbor before I left.” Lynesse took great pleasure to make a short rendition of the scene, rising fake toasts after fake toasts at the death of the King. “I don’t think we need to be very concerned she will torment you for not finding the assassins of her husband.”

Thank the Gods, because the killers had evaded pursuit – not that it was a legendary escape, given the level of disorganisation and the rates of desertion during the last hours the Red Keep resisted. They had only the mangled corpse of Rhaegar, his genitals mutilated, sectioned and forced into his mouth after his teeth were removed one by one. And on the wall next to what remained of his body, the assassins had painted in his blood the message ‘THE NORTH NEVER FORGETS’.

The Stark soldiers could vicious sneaky buggers when they were sufficiently warmed up, apparently.

“I supposed it amused you for a few hours.” Lynesse didn’t smell like wine, so she must have not partaken in this ‘celebration’.

“Yes, it did. Afterwards I was busy taking many servants in my service and throwing out those who were too long in the employ of Varys and the other former Masters.”

“I was not aware Varys’ spies were so easily discovered,” the Seven knew their lives would be far simpler if it they were...

“Oh they are presenting you like they are fine and upstanding servants, but they are too muscled, too swift, too intelligent and they have that look in their gaze when you asked them something...” his wife made a negative hiss. “And while they talk alright, many of them don’t do well in practical things like choosing dresses, combing their hairs or seeing a ruby is a fake.”

Varys’ agents were betrayed by their lack of fashion knowledge. What had this galaxy gone to?

“And now?”

Lynesse pouted, her impressive blue eyes shining like sapphires under the light of the crystal chandeliers.

“Now I’m bored...my King has no time for me...”

“I have a bankrupt realm to rule you know...”but Lynesse climbed the steps of the throne, and placed one of her fingers over his mouth.

“If you work from dawn to dusk my poor dragon, you will not last a year on this throne.”

“What is your suggestion, my Queen?”

In a move that should have been impossible with more traditional robes, Lynesse opened a series of laces to her back and slowly the cloth she wore fell to her feet, revealing she wore nothing underneath. Viserys felt suddenly very glad he had dismissed the guards ten minutes ago.

“I approve your choice to abandon the Iron Throne. It is too dangerous...”purred the youngest daughter of Lord Hightower. “Now let’s test your new seat. I am your Queen and I want to feel like one!”

For the first time of the day, Viserys was the one to obey. And it was pleasurable, he had to admit.

**Princess Daenerys Targaryen, 05.09.300AAC, Braavos System**

Daenerys didn’t like going to the official Braavosi receptions. Too bad, her wishes in this matter were of little importance for the diplomats. When the worthless emissaries of the Iron Throne had negotiated to avoid a war with the Republic of Braavos, Westeros had not been the side in position of force. The Seven Sectors had just experienced the second greatest civil war of its history, only surpassed in violence and divisions by the Dance of Dragons. A conflict with any Great Power of Essos would have been disastrous. The Republic of Braavos had not the men to occupy a large number of Westerosi systems, that much was true. But conventional fleets and armies had never been the pride of the Republic. For those there were sellswords companies, to be bled against the rival Free Planets. No, the strength of Braavos lied in its mighty Deep Space Fleet and its supercarriers. It was a void fleet the like of which only Volantis had the effectives and the ancient marvels of Valyrian technology to counter.

It was unlikely Braavos would ever be able to conquer more than ten star systems should they declare war to the Seven Sectors, active opposition or not. But the Braavosi fleet could hunt in the void all their Deep Space merchant ships. The conventional merchant ships using jump generators were also easy prey when they were outside the inner gravity well of a star. Braavos didn’t need to annex Duskendale, King’s Landing and Dragonstone to bring the Iron Throne to peace terms. They just needed to destroy its merchant fleet, wait patiently until insurance rates exploded out of control, banks went bankrupt and transstellar mega-companies fired tens of thousands employees. When the very middle-classes of Westeros were completely ruined, destitute and ready to sell their bosses for a third of their salaries, the will of the Noble Houses to pursue a conflict was not going to be the worst problem her brother Rhaegar faced.

Well, in the end the Targaryen envoys had acknowledged the unavoidable. She had been the designated hostage sent there, to travel the Narrow Void as soon as she was able to understand the world around her, and several duties and conditions had been added in the final treaty. Daenerys had seen the thing four times. It was a voluminous book, easily going in the thousand-plus pages.

Returning to the subject of receptions, it had been one of the clauses that once she was sixteen and able to dance, talk and salute in adequate princely manner, she was to go to one of these receptions. The good news, if you could call it like this, was that she wasn’t supposed to represent the Seven Sectors or act in any official capacity. Princess Daenerys Targaryen, sister of the King, was not the ambassador to the Republic of Braavos, thanks the hundreds of Gods worshipped at Braavos. This role was given to a cousin noble who was accumulating scandals and problems faster than it should be possible. But then the ambassadors rarely lasted here. This one was the fifth Daenerys had greeted at Braavos and it was unlikely he would be the last.

It never stopped amusing the girls she frequented at the Academy. Essossi ambassadors at Braavos were more likely than not merchant princes renowned for their fortunes and negotiation abilities. Most nations save Westeros were considering a great honour to be an official of a foreign power in the heart of a sea world. In comparison, King’s Landing was sending the dregs and the disgraced. At least she hoped it was the dregs.

Daenerys prayed these men weren’t the best the realm of the Sunset Quadrant could afford.

“Good evening, Princess Daenerys,” said a soft voice, breaking the silence around her.

“Good evening,” she answered by reflex and turned to see her interlocutor. It was the Black Pearl of Braavos, Bellegere Otherys. Older by Daenerys by three years, the young woman was one of the most popular courtesans in the high circles of the Braavosi society and it was deserved: between her light brown skin, her black hairs, her delicate stature and her enormous breasts, Bellegere was a vision of beauty. According to the legend, her ancestor –also named Bellegere – had been the lover of Aegon IV the Unworthy and all Black Pearls descended from her. If this was the case, it was well-hidden for the line of the Black Pearls had none of the Valyrian traits on their visage or their bodies.

She and Daenerys were both invited to the same receptions, though for different reasons. Daenerys received them because politics were politics. Bellegere was paid to come by the cream of the merchant princes for exorbitant prices and it was not rare courtesans like her were literally showered with incomparable gifts before, during and after important parties.

The dress her client had chosen for her this evening was red and had to cost a mountain of gold. It was also back-less, which proved once again the courtesans crossed the limit between seduction and indecency without warning.

“A fine gathering, tonight,” said conversationally the Black Pearl.

“Indeed,” she answered and it was not an exaggeration. Daenerys was used to gatherings of power now, but there were a lot of wealthy and influential families tonight. The Sealord was not present since his health was increasingly bad, but there were many men and women whose purses would have been able to buy a planet or two on a whim.

And since the powerful merchants were there, the courtesans had come in numbers too. Not counting the Black Pearl, there were the Veiled Lady, the Merling Queen, the Daughter of the Dusk, the Nightingale, the Poetess, the Azure Grace, the Laughing Flower, the Rose Kiss and several other famous courtesans whose fame had long spread to Lys, Tyrosh, Westeros and beyond.

“We were not graced with a masked ball, praise the Lady of Waters,” Bellegere spoke in a satisfied tone, taking a crystal glass full of black liquor with effortless grace. “House Reyaan was at least wise to avoid this trap.”

The glass was inclined negligently in the direction of three men in ostentatious black clothes. With their large bellies and obese members, the Reyaan men looked like they had eaten two or three whales before coming. It didn’t stop the crowd from surrounding them.

House Reyaan was rich and influential. Not Lannister-rich, but wealthy enough to be in the top twenty of the Braavosi elite. Not that it was difficult to acknowledge, when the half of the reception was a palace in itself, with paintings and tapestries worth ten fortunes covering the walls, a magnificent painted rotunda over their heads and the glasses of the finest crystal. There was gold, silver and crystal wherever you looked at the decoration, complemented by artwork of renowned masters, including paintings, sculptures and gemstones.

It was said that at every second, the Reyaan keyholder – also a magister in his own right – had five thousand mega-conveyors sailing through the Narrow, Jade and Summer Voids at every instant. In this instance, Daenerys wasn’t sure they were untrue.

They had also an unpleasant reputation and Daenerys didn’t like them at all. Fatness and greasy-like appearance aside, the Reyaans had their greedy hands in two of the last five mini-wars of the Disputed Planets. And there were more worrying whispers behind the doors. Murmurs these merchant princes had participated in military technology transfers to Westerosi rebels... actions which were certainly not in the best interest of the Targaryen dynasty...

But they were the first reception this month of importance, and she was of the advice it was best to do this chore early in the month before being forced to go to a more unpleasant location.

“Where is your companion?” In general, benefactors of a courtesan wanted to stay as close as possible from her. After sending enough to feed a hundred thousand families, they understandably wanted some return from their very expensive investment.

“He went to one of the collection rooms...he wants to speak to you in private.”

That didn’t reassure her. Collection rooms were rarely opened to non-family members, and since the Reyaan family was entire present in front of her eyes, the Black Pearl’s benefactor had to be one of their close allies and of the two-three names Daenerys knew, none were what she could call peace-oriented.

On the other hand, if she didn’t go, she was sooner or later going to have to pay her respects to their Reyaan hosts, something she was trying to avoid. After seeing them stare like pigs at her body, Daenerys always felt the need to take a long shower.

“Why not? Lead the way.”

While Braavosi had not the equivalent of the laws of hospitality, if someone came without a weapon at a reception – and it was her case – said person could not be challenged to a duel or provoked into an ambush. The moment her green heels had touched the ground of the Reyaan domain, any wound or incident threatening her life and honour would shame the merchant-princes for ten generations.

Bellegere didn’t really lead the way through the huge stairs in pink marble leading them to the first floor and the collection rooms of the Reyaans. The Black Pearl had at her feet incredibly tall red heels, and it was nearly impossible to walk with those on a long distance. As such, they progressed side by side, the Braavosi woman showing not a sign of discomfort and continuing to move like a professional dancer.

Drawing a golden key she carried in a necklace around her, her guide opened silently a large wooden door where the arms of House Reyaan had been carved in a two metres-high representation. The locker was shaped like a dragon and for a strange reason Daenerys didn’t like it.

What was inside, however, was pleasure for the eyes. The large hall serving as a collection room was full of ancient artwork from the Valyrian period. Intellectually, it was not a surprise. Like the magisters of the other Free Planets, Braavosi loved taking for their own aggrandisement souvenirs of the ancient Freehold, Bastard Daughter of Valyria or not. What surprised her was that there were so many concentrated in one place. There were tapestries, sculptures and old banners. There were deactivated parts of techno-magic, that no one knew how to activate anymore. And there were spears and battle-armours, some having an edge or an image of Valyrian steel. It was a collection millions of students of Valyrian history would give both hands and one leg to own.

“I didn’t think...”

“There is an exhibition in two days and Houses Reyaan, Lihes and Fregar in addition to several lesser contributors have graciously accepted to show some of their best pieces for this exceptional event.”

Ah, so the abundance was explained. This was not a Valyrian collection; it was the sum of four or five Houses’ efforts. But as much as she did her best to move her eyes away from it, her purple eyes came back to the object placed on a platinum stand.

It was a great black dragon egg, the very colour of onyx and so perfect it looked like the rest of the room was full of insignificant baubles.

“Who owns the egg?” She asked, trying and failing to turn her eyes away from this last remnant of the dragonlords’ glory.

“I do,” Daenerys threw her a surprised look. Bellegere was far from poor, of course, but... “It was a gift of Aegon IV to my ancestor.”

And suddenly Daenerys felt an incredible torrent of shame pouring in her heart and head. Of course it had to be the Unworthy who had given away this Targaryen legacy. Dragon eggs were worth king’s ransoms and this whoremonger had given it away for taking liberties with a Braavosi courtesan.

After a minute where shame and anger fought inside her, Daenerys finally shrugged and began to look at the rest of the collection. The dragon egg had been petrified for at least one hundred and fifty years and the dragons were extinct; by this point the fact a noble or another had possession of a dragon’s egg was inconsequential.

“When was this sculpture created?”

“Our experts think it was about one thousand and three hundred years ago. It was a representation of the Valyrian goddess Syrax,” spoke a deep masculine voice behind her.

Daenerys abandoned her contemplation of the Freehold artwork to look at the newcomer and she groaned internally. Blonde-haired and green eyes, here came one of the most powerful men of Braavos. His name was Tormo Fregar, and despite his relatively young age – nearly forty years old – he was one of the top contenders to succeed the Sealord should the current incumbent die. He was also one of the firebrands who had long supported a more energetic stance towards the Seven Sectors in recent years.

At least he behaved like a gentleman she supposed, as Tormo Fregar bowed largely before kissing the tips of her fingers.

“Your beauty is truly an exquisite vintage, Princess,” the merchant-prince proclaimed with the sort of voice you couldn’t help but trust. “This green dress is allowing you to bring the lights of the Goddesses on this poor world...”

“Flatterer,” she replied with a little smirk, before shrieking as her hands seemed to cover themselves in flames.

One second later, she tried to calm herself. The flames had disappeared once more. They were just an illusion, yes. Then the flames returned and suddenly Daenerys found herself...elsewhere. It was a dark room and it looked like one of these cultist lairs in frightening tales. She saw a silver-haired man looking like an asylum inmate fall, massacred by many blades and silhouettes in grey battle-armours.

And then the vision disappeared and Daenerys heard the voices of Tormo Fregar and Bellegere Otherys call her, there was an alert siren screaming and footsteps ringing in the distance. Why was she on the ground?

“Princess, princess!”

“I’m...” why were the words so difficult? “I’m...fine.” The world appeared less luminous than it had been instants ago. What had happened to her? There were cracks every time she tried to move and she sincerely hoped she had not ruined something centuries-old in her fall.

“You don’t look fine at all,” replied the Braavosi man in a concerned tone. “I don’t know what happened to you, your eyes and hands seemed suddenly aflame and...”

The merchant-prince had a comical expression on his face and Daenerys was about to laugh when she noticed the cracks had ceased. And raising her head, she saw the reason of Fregar’s stupefaction. On the platinum stand, the black egg had utterly exploded and a small reptilian figure was fixing them with merciless eyes.

No, it was not fixing them.

It was fixing her.

“By all the gods and demons...”

Dragons were extinct. Every child of Westeros and Essos knew it. Until today. Until now.

“Oh brother, what have you done?”

And for the first time in more than one hundred and fifty years, the roar of a fire dragon resonated high and loud in the air, triumphant and conquering.

\*\*\*\*

*When the ink of the peace treaty dried up at Maidenpool, civil war in the Vale Sector was not unavoidable. Lord Jon Arryn and the rebel cause had their core planets completely untouched by war, the loyalists like House Grafton had suffered tremendously and generally the Vale soldiers had fought superbly during the Usurper’s Rebellion. There was little popular will to disagree with the Master of Eyrie or to voice concerns the Old Falcon had been wrong defending his honour when Aerys II had proved beyond doubt he was an insane tyrant.*

*But in the following years, the financial and political support House Targaryen poured in House Grafton and every Noble House dissatisfied with House Arryn’s rule rebuilt an opposing block and fanned the flames of dissent once more. On a different front, King Rhaegar and Crown Prince Aegon scored an enormous coup by rallying the Heir of the Vale Robin Arryn and Jon Arryn’s wife Lysa to their side.*

*In reality, it proved nothing but. House Grafton may have rallied many Houses to the loyalist banner like Houses Lynderly, Waynwood, Hersy and Hardyng but it wasn’t a game-breaker. These nobles had agreed to break their allegiance to their Lord Paramount, but the rapport of force was remaining largely in Jon Arryn’s hand. Many of the most experimented Grafton officers had died in the Usurper’s Rebellion, the Greyjoy Rebellion or were busy crushing the repeated insurrections in the Iron Sector. Alas for them, on the other side Lord like Yohn Royce, Horton Redfort, Benedar Belmore and their cadre of staff officers were very much alive and while they were far from young, the fact all these men had survived countless battles to arrive to 300AAC was a warning in itself.*

*And then there was Jon Arryn, third of the Warlords, certainly one of the most accomplished politicians and generals, an eighty years-old Lord Paramount who had fought and survived every crisis House Targaryen had thrown his way.*

*When you think about it these poor Hardyng bastards were really unlucky to be so close to the Eyrie...*

Extract from the Last Flight of the Old Falcon by Arthur Stone, 315AAC.

**Ser Eddison Tollett, 05.09.300AAC, Hardyng Hill System**

Covered with carcasses of exploded tanks, crashed flyers and dead soldiers, the plains of House Hardyng stank. Edd had known many things smelling like shit before today, but this smell...it was awful. It was not only the corpses, the acid smokes and the crows eating the flesh of the dead. It was not the sheer atmosphere of desolation. It was not the cloud-covered sky. There was something...something he wasn’t able to describe. Maybe it was the death and despair which had left their mark on this field of death. But he doubted it.

“Smile, Dolorous,” shouted one of the soldiers had assigned to his protection. “We are not going to the Seven Hells today!”

“Careful,” he replied darkly. “The omens are dark and the shadow of death isn’t far from us...”

Benjen Lorn rolled his large shoulders, and put back his helmet on his head.

“You worry too much. The Hardyngs have sent most of their forces to Gulltown. They haven’t anything left to counter-attack.”

“So our doom will await us at Newkeep.”

“Continue to be pessimistic, and even death will flee away from you, Dolorous.”

They activated the dorsal reactors of their battle-armours Mark 8 ‘Falcon’ at the same time, followed by about sixty other men of Grey Glen and they flew over the last hill, flying over more and more destruction.

The dead of the Hardyng were everywhere. In the first instants of the surprise assault, the Hardyng forces had sallied out of their barracks in a massive charge to stop the Arryn, Tollett and Egen veterans from gaining a foothold near their capital. It had failed. Everywhere his visual sensors could carry, the blue armours half-painted with the red and black cross of treachery were lying dead. Edd didn’t know what the Hardyngs had been promised, but it had better be good for the wrath of the higher-ups now was terrible once roused. A rapid glance at a Sector Map was sufficient to realise House Hardyng had been the sole traitors of the Western Vale. Everyone had known the East was filling its pockets with Targaryen gold, but the West had been confident they remained true and honourable, loyal to the Falcon Throne and the Old Man.

For hours, Edd Tollett, Benjen and the rest of their company patrolled on the plains and the hills. Hardyng Hill was not a bad world, with all this greenness and its small mountains, he decided. Of course, there had to be some incredible darkness behind this peaceful appearance. Otherwise, why would have they decided to embrace the madness of the dragons?

The afternoon was ending when the Generals summoned them back in a proper parade formation. Thousands and thousands of Arryn, Egen, Tollett, Corbray and countless other Noble, Masterly and Knightly Houses trampled a ground the siege engineers had just levelled with their gigantic machines. There had to be nearly three hundred thousand infantry in neat lines and all had participated in the punishment of House Hardyng.

Great holo-screens were raised and orbital transports descended in front of them. After the usual protocols, their Lord Paramount arrived in front of the cameras and soon his old but noble face could be seen by all.

“Soldiers of the Vale! I am proud of you! When I called you to arms to punish this treachery, you answered without delay and crushed the rebels! I will never forget your loyalty!”

This was very well and good, but what were they going to do when the Iron Throne declared them all traitors and sent millions of men in this direction? Today the Hardyngs were the traitors, but next day it could be them...

Edd didn’t pay really attention to the rest of the speech. Several Generals and Knights were rewarded for their high deeds, the troops would receive a nice bonus added to their monthly wage. Then the Old Falcon stopped speaking and a woman was brought in chains next to him.

“Allow her to speak,” said Lord Jon Arryn, with an expression where no smile could be found.

As the gag was removed, the woman threw a torrent of insults which would have made a spaceman blush. As the screens focused on her, the fact the woman was ugly could not be hidden. A lot of her mascara and cosmetic artifices had trickled on her cheeks, nose and the upper part of her dress, but she hadn’t been especially pretty in the first place. Her nose was too big, her hairs were an ugly mix of brown and what you could see of her body was enough to tell that despite her relative young age – thirty years old or so – the noblewoman was well on her way to become obese.

“I allowed you to speak by courtesy, Lady Hardyng,” the Lord Paramount’s declaration cut through her shouts like a blade. “You will be polite or the gag will return to its place.”

“Oh, the Lame Falcon is not happy a Lady is telling him how horrible he is?”

Jon Arryn didn’t move a finger or any other part of his body, but the impression gained by the army was that he was making a lot of effort to not raise his eyes to the sky.

“Do you know how many young men died for your monstrous ambition, Tyrant of the Eyrie?”

“Three thousand and two hundred soldiers for my side, over one hundred and forty-five thousand for yours,” the calm reply stunned the Lady for a few seconds before she began to laugh hysterically.

“You lie! You lie and you do it badly, traitor! My commanders have slaughtered hundreds of thousands of your men! And soon all your cowards and your butchers will be put down like the rabid dogs they are! My husband and my cousins will come back and they will decapitate you with Lord Grafton and his new fleet!”

“It is entirely possible, of course,” the tone of Lord Jon Arryn told in an evident manner how likely he believed it was. “But whether your husband manages to find back his way here or not, your House has betrayed its oaths.”

“The oaths we have sworn to the Targaryens are far more valuable than the words spoken to an old fool who has lost heir after heir and is now on the eve of senility!”

“Yes, I see this...and for this admission, I strip House Hardyng of its nobility title, its possessions and its privileges. For as loyalty must be rewarded, punishment must be enacted for the oath-breakers and the traitors. Hardyng Hill in time will have its name changed, and my administration will return this planet to compliance until I am satisfied and another Noble House can be elevated for these lands.”

“Your own son will kill you and erase all your decrees,” and by the defiant behaviour, the woman really believed this.

“Perhaps, but you will not be here to see this.”

For the first time, the ugly woman’s face contorted with fear.

“I will swear the vows of the septa, I know...”

“No.” Suddenly, Jon Arryn looked more dangerous and towering, as a massive double axe was brought by one of his squires. “I do not trust an oath from you or any of your treacherous friends.”

“Lord Grafton will gut you like a pig! Your Robin will piss on your grave! You wife has cuckolded you a hundred times in your marital bed!”

“Have you finished?”

“Yes, I have. Order your executioner to come and let’s finish this.”

But their liege did not give any command to that effect. Instead, he turned to face the army. He spoke to them and at that moment despite the dark destiny waiting for them, Edd felt proud to serve a man like this one.

“Years ago, I had a ward. This ward had little Andal blood flowing in his veins and very different customs and principles than we Valemen take for granted. One of the most interesting traditions I remembered was the idea of personal responsibility. If the harvests are good, then it is the duty of the noble to store extra-food and reward his smallfolk, for this surplus will be useful in more trying times. If a call to arms is sounded, it is the Lord’s duty to armour himself and choose the best soldiers to go to war and win the battles. And if a criminal is caught...it is the Lord’s duty to hear his words, pronounce his judgement and cut the life thread of the law-breaker.”

The Old Falcon seized the double axe and raised it with a grunt of effort before approaching the bewildered Lady Hardyng again.

“For too long the Vale has relied on executioners to do the ugly work. I will not make the same mistake!”

The proclamation was followed by hundreds of thousands approval screams and the Vale army shouted harder as the head of the traitor rolled to the feet of the officers.

**Princess Shiera Targaryen, 05.09.300AAC, Castlewood System**

Shiera was bored. The escape from King’s Landing had been terrifying and exciting at the same time, no doubt about it. But once they had reached orbit and the light cruiser had accelerated to the jump point at full power, it had been over. Protocol had returned with all celerity and they had been escorted to their cabins.

She wasn’t going to complain about the cabin themselves; they were very nice and listening the guards’ talks, the Targaryen Princess had learned these were the quarters the Western Navy set aside for its junior squadron commanders when they used these small warships as flagships.

But the cabins were all they were authorised to see. Three times per day they were escorted to the dining room where they ate with Uncle Gerion...and the ‘excitement’ ended there. The light cruiser was doing its best to convey the impression they were just one of the many starships fleeing the eruption of violence at the capital. In turn this meant a minimum of communications with the outside, and the soldiers and the navy officers were at a high state of readiness if their ship had to fight its way to the Deep Den System.

Since it was a military ship in the first place, it meant there were few distractions and games. Daeron and she had searched the room for several hours, but they had found no interesting holo-devices to watch or play with. Whatever the Lannister officers did in their quarters, they didn’t leave it in their cabins once they were transferred to other flagships. There were no mysterious coded messages to decipher. There was no information on what was happening at King’s Landing. They had just their own beds with the embroidered Lannister lion and a space soberly decorated in red.

There was nothing to do but wait for their arrival at Deep Den, when they would be free to transfer to a bigger ship with more acceptable accommodations. And by the Crone, it couldn’t come fast enough, for Daeron was progressively becoming unbearable. Her little brother had thousands of questions, and Shiera replying ‘I don’t know’ to most of them was only encouraging him to find others or to repeat them after one hour or two. Daeron also regularly demanded to see tutors, servants and everyone they knew in the Red Keep, which was of course impossible...

“Shiera, you must have some games in this coffer...”

Fortunately, she stopped him before he had the time to do more than plunge one hand into the container where she had stored several of her most expensive possessions.

“These objects are not to play with, Daeron,” she informed her baby brother with a patience disappearing minute after minute. “The objects in this coffer are our family legacy.”

Included in it were several jewels of Mother, some gemstones and artwork which had been gifted for her birthdays and official ceremonies and other things. Shiera would have loved to bring more, but unlike dresses and the like, letting out treasures of House Targaryen out of the Red Keep attracted too much attention.

“Show me! Show me!”

Shiera sighed before succumbing. For the next hour, she showed the jewels to Daeron. His favourite was without contest the set of rubies and emeralds Queen Cersei Lannister had once worn during her marriage, a fabulous necklace of platinum and gold linking the jewels together. There had been a gold tiara going with it, but Shiera had not found it before their departure.

“And the last box?”

Shiera murmured a combination of High Valyrian and presented her eye in front of the visual security system. The recipient opened, revealing what looked to be from afar a superb gold stone. Except it wasn’t one.

“It’s a dragon egg...”

It was. This one had been offered to Shiera by the King. To her best knowledge, every child of the Targaryen family save Daeron had received one days after their birth...her little brother had not, for in the days of the Greyjoy Rebellion their genitor had royally ignored them and the King of Westeros had never taken great importance to correct this detail when he had returned victorious.

Well no, this wasn’t exact. Rhaenys had received an egg as the eldest, but when she had been spirited away to Dorne, the egg had remained with her. Visenya’s twin had never been to the capital, as the royal exchange had been constantly delayed year after year and while an egg had been presented at one ceremony, it had soon returned to the high-security vaults. Prince Viserys had never been offered one too. And Princess Daenerys had been sent to Braavos without touching one.

Aegon, Joffrey and Visenya had theirs, however. But those of the two Princes and the Princess had likely remained at the capital...since they were petrified decades and decades ago, there was no point travelling with an egg which was worth several billions at the current market’s price. She caressed it for several minutes before delicately handing it to Daeron.

“It is warm...”

“Don’t say things like this...” Shiera rolled her eyes. Unless you plunged an egg into a fire, it was staying at a low temperature. But when she took it from the hands of her little brother, she was quite happy to wear silk gloves, for the golden-yellow scaly object was burning and let it fall on her bed with a small cry.

There was a loud thud, and for several seconds Shiera was horrified at the idea of having broken this treasure, but as cracks spread from top to bottom and the surface, it was evident nothing she had done was responsible for this event. The egg...it was hatching.

It was impossible, and yet unless she was the victim of a massive hallucination, it was the reality. Smoke appeared and a golden snout soon emerged, quickly followed by a lithe body as the egg disintegrated and the dragon breathed the air of the warship.

“Dragon!” Daeron, ignoring all instincts of conservation, rushed towards the newborn reptile but the tiny dragon avoided his embrace and took flight to slam in her arms before growling and clacking its maw. Somehow, Shiera felt a rush of energy and then...hunger.

“Princess, we have translated in the Deep Den System...what in the Seven Hells is happening here?”

The door of their quarters had opened to reveal Uncle Gerion...which for once had a genuine shocked expression on his face looking at her. Well may be not at her, rather towards the growling dragon in her arms trying to see where his first meal was hidden.

“Err...this is exactly what it looks like?”

**Lady Calla Peake, 05.09.300AAC, Starpike System**

Calla was the only person in the vast war conference room to not wear the green uniform of the Reach armed forces with gold insignia. Usually, she felt amusement. The Seven forbid she was admitted to give her own voice to military strategy when she had to be one of the rare persons in the Sector to realise how fucked the Sector was.

Today, she felt concern. Starpike had suddenly been thrown on the frontlines of a new war, and the reactions since the news of the defeat of Nightsong had spread were discouraging in the extreme. The Reach officers had been high on the drug of victory and narcissism for a decade. They had woken up yesterday with the knowledge their cause was unassailable, and they had gone to their beds confused and in shock.

Now that they had the time to recover, part of their arrogance was back. After all, the warships which had just been massacred were Storm warships, and everyone knew the designs of the Storm Sector were incredibly inferior to those of the Reach, right? More importantly, the commanding Vice-Admiral had been a bastard of dubious reputation, and what could you expect when you put someone like this in charge of your fleet? It would have been better if a proper blue-blooded officer had been given command, and victory would have been certain if the Reach ships of the line had been there.

Talks like these were very common in the streets and the vast hemicycle where dozens of officers waited for the war briefing to begin.

The Starpike war room was somewhat classical by Reach standards. The officer in charge was granted a desk at mid-height and a massive tactical display, and faced the hemicycle-shaped assembly of green uniforms. By tradition, the Lord and Lady of Starpike were seated behind the speaker, vast and richly elaborated seats which rightly deserved the throne designation.

In another system, maybe the Lord of the Noble House would have made a speech, but the Lord Paramount and his cronies in far-away Highgarden were far too unfriendly with the nobility of Starpike to allow such a thing. No, today the General and the Admiral respectively in charge of the ‘Marches 2nd Grand Army’ and the ‘Marches Mobile 6th Task Force’ were going to impress them with their genius.

And if Calla felt sarcastic, it was because three days ago, said imbeciles were affirming in public Nightsong could resist years to a frontal assault of the Dornish fleet. At the light of recent events, their predictions had proven a bit optimistic.

Calla exchanged a sardonic book with her husband to her right, but didn’t open her mouth to share her conclusions. In this open setting, the scrutiny was at its greatest intensity and she had counted over seven officers and four servants focusing on her and the Master of Starpike to the exception of anything else. It was not counting the myriad of listening devices and other methods of spying undoubtedly deployed at this very moment.

One might think the Tyrells would take far less precautions on the internal front, but one had to take into account the Queen of Thorns, Lady Olenna Tyrell. The woman was notoriously suspicious of anyone not drinking at the fountain of idiocy created at the heart of the Reach.

This was why the starships built and crewed by men of Starpike weren’t currently in orbit or guarding the jump point of Nightsong. These starships – two ships of the line and three battlecruisers – were at Highgarden, welcoming the Crown Prince and wasting the money of the middle-classes in frivolities and disgusting demonstrations of power while Nightsong discovered the joys of Dornish rule. And they had been replaced by Tyrell bootlickers, who certainly weren’t the most alert of men. By the time their task force – three ships of the line and five battlecruisers – was ready to move, the Battle of Nightsong was over and Dornish ships of the line had been positioned to intercept any sally in the Storm star system.

Now the question was what idiocy they had brainstormed in their spare time. By the looks of it, several local officers and her husband wondered the same thing. The Peake officers in charge of the fixed defences – Mace Tyrell and his mother had not the power to replace those with their own men – had been anything but impressed with their reaction times and their tactical skills. The few which had been invited in this war room tried very hard not to show their dread.

At last – five minutes later than the agreed hour – Admiral Ser Gaston Leygood and General Ser Bastian Oldflowers entered and made their way to the speaker’s desk. Both were in their great uniforms, the green of the cloth disappearing in many emplacements under the large gold decorations. They carried themselves with an air of dignity and assurance you would almost believe they were able to find their way to the toilets from their flag bridge without a map.

For the officers eager to speak of strategy, Calla was sorry. The Oldflowers scion began his speech by a long prayer to the Warrior and the Father, demanding their divine assistance to defeat the Snake-Whore – it was apparently the very unoriginal nickname they had found for Rhaenys Targaryen. Then there was a recount of the Nightsong events – Tyrell sauce. For those who weren’t in the know, it meant the enemy was accused of heresy, treachery, underhanded ways and about everything possible – and a few things which were not – Vice-Admiral Rolland Storm was lambasted for his bastard birth and the rest of the Nightsong officers were praised for their ‘gallant defence against overwhelming odds’.

This gave her the envy to laugh, honestly. Seven Hells, they were at war now! And when you were at war, everything was becoming divided in ‘acceptable today’ and ‘not yet acceptable’ tactics. You didn’t waste your time on the social structure of a Sector or the legitimacy of one’s birth. What they really needed was to investigate the behaviour of the officers at fault, study the Nightsong debacle and the Dornish new weapons and establish a counter-strategy to ensure this first defeat was not going to become the standard every time a Dornish commander attacked a Reach system.

It went without saying that her opinion was not those of the two men turning her back to her.

“Due to the Marches Mobile 6th Task Force’s presence, the Dornish whore has renounced to test our mettle at Starpike. This shows once again the Martell and their viper-whores are unable to truly conquer our fortresses when they are defended by the might of Highgarden and its bannersmen.”

There was so many things wrong with this Calla didn’t know where to begin. But if she had to give it a try...the Dornish capital ships had not refused to engage the Leygood-commanded task force. They had refused to engage the modern Peake star-forts, their hundreds of platform defences, their considerable minefields with proximity warheads and the thousands of short-range laser bombs. Task force or no task force, the force which had flattened the Nightsong Admirals would have taken horrific losses to take the outer shell of the Starpike defences.

“Unless the Snake-Whore is ready to lose her entire fleet in a suicidal assault, there will be no attack from Nightsong in this direction. In the short-term, the security of this system is not in question and I have no doubt the orbital and planetary industry will provide great contribution to the war effort.”

Some of her inclination must have shown, for her husband placed his left hand on her right. Calla gave a thin smile of circumstance, before discreetly giving him a direct look on her breasts. The black robe she wore today was more conservative than what she chose on a day-per-day basis, but its cleavage had been slightly modified for her purpose. The lustful look Lord Titus gave her gave her a warm feeling of satisfaction.

“At this hour, the 6th Task Force has concentrated three ships of the line, five battlecruisers...”

Her husband was not the man she would have chosen for herself, that much was true. Titus was old, had plenty of scars courtesy of the last wars and he was rather bear-like with his brown beard, his brown mane and his heavy hairiness everywhere.

Calla didn’t love him.

But then love was a luxury in arranged marriage, and often the source of unnecessary complications.

“The Marches 2nd Grand Army fields four million men, divided in four field armies of excellent past services and reputation...”

Lord Titus Peake and she shared many goals and ambitions, which was arguably better. They both wanted an end to the Tyrell domination of the Reach and their hate of Olenna Tyrell had been sealed in blood. For their mutual pact, all she had to do was to give him an heir...and since he was experimented and patient with her in their bed, Calla saw no reason to deny him this.

She had other ambitions and another husband for the future, but Lord Titus Peake was already old and she could wait for a few years. For now, Starpike had the potential to be a bastion of stability and prosperity against the enemies arriving from every direction.

“...and the Dornish forces have profited from the cowardice of Lord Selmy and Lord Wagstaff’s cousins. Instead of fighting as their oaths demanded of them, these ‘Storm Lords’ have taken their warships and their best troops before fleeing their planets and taking refuge in their neighbours’ fortresses. The Lord of Harvest Hall has escaped to Gallowsgrey and the senior Knights of Wagstaff’s March have demanded the protection of Lord Dondarrion.”

Calla wondered what the Admiral had expected Lord Selmy to do. The Stormlander, if his order of battle could be trusted, had one armoured cruiser and a couple of battlecruisers to defend his world. The enemy forces had tens of thousands new starfighters, these new ion-cannon battlecruisers and several ships of the line nobody knew anything about.

Fleeing and capitulating were the only reasonable choices. In his place, Calla would have done the same thing. Why die for King Rhaegar Targaryen and Lord Paramount Jon Connington when you knew pertinently they weren’t going to do the same thing for you and will probably profit from the occasion to replace you by one of their supporters?

“This leaves the frontiers of the Reach vulnerable, even assuming the defences of Gallowsgrey hold against the Dornish.”

By the tone conveyed, Admiral Gaston Leygood thought the Storm warships stopping anything bigger than a malfunctioning satellite would be miraculous. The tactical display, centred on the star of Starpike, shifted north-east to focus on another familiar frontier system.

“Because the Stormlanders are unable to defend their Marches, Ashford is now incredibly vulnerable.”

Ah yes, the good old-fashioned strategy of blaming the absent for their own failures.

“The sneak attacks and genocidal actions of the Sunspear whores have placed unexpected strains on our deployments but we still have four ships of the line between one and three jumps away from Ashford. We propose to this assembly a new move: gather these capital warships at the jump point to Harvest Hall and let them form a new battle-squadron with the 6th Task Force. With seven ships of the line and eleven battlecruisers, we will have the strength to retake Harvest Hall, stop the perfidious Dornish ravages and prepare the reconquest of Nightsong.”

There were some cheers and applauses coming from the Leygood, Oldflowers, Bridge, Hightower and Tyrell officers massed in the hemicycle. But a large minority was hesitant, and next to them not one of the Peake officers smiled.

Calla for herself was staying quiet after hearing this web of lies, stupidity, and insubordination. Admirals and Generals in times of war were always granted large and broad authority. As much as anyone didn’t enjoy hearing it, the very nature of galactic warfare made it unavoidable. When a captain of a cruiser could wait the arrival of a convoy for weeks in the void and an ambush could be delayed for months, high-ranked soldiers were by necessity forced to rely on their own judgement. This was normal, and had to be one of the rare practises every Sector Navy had in its manuals.

It was not intended as a free pass for dreams of glory. Admiral Gaston Leygood and General Bastian Oldflowers – she was going to forget the ‘Sers’ for they were not worthy of it – had been commanded to garrison Starpike and probably keep an eye on its troublesome Lord and Lady. Somehow, she didn’t think Lord Mace and his friends had written the orders for their subordinates to launch an offensive two jumps away against the entire Dornish Navy.

To her suspicious mind, it looked like the new traitor-Queen Rhaenys Targaryen had delivered a magnificent bait to the Reach commanders...and the lackeys of Highgarden were ready to bite deeply in their thirst for glory and renown.

This was bad. If the objective of the Dornish was really to shatter the Reach, a failed offensive at Harvest Hall would leave more or less Starpike, Ashford, Cockshaw Plains and Grassy Vale without warships to defend them. Of these four stellar frontier paths, only Starpike had the defences to truly stop cold from every direction their enemies. And it could create a cascade of defeats. The line Starpike-Dark Dell-Hutcheson- Horn Hill was heavily fortified and its defenders had not abandoned their old martial traditions, but without the warships parading and sailing prettily around Highgarden, they couldn’t counter-attack. As for the rest, maybe Cider Hall and Longtable could repulse big assaults. The rest would fall like a clay castle against a super-earthquake.

It was funny how this worst-case scenario had somehow been missed by the minds of the glory-hounds. When a purely advisory vote was called, the Tyrell-Leygood appointees and their loyal servants all voted in favour of the new plan. The Starpike officers all voted against. Lord Titus and she voted against too, not that their opponents seemed bothered by their opposition. You didn’t need to read their thoughts to know the ambitious young men and their elders wanted a big share of the spoils. Obviously, the great defeats of Houses Caron, Selmy and Wagstaff were evident signs at least three planets were going to possibly require new management and this was nothing compared to the prize Dorne represented...

“We will not let the traitorous bitch who has betrayed her dynasty destroy a decade of unequalled prosperity and unity! The Seven and the Just are with us! To war!”

“TO WAR!” answered the assembly some with all the air in their lungs, others far more slowly and unenthusiastically.

“TO WAR!”

“WAR AND GLORY!”

“WAR AND THE KING!”

“To war,” Calla murmured, thinking her predictions had been entirely false, after all. If the Lannisters and one or two other claimants jumped in now, the Tyrells were going to be lucky to hold for half a year, not fourteen months.

**Princess Visenya Targaryen, 05.09.300AAC, Winterfell System**

Running in the home of a Noble House was an activity devoid of risk. Unless you were doing it in the old fortress of Winterfell. Visenya had sadly discovered it this morning as she made her morning work-out.

The problem was not that someone had hacked the defence turrets in a vulgar attempt to assassinate her. She had not thousands of barbarians like one saw in medieval holo-series brandishing axes and shouting they were going to rape her.

No, she was ‘just’ pursued by a very enthusiastic pack of direwolves. For a reason which had ninety percent of probability to originate with a certain Arya Stark and her four-legged companion, the Targaryen Princess was pursued by the numerous furry auxiliaries of House Stark. So far, she was winning the race. The narrow corridors and the series of bends was giving her the advantage, as the direwolves often rammed each other when the leading animal tried to slow down to change course.

But she was tiring – after near an hour of running, her first hope to distance the pack had long died of exhaustion – and if she wanted to avoid the dreaded tongue-licking of the furry beasts, Visenya was going to need a perfect solution in the next minutes before they found a short-cut she didn’t know.

Otherwise she was going to require ten showers to get risk of the musk odour which always came with the cousin of the wolves.

She was not far from her new bedroom when she met in one of the corridors Icefyre, the dragon of her little sister.

“Saved!” she exclaimed, but to her stupefaction, the draconic representative screeched when the direwolves came into view before taking flight and escaping in the opposite direction.

“Hey, come back!” Visenya shouted. “You’re a dragon! You are superior to these balls of furs!”

But no imprecation or insult was apparently good enough and she had to continue running to her destination...seconds before arriving to the final door, the direwolves all stopped like a single trained dog as they saw a holographic replay of Lord Eddard Stark’s latest speech.

Not believing her chance, Visenya closed the metallic door. Seconds later, loud shocks against the wall told her she had escaped a fate of saliva and fur.

“You should have gone to the stadium, if you wanted direwolf-less exercise,” the voice of her twin made her jump on her feet.

“Baela! This is my room!”

“Yes, and you really need to close it when you leave, otherwise the direwolves are trying to put their muzzles everywhere and believe me, the servants need hours of work to remove the smell.”

Clad in the Northern military uniform, her twin had taken one of the available chairs and was eying in a disinterested manner a holo-magazine of aircars.

“Your dragon is a coward, by the way. She fled once again against the direwolves.”

“Bah, in one or two months Icefyre will be bigger than the adults...and she will probably still flee,” Baela admitted with reluctance under her piercing stare. “The direwolves are very much pack animals, and they made my dragon understood its place from the very beginning. And Arya encourages Nymeria...”

“And Nymeria encourages Arya...”

It was a vicious and terrible cycle which was going to make Westeros tremble to its foundations. May the Seven, the Old Gods, the Valyrian Gods and whatever benevolent and war-like deities protected them from adult-Arya.

Visenya fell on an empty chair with a groan and removed her running shoes.

“I am going to take a shower,” she told her sister. “We still have five hours before leaving right?”

“Yes, but we have the possessions you take with you to prepare.”

“I have prepared my affairs, thank you very much.” The pilot in her was offended. Visenya pointed the three middle-sized bags in the corner. “This is barely one tenth of the things authorised for Lieutenants in the Crown Sector...”

“They authorise the Lieutenants to come with that much?” Her twin seemed genuinely horrified. “Unless these bags are all different type of uniforms, there’s no way it would be accepted by any logistic officer worth his rank!”

Note to self, make sure the Northern and the Reach officers in charge of supply never met unless it was a question of life and death. The supply quartermasters of Highgarden were infamous for storing quantities of things aboard their warships, and their Crown counterparts often raised several eyebrows of consternation. Putting them in the same room with the Stark bannersmen in charge of the war logistics seemed an easy way to begin a cataclysmic conflict.

“I didn’t pack a lot,” she said trying to not show how much she was vexed. “My new uniforms, the pilot manuals, one or two robes...”

“Forget the robes, sister,” Baela told her, posing her hand on her shoulder. “We are heading to a war zone and although it’s unlikely we will be in the thick of the bloodbath, none of the Admirals will host a ball, I can guarantee you that. In fact, discard everything which might be a luxury. You need to take what is useful and good for survival, not what is pretty.”

“Okay.”

Her twin seemed surprised by her easy surrender. She was right to fear there was something wrong.

“I’m going take my shower. I leave you to decide what must stay at Winterfell.” And she stuck her tongue in an undignified manner. It was petty vengeance she knew, but the direwolves plus not telling her about the ice dragon had peeved her a bit. By the Iron Throne, her twin was to be the first Targaryen bonded in a century and a half, and she hadn’t told her until they were at Winterfell! Visenya knew Baela was obeying to orders, but she couldn’t help but feel jealous and resentful...

The shower was rapidly expedited and when she re-emerged, she stopped her walk an instant at the mess waiting on her bed and everywhere else. It was like a storm had torn apart her bags. Her sister had really...err...emptied everything out to see what was acceptable and what was not.

“Put this uniform first,” Baela told her in a voice which broke no command. “I called a Captain to bring me some equipment you lacked, he’s sending one or two men that way and I doubt you want to receive them half-naked.”

Visenya obeyed with a thin smile. The uniform and what was worn under it wasn’t too bad, frankly. Despite the rumours, the Starks were no barbarians and the clothes, the undergarments and the suits were very comfortable. In fact, they looked easier to wear in the long term compared to the outfits she was granted at the capital. The only motive of satisfaction outside was the greyness of the panoply. It was grey, grey and grey from top to toe. Her long silver hairs were restrained with a silver dragon-shaped brooch.

“We will test the spacesuits later at the spaceport.” Visenya didn’t answer. At the moment Baela was verifying nothing was out of place and her insignia of Lieutenant on her shoulder pads was correctly adjusted, they had both appeared on the mirror and under this light, they both looked nearly identical.

Baela must have sensed it too for their hands joined and for a second or two they stayed immobile. They weren’t exactly perfect reflects of each other: she was slightly taller, but Baela had a cup over in breasts.

Then other men-at-arms brought several standard boots like the one she had just hopped into and quantity of things that the Crown standard was obviously unable to challenge.

“This doesn’t look like the Northern standard equipment from the last war,” Visenya commented as the new Northern square-trunk she was given received Northern uniforms, undergarments, spacesuits, gas masks, several survival kits and more.

“The 285AAC reforms have modified a lot of rules and equipment. And after that, there were two others in 290AAC and 294AAC. I’m told several Braavosi magnates made demonstrations and sold the rights to Northern firms a few of their outdated licences. Take your uniform for example: it is in a new type of shock-fibre which provides about thirty percent more resistant. It also increases the speed you can put your spacesuit when there is an unexpected incident. It is also more comfortable.”

Visenya nodded and suddenly became very glad she was not a courtier of King’s Landing, as Baela and one summoned servant tore through her shampoo and lotion stock. Visenya wouldn’t consider herself someone who took great care of her appearance, but her twin removed about two-thirds of it.

“Everything will be stored either in your bedroom, our children’s quarters and the valuable things are going to the vault,” she was explained. “I suppose you must have a few jewels?”

“In the black-red trunk with the arms of House Targaryen,” they had not been exactly at risk at King’s Landing, but given their genitor’s inability to notice she was sarcastic, she had preferred taking them with her.

“Nothing dangerous in there?”

“I would call certain things fragile, more dangerous,” several admirers had gifted her rings, necklaces and a few crystal objects. “There were...”

A loud growl and a loud thud stopped her in her tracks. Suddenly smoke began to escape from the overture...

“Nothing dangerous?”

“I swear, Baela! This must be one of Arya’s jokes, she was here when I opened it the last time! Apart from the jewels, the only thing I have in the trunk is...”

She taped the combination and faster than her reflexes, a red growling arrow threw itself out of the container. Only her training as a pilot allowed her to feint and suddenly she was face-to-face with it.

“Oh, by the Old Gods...” She heard her sister swear.

At the moment, Visenya didn’t care. In front of her eyes, there was a dragon, red like the fire, from the horns to the tail. Her egg had hatched. It was her dragon. Delicately, she caught it and placed it upon her left shoulder.

“I name you Starfyre, born of flame on the eve of war,” the Targaryen Princess whispered. And for the first time, she felt complete.

\*\*\*\*

“*There are those who say the King reigned justly and wisely. But if it was truly the case, how it is possible that half of his children crowned themselves Kings before they knew his last breath failed in the depths of the Great Keep? The royal corpse was not cold when Princess Rhaenys led the Dornish through the Marches and broke peace. The Iron Throne had a sovereign when the Vale and the Reach bled their first drops of blood in the War of the Ten Warlords. And the Lannisters were not the last to answer the storms of war, for they had their own candidate too. If the two children of Princess Elia Martell wanted the throne, then Prince Joffrey, Warlord of the Western Sector, was quite happy to fight them by unleashing the mighty squadrons of Casterly Rock...”* Anonymous agitator arrested for his seditious words against the Targaryen dynasty, executed by hanging in the Highgarden System, 301AAC.

**Colonel Tyrion Lannister, 06.09.300AAC, Casterly Rock System**

If you wanted to worship a God of tits and wine, the Warrior’s Fields of Casterly Rock were not the ideal location for you today.

From the seat he was using as a footboard, Tyrion saw them. Hundreds of thousands soldiers were walking in tight, ordered lines on this pleasant sunny day. Ranks after ranks, they were arriving on the Fields, taking formation and then saluting the royal balcony where the most important nobles were contemplating the military might ready to fight and die for their own ambitions.

Officially, this day had been improvised in two days, following the dreadful news brought back by Prince Joffrey at Casterly Rock. King Rhaegar’s madness was impossible to hide and the Dornish Princedom was in revolt or soon going to be. The Seven Sectors were ruled by a Council and a sovereign who had to be deposed before they stabbed the Western Sector in the back like the Iron born had tried to a decade ago.

Unofficially, it was completely impossible to make these military deployments in mere hours. From the ships of the line, battlecruisers and heavy cruisers waiting kilometres above their heads to the columns of Panther-688 battle-tanks, everything had been carefully and methodically prepared by the officers of his Lord Father.

House Lannister rarely forgot the insults uttered against the Lion’s honour, and Rhaegar and his cronies had been delighted to voice them by the dozens in the last years. Bad enough the owner of the Iron Throne preferred the Reach over the West, the loans and the armament programs seized by House Tyrell, House Hightower and their friends were a dangerous blade ready to massacre the power of Lannisport and their other vital systems if given the chance. Since Dorne was recalling its merchant hulls and was preparing for a violent assault, Lord Tywin Lannister and his bannersmen were not going to waste the opportunity.

The result was this formidable hammer of steel, flesh and ambition gathered at Casterly Rock and hundreds other bases. Without interruption, he could see pass before his eyes entire regiments of battle-armours Mark 2, 3 and 9, accompanied by the more expensive Mark 4 and 5. In their hands were the laser rifles Sa296, vibro-swords, vibro-axes, mighty lion’s ripper claws, blasting-shooter guns, plasma-throwers, incinerators and every type of dangerous weapon the Western forces made available for their troops. It was a red human wave, the gold lion of House Lannister roaring on their armoured chests, and the sound of their armoured feet making the ground tremble. At regular intervals, the Panthers and the light Leopard-1750 scout tanks were presented. Whereas the flow of infantry would occupy and provide boots on the ground of the occupied planets, the durasteel-built mobile divisions would administer a terrible punishment to anyone wishing to test his mettle against the Western armies. And the tanks like the White Lion-70 super-heavies would not be alone on the battlefield, but supported by the Rock, Castamere Bane and Asteroid artillery batteries. Flying at low altitude were the newly developed H-shaped Aggressors Superior and Avengers Interceptor.

And overseeing this from the palatial seats, were his Lord Father and their new King, the former Prince Joffrey Targaryen, now King Joffrey of Westeros, Lord of the Seven Sectors and a good list of titles Tyrion supposed the readers would be quite content to not see them listed here. Who knows, a herald might still be here tomorrow trying to shout them all.

“So this is how peace dies,” the lone dwarf murmured while pouring himself a new cup of red in his empty golden cup. “I didn’t think it would happen so soon...”

He had made bets to that effect, too. In his opinion, the war had been three or four months away, not right now. But apparently, he had been wrong. The best consolation was the fact all these pompous Marshals, Generals and Admirals were deeper in the wrong than he was, so for once it wasn’t like he could be blamed too much.

“HAIL KING JOFFREY!”

“HAIL KING JOFFREY!”

And they repeated that every ten minutes, breaking his hears and forcing him to refill his cup. Not that he needed a lot of excuses to do that, but still.

Tyrion threw a glance at the central portion of a balcony, where of course the grand red carpet arrived after running on several hundreds of stairs. Under the warm sun and the red pavilion, his nephew looked like a young clone of Jaime. Well, if Jaime had been more interested in choosing clothes than training with weapons, but the green-eyed young man had still muscles – to impress the girls, it was kind of a necessity.

For the moment, Joffrey had caused no scandal and was behaving like a benevolent King. The trillion-dragon question was if it was his real visage or just a mask. Tyrion had looked a lot at the holo-images of Rhaegar Targaryen two decades ago. The man had been the perfect symbol of grace and silver-haired beauty, playing music and enchanting nobles and smallfolk alike. What lied underneath this veneer of perfection alas hadn’t been something pleasant.

Joffrey had not manifested in public or in private any disturbing behaviour. So far, the most concerning point about him was his hate of his half-brother Aegon Targaryen. But given how many people in the Western Sector didn’t like the favourite spawn of Rhaegar, it was kind of hard to blame him...

A shadow loomed over Tyrion and for the first time in three hours, the seat to his left wasn’t unoccupied anymore.

“Ah, Ser Addam Marbrand, you arrive just in time to see the official parade of the 9th Hornvale Army!” Yes, he was well-aware the Heir of Ashemark certainly couldn’t care less about this particular army – from their position, the parade of one army in red armour was very much like the one preceding it or the one succeeding it.

“I am surprised you manage to keep a smile in front of this boredom,” replied the Vice-Admiral before yawning. “I came to swear my vows before going back to work. Parade ceremonies are well and good, but King Joffrey and Lord Tywin have expressed deep reservations about Operation Vanguard given the...tumultuous political situation.”

‘Tumultuous’, yes it was a way to describe the chaos which was spreading everywhere. Merchant ships of several companies attacked by unidentified ships, the Dornish attacking everywhere according to panicked couriers. There were rumours of battles in the street of King’s Landing, of Lords declaring themselves independent, of new rebellions in the Iron Sector and Sectors mustering their full levies for the first time in a decade.

“It’s not surprising,” Tyrion Lannister replied before taking a colourless apple-tasting liquor of Oxcross to vary after five cups of red. “Ser, your strategy’s key strength was to assume Mace Tyrell and his fleet would rush in the River Sector like brainless bulls. But according to the latest news, Dorne and the Storm Sector may have stolen us this status. If half of the Reach fleet is in the Marches or trying to put off fires near Storm’s End, the Tyrells will not care about the Vances, the Darrys or the Goodbrooks. They will try to smash the vipers offending them, all the while they reinforce their positions at Old Oak and Goldengrove.”

“I know.” By the grimace he made, Addam Marbrand had realised it and utterly loathed it. “The first phase of Vanguard is still looked favourably at headquarters. After all, it offers us our best chance to get rid of a major fleet loyal to the Crown Prince.”

“Well, I can’t disagree with this,” Tyrion looked at a gigantic banner of the Crakehall boar before returning his attention to the Western Vice-Admiral. “If you trap the Vance-Tully-Piper-Goodbrook fleet, you gain Wayfarer’s Rest and Riverrun for sure. Assuming the rest of the River Sector implodes, we would have just established a nice shield without severe losses and these star systems can easily be fortified for our purposes.”

“That’s my view as well,” agreed the brown-haired Knight. “But I wanted to adapt it to a more offensive proposition. The order of battle for Vanguard called for forty-eight ships of the line to be mustered at the Golden Tooth. In my personal opinion, it would be a missed opportunity to not strike as hard as possible.”

Tyrion rolled his shoulders in amusement. On this point, Addam and Jaime were very much alike. The thought of his eldest brother brought an ache to his heart the second after, however. No one knew what had happened to him after this idiot of Rhaegar had sent him to Dorne, and given the recent strategic updates...

“I am not the good interlocutor for this conversation, Ser Addam,” Tyrion sighed. “I will grant you I am not without influence in certain parts of our industries, logistics and planning,” mainly because a lot of Generals and Knights considered these duties beneath them, “but King Joffrey is now in command and my voice carries little weight to him.”

The new King, for obvious reasons, wanted to strike the Reach first before they had the time to adapt their obsolete war plans, muster billions of newly-trained soldiers and drown the West in an ocean of green-painted warships and infantry.

“My...concern,” said prudently the Marbrand heir, “is that an offensive in the Reach may not meet the successes we expect. As much as we love to laugh at the lack of imagination shown by certain Reach Admirals, an attack through Old Oak or Goldengrove can’t surprise our enemies. We will attack directly very heavily fortified systems, and though the supporters of Mace Tyrell have not many new toys to play with, their numbers are a quality of its own. The Rowan and Oakheart worlds may very well be a bloody quagmire for our troops and months of deployment could be lost if their resistance lasts too long.”

Tyrion had his throat dry and the holo-images of the Fall of Pyke in his mind after that. Before he watched the extensive reports of the Greyjoy Rebellion, he had no idea how bad a battle could be for an inhabited world...now he did. Given that the Lannister troops wouldn’t have the advantage of outnumbering the enemy eighty-to-one, it promised to be bloody indeed.

“And your proposition?”

“We close the same trap around the Vance-Tully forces and destroy them. But instead of advancing towards the heart of the River Sector, we shift our space assets on a southern direction.”

Tyrion had to admit, Marbrand was certainly a commander who was resourceful. Most of his cousins, uncles and other useless assistants would still defend their strategies for one or two months before realising events had overtaken them.

“How far do you want to go?”

“Ideally,” Addam stressed with the accent of someone who understood that reality and fate were unlikely to cooperate, “we take Wayfarer’s Rest, Riverrun and we leave pickets in Deddings and Kneeling’s King for the alert warnings. Then we move for Pinkmaiden, Grell, Stony Sept and Castlewood.”

“You will have created a shield protecting the Western Sector from the River counter-offensives,” said the youngest son of Lord Tywin Lannister, visualising mentally the map of the Darry-governed systems.

“And if we want to invade the Reach by the Lychester-Inchfield jump point, we are but one transit away with about thirty ships of the line.”

“Optimistically, it leaves two squadrons in the River Sector for garrison and suppression duties.”

It went without saying his Lord Father was not going to appreciate reducing his order of battle.

“Yes,” replied levelly the man behind Operation Vanguard. “But the price is worth it, I think. Give a year or two to a competent administrator aware of industrial realities, and we could rearm the star system. The Targaryens have forced them to scrap some forts and defences, the Blackfish is in the North with some of their veterans and their Lord is the ‘Lame Fish’...but it is still Riverrun, capital of the Sector for two hundred and eighty years. Supported by several River systems, we would have a power base of our own to...moderate the Frey and Bracken ambitions.”

Yes, and it might give them a bargaining ship with House Stark. The Northerners didn’t like the Westerners for valid reasons, but if House Lannister rid them of Edmure Tully, perhaps as a prisoner to be sent to the Wall, a child of House Stark could claim Riverrun, which was not a small consolation prize.

“Fine, I agree to support your new plan, though I want to see the long version in public, first.” It was not like he was risking a lot, in the end. At worst, he would stay a Colonel-dwarf in the deep bunkers of Casterly Rock until the outcome of this war was decided. At best...probably the same thing would happen. “But I want the best bottles from the great wine cellars of House Vance...”

\*\*\*\*

*The Battle of Fawnton. The Storm Civil War. The Fawnton Heresy. The Connington’s Graveyard. The Final Purge. The Great Betrayal. The Cataclysm of Horrors.*

*The number of names given to Operation Cataclysm in the years after the bloodshed were literally uncountable and rarely of a positive nature.*

*From the Wall to Sunspear, all the Noble Houses had known of the hostility between House Connington and House Baratheon. Few had thought likely it could end in anything but tears and war.*

*There had been some men at court to publically demand that something be done before the point of no-return was reached. An overwhelming majority of strategists recognised the defeat of a Storm-led rebellion was going to be unavoidable in less than a year, but this victory would have the taste of ashes. The Crown had relied heavily on draining the planets once sworn to the Usurper to replenish its finances. After what had happened to the Iron Sector, the possibility of replaying the Fall of Pyke on dozens of planets was giving shivers to those who had the eyes turned in the direction of Storm’s End, Stonehelm and Haystack Hall.*

*But in the end, nothing had been done. Jon Connington was hated and reviled, his name an insult in towns and aboard the starships of the former Storm rebels. The taxes had never stopped climbing, and the Sector was so close to bankruptcy the difference was mostly academic. On 14.09.300AAC, Stannis Baratheon, the Warlord the Targaryen Loyalists of King Aegon Targaryen would forever call the Betrayer, announced the obligations and the debts the Storm Sector owed to the Crown, the Reach and every other individuals or nations were null and void. The economic crisis the Iron Throne wanted to avoid for a good decade was striking at the worst possible moment, although the war’s start helped mitigate this explosion. There were evidently too many disasters and upheavals happening in every corner of the realm for this new problem to agitate the collapsing markets.*

*The fratricidal butchery inflicted at Fawnton could not be so easily dismissed. The First Storm Fleet and the First Storm Grand Army mustered at Fawnton by Lord Jon Connington represented the greatest muster the supporters King Rhaegar and Crown Prince Aegon Targaryen could afford to gather. They gave it an impressive name: the First Storm Legion. When added the warships Stannis Baratheon and his supporters came with, the percentage of the Stormlands-crewed fleet which fought in the star system was nearly eighty percent of its total effectives, and one had to make the assumption several capital ships could not be present due to lack of maintenance, funds and spare parts.*

*Noble, Masterly and Knightly Houses, old and new, had been called-to-arms for war. And it was war they met at Fawnton. The hate of the last decades found finally its boiling point, and the great enmities were settled once for all.*

*There was to be no mercy, no pity and no surrender.*

*Stannis Baratheon and his commanders had named it Operation Cataclysm, and by a dark prescience, this was exactly what the battle was...*

Extract from the Lies and the Vengeance, Anonymous author, 320AAC.

\*\*\*\*

*The Fawnton System has always been a third-tier system of the Storm Sector in every era. With a single planet able to support life, no asteroid belt and very few features to support a massive industrial presence, Fawnton was never one of the big powerhouses under the Durrandons Kings, and it was a trend which continued under the Paramount rule of House Baratheon. The presence of a gas giant remains one of the high advantages of House Cafferen, allowing them to sell their home-produced fuel to the nearby Reach Sector neighbours and the other Storm Noble Houses.*

*Otherwise, the rest of the system has not any touristic appeal. Of the three continents available colonisation, two have unpleasant rainy weather and low temperatures. The oceans are generally far colder than any non-Northerner Westerosi tolerates for swimming. The ancient monuments are few and far between: the Dance of Dragons destroyed many prized statues and valuable archaeological sites and the aftermath of the Usurper’s Rebellion saw more disappear. Fawnton remains logistically independent for its food consumption and industrial needs, but remains a net importer for cutting-edge technology. The last years have seen a slim increase of the Gross Systemic Product, but there are concerns about some agricultural reforms...*

Extract of Guide of the Storm Sector, by Hugh Argenter, 297AAC.

\*\*\*\*

*Ser Morrigen,*

*Per your instructions, here is to my best knowledge the list of the forces the dragon-licker Connington has ordered to Fawnton. It is highly unlikely there will stay in this star system for more than eight days, however, as the skirmishes with the Dornish Princedom have radically increased in the last days. You will note the presence of the* Golden Stag *and the* Golden Age*, two capital warships of the Reach and known to be the personal flagships of the traitor Renly Baratheon and his friend Loras Tyrell. Otherwise, the warships and the forces are what we were warned for: roughly two thirds of the manpower available to Connington for the ground forces and even bigger percentage for the space assets. Houses Connington, Cafferen, Herston, Lonmouth, Musgood and Caron form the bulk of the Noble Houses. There are a few Grandison and Peasebury lesser branches trying to sell their souls and their swords for a good price, but their contribution is negligible. Below is the order of battle.*

First Storm Fleet:

Lord Paramount Admiral-General Jon Connington is in command.

8 Ships of the line:

5 Loyalty’s Reward-class: *Loyalty’s Reward* (Admiral-General Jon Connington flagship), *Griffin’s Wrath* (Admiral Ser Ronnet Connington flagship), *Usurper’s Death* (Admiral Lord Thurgood Cafferen flagship), *Harrenhal Triumph* (Vice-Admiral Lord Richard Lonmouth flagship), *Shining Star* (General Lord Bryce Caron flagship)

1 Purple Rose-class: *Golden Stag* (Admiral Ser Renly Baratheon flagship)

1 Loyal Griffin-class: *Loyal Griffin* (Marshal of the Rain Rift Ser Rhaegar Connington flagship)

1 Shield-Breaker-class: *Indestructible* (Admiral Lord Orys Herston flagship)

1 Armoured Cruiser:

Steel Paragon-class*: Blessed Knight* (Vice-Admiral Ser Raymund Connington flagship)

12 Battlecruisers:

6 Fall of Pyke-class: *Fall of Pyke* (Senior Captain Ronald Storm), *Blackstone Fortress* (Rear-Admiral Ser Ralph Herston), *Final Redoubt* (Senior Captain Ser Bonifer Musgood), *Kraken’s Death* (Senior Captain Ser Lomas Cafferen), *Massacre of Reavers* (Vice-Admiral Ser Durran Musgood), *Price of Betrayal* (Rear-Admiral Willis Lonmouth)

4 Destruction-class: *Destruction of Rebels* (Rear-Admiral Ser Royce Fawn), *Magnanimity* (Senior Captain Ser Barristan Herston), *Tears of Destruction* (Rear-Admiral Alyn Chamois), *Yellow Ruin* (Rear-Admiral Ser Theo Nightingale)

2 Eastern Wind-class: *Strong Wind* (Senior Captain Dale Shouter), *Tornado* (Rear-Admiral Eldon Tent)

 23 Heavy cruisers:

12 Nightsong-class

10 Fawnton-class

1 Sleeping Lion-class

24 Light Cruisers:

20 Stone Guard-class

4 Golden Buckle-class

50 Scout cruisers:

42 Griffin’s Charge-class

4 Jewel of the Storm-class

2 Wooden Ambush-class

2 Black Butterfly-class

3 Fleet Carriers:

1 Royal Eagle-class: *Royal Eagle*

1 Griffin Wing-class: *Griffin Wing*

1 Lord Luthor Tyrell-class: *Golden Age* (Fighter-Admiral Ser Loras Tyrell flagship)

41 Light Carriers:

36 Sky Master-class

5 Falcon Hunter-class

76 Escort Carriers:

15 White Feather-class

16 Marcher’s Defiance-class

20 Haven of Loyalty-class

10 Royal Pavilion-class

11 Ashford-class

4 Red Lips-class

 5125 Starfighters:

4300 White-Griffin-class

720 Stormshadow-class

105 Paladin R-7-class

First Storm Grand Army:

3 Behemoths:

Crown Behemoth *Royal Thunder*

Crown Behemoth *Terrible Blade*

Storm Behemoth *Paragon of Nobility*

3.6 million Cannons

472 000 Tanks

413 000 Aircraft

Connington Muster: 140 million men

 Cafferen Muster: 2 million men

 Herston Muster: 1.5 million men

 Lonmouth Muster: 21.4 million men

Musgood Muster: 2 million men

Caron Muster: 26 million men

Crown Expeditionary Force: 1 million men

*I remain your humble servant,*

*X-149999*

**Ser Guyard Morrigen, 06.09.300AAC, Fawnton System**

“This is Ser Guyard. The time has come, men. Execute Case Black.”

The Morrigen Knight didn’t waste any more words in futile words. One combination and the camouflage armour he wore stopped showing red and white colours. Next to him, the ten warriors of his staff did the same thing and where Connington-coloured battle-armours had been seen moments ago, there were now replaced by the traditional yellow-black of the Storm Sector.

“Death to House Connington!” He shouted and he opened fire with his laser blast-gun on the fifty or so Caron infantry in front of him guarding the doors of the orbital station’s armoury.

At this distance, even the worst shooter in the galaxy could not have missed and Guyard had twenty more shooters positioned in ideal positions. In seconds, the walls and the ground were painted in red, and it was not Connington’s toxic paint which flowed.

A roar of triumph rose in the throats of his men.

“DEATH!”

“DEATH TO THE TARGARYENS! DEATH TO HOUSE CONNINGTON!”

What followed could be not called anything but a slaughter. Guyard and all his men were in Mark 2 and 4 battle-armours. The Connington, Caron, Musgood and Cafferen troops in the centre of *Fawnton One* were not. Oh, some had light weapons but more for crowd control and intimidation at this late hour and even then their main opponent had been boredom.

Against his men, they had no chance.

“DEATH TO THE GRIFFIN!”

Cannons shot indiscriminately civilians and soldiers, and bodies fell everywhere. Some courageous officer tried to put his men in a regular line but a plasma explosion volatilised the formation into bloody fragments.

“KILL THEM AND NO MERCY!”

Vibro-swords and vibro-axes were drawn, cut flesh and bones, creating thousands of agony screams by their actions. The corridors, the halls and the muster points soon became slaughterhouses. The battle-armours in Baratheon-armours herded the fleeing troops towards the agreed killing grounds and the butchery continued, merciless and remorseless.

“The armouries are all under our control. Defence turrets and gas stores are deactivated.”

“Then we move for the central command post. Kill everything and everyone who isn’t loyal to Lord Stannis.”

“By your command!”

Though Guyard would have preferred taking hostages, he couldn’t afford to. Counting all his men aboard *Fawnton One* and the rest of the stations, he had perhaps seven thousand men under his command, basically three infantry regiments and support. There were roughly *two million* regulars and several hundreds of thousand civilians aboard Fawnton One, and while he had surprise on his side and a large majority were sleeping in their beds, the Lieutenant-Colonel was still facing what euphemistically called ‘a slight strength disadvantage’.

The Connington and Cafferen, now that surprise was over, tried to regain the positions they had just lost. Guyard and hundreds of men surged forwards, crushing skulls, slicing throats and shooting torsos. After for so long being forced to obey these fuckers, it was glorious.

The killing-count spiralled out of control. By the time, they forced their way to the final great hallways and the golden fountains bought by Lord Cafferen to satisfy his ego, Guyard had killed over seven hundred enemies by himself and each of the closest soldiers with him were boasting of similar hunting numbers.

“Stay alert! This is where the hard part really begins!”

His warning came just in time for a tide of Cafferen regulars launched a monumental assault to stop their progression towards the command centre. Both sides knew what the other’s objective assault was and had no possibility to withdraw. Here and there, some Connington Loyalists had found battle-armours and there were in the middle of thousand men brandishing vibro-spears and laser guns.

The frontal shock was terrible. In a single impact of astonishing violence, six hundred Baratheon battle-armours smashed into a Cafferen-Connington mass boasting ten times their numbers. For a good minute the tactics and the strategy were nothing more than a long-past annoyance. Guyard plunged his vibro-blade to save his life and his laser weapon massacred at an insane rate his opponents.

“FOR LORD JON CONNINGTON AND KING RHAEGAR! FOR THE CROWN!”

“FOR THE BLACK STAG AND REVENGE! FOR KING STANNIS!”

The soldiers of Fawnton arrived by pickets of hundreds to reinforce their failing centre, the corridors filling with their corpses, but his Morrigen regulars killed them faster than the incoming fresh men. These fighters were courageous, yes. Guyard Morrigen would give them that.

But they were not ready for a true battle in the very heart of their defences. And now they never would fight again.

“STANNIS KING! STANNIS KING!”

The Cafferen troops stopped and their efforts began to collapse. The screams they were making demoralised their companions, but the lack of correct equipment was more harmful and seeing thousands of their friends lying dead was even more damaging for their morale.

Guyard raised his close-contact weapon and screamed in defiance.

“WE WILL AVENGE THE TRIDENT!”

“CHILDREN OF THE STORM! DEATH TO STORM’S END FOES!”

“OURS IS THE FURY!”

The three minutes which followed were annihilation in every way which counted. The Fawnton forces were scythed down and murdered. Secure doors were blasted apart and fleeing men gunned down for the example.

It was not a cheap offensive. When he finally entered the command centre and ordered his closest subordinates to get rid of the slimes – the same which had insulted him profusely not ten hours ago – he was left with less than two hundred and fifty men.

“Turn the platform defence grid against the dockyards and the warships,” the second son of Lord Morrigen commanded. “Priority targets are the starfighters hangars and the ships of the line. We must make sure they are bloodied before our liege arrives.”

“With great pleasure, Ser!”

“And since Lord Connington mustn’t escape, begin with the *Loyalty’s Reward*.”

The Griffin had insulted the Storm Sector in every way possible in the last decade, it was time to begin the repayment of the humiliations.

“Once you have re-routed the primary plasma and laser armaments on the capital warships and the First Fleet, use the energy sensors to prepare preliminary strikes on the ground forces.”

“Your will be done, Colonel.”

“How much time since our reinforcements arrive?”

“About five hours...”

Guyard Morrigen nodded grimly. It was unlikely his forces were going to survive that long, to be honest. Stannis Baratheon and his Lord Father had not hidden this from him. Seven thousand or eight thousand soldiers, it was all the same ultimately: they were against a mustering of over three hundred million troops, and once the imbeciles knew they had been betrayed and *Fawnton One* had fallen, they would stop at nothing to regain control of the orbital defensive and offensive systems.

“Colonel, our scouts are reporting boarding parties in Sector 14-A, 6-C and 9-E. The men have the sigils of House Lonmouth and Connington. They have a lot of heavy weapons, battle-armours and... the first sensors are reporting at least sixty thousand of them.”

“So they have finally wised up and unleashed their elites. What a pity.” Guyard shrugged. “We can’t stop them, and we are not going to try. Open all the non-vital sections to the void. Let’s see how they like to fight in zero-gravity conditions...”

**Lord Richard Lonmouth, 06.09.300AAC, Fawnton System**

Richard had taken his seat on the flag bridge of the *Harrenhal Triumph* when he saw the *Loyalty’s Reward* die.

The mighty ship of the line, pride of the Connington shipyards and flagship of the First Storm Fleet, was not granted a clean and honourable demise. The first volley of lasers broke its prow and set aflame the upper decks. A near-plasma hit impacted the armour like a thousand mini-asteroids. Laser guns – the Cafferen platforms returned against their own side – eviscerated the engines and the vital sections.

If the *Loyalty’s Reward* had been at battle-sections, the fusion reactors and the rest of the damaged systems would have certainly went critical or melted half of the conduits. But the capital ship had been under minimal power and thus this fate was avoided...for all the good it did. More missiles and lasers find their target and the great ship of the line turned aside like a slug in a futile attempt to disengage, revealing how deformed and wounded its flanks were. Most of the decks were venting air, water and uncountable debris, some which looked to be of human nature. Its acceleration was already failing and after several seconds it stopped. Hundreds of escape pods emerged from the wounded hull, some of which instantly vaporised by incoming explosive ordnance or the disintegrating warship.

“GET US OUT OF HERE!”

“Fire and kill the traitors!”

“Batteries 6 and platform 201 compromised!”

The *Loyalty’s Reward* didn’t explode, but Richard suspected it was because there was nothing less in its pitiful wreck to play its role. The ventral section of the warship had three enormous holes in it, there were mini-explosions everywhere and the prow was broken in half. By this point, there was no way this warship could be considered salvageable. Building a brand-new starship would cost a third of the cost and cause far less logistical problems...

“Over seventy percent of the grid has been returned against us, my Lord,” informed him his flag Captain. “Every commander is ordered to send boarding parties to retake control before we are completely obliterated.”

“Do it,” he answered. “Put the maximum distance between us and those damned platforms and start evacuation procedures for the divisions on the ground. We can’t...”

A lone missile exploding less than fifty kilometres away provoked a nasty shockwave and the *Harrenhal Triumph* shook under the blow.

To his shame, his flagship was doing well compared to the disaster engulfing the fleet. The *Loyalty’s Reward* was no longer answering, and it was fortunate indeed Jon had been on the planet when the treachery began. The *Shining Star* of Bryce Caron was still trying to move, but it had lost a good third of its length and was venting tons of debris. Of the *Usurper’s Death*, nothing remained. The first volley had apparently touched its core and transformed into a star. The *Indestructible* was, at the risk of saying a bad pun, not proving itself worthy of its name. The *Loyal Griffin* had left with small injuries, but in its precipitation rammed a scout cruiser and only their low velocities prevented a mutual overkill, though the ship of the line would need months of reparations and the scout cruiser was a lost cause.

The lone armoured cruiser *Blessed Knight* was vaporised by the merciless bombardment, and two heavy cruisers accompanied it in its fiery grave. The battlecruiser *Tears of Destruction* erupted like a super-volcano when its own ammunition exploded in its stores and Rear-Admiral Alyn Chamois’s voice went silent on the communications frequencies.

The battle was an inferno of fratricidal destruction. Surprised, the Storm Fleet and the mobile orbital battalions had lost precious minutes trying to rally, but now they struck with a vengeance. Fawnton Three was recaptured with an obscene amount of casualties and three light cruisers detonating in monumental charges.

The starfighters hangars were the scene of desperate evacuation and mere dozens engines had managed to launch before the holocaust found them. The scout cruisers were massacred by the very facilities and weapons they were supposed to protect.

But the traitors had shot their bolt. For all their ruthlessness and efficiency, it appeared they weren’t that many of them – most calls and reports agreed the betrayers were from House Morrigen and had repainted their battle-armours in Baratheon colours.

“Neutralise *Fawnton One* and finish them!” He ordered more loudly than he intended. On the tactical display, the representation of the *Indestructible* vanished from the screens and one second later new explosions and debris were added to the massacre. Admiral Lord Orys Herston’s flagship was no more, and the battlecruiser *Yellow Ruin* of Rear-Admiral Ser Theo Nightingale was...experiencing massive problems like four or five decks opened to the void.

They were suppressing the betrayal...but too slowly. Five more scout cruisers were broken apart, and in the last minute they had lost over twenty transports and supply ships. Not to mention they were several orbital strikes against the planet and the casualties list were in the tens of thousands there.

“Oh, Merciful Father...”

Richard turned his eyes in front of the main screen to see the battlecruiser *Kraken’s Death*, uncontrollable and agonising, plunging its hammer-shaped head in the core of the *Fawnton One* command station. The resulting calamity was so brilliant that even hundreds or thousands kilometres away, the flash was blinding and everyone on the bridge covered his eyes for a few seconds.

The Lord of the Lonmouth System crumbled on his seat and for several minutes stayed silent. Why? What sort of motivations could justify this folly? He didn’t know how many conventions and treaties of good conduct had been violated in the last minutes, but it was madness. Some folly had devoured the souls of the Morrigen troops, nothing...

“Our losses, Lieutenant,” Richard croaked after long minutes where he tried to stop thinking about the fate of the thousands he had sent to retake control of the station, only to lose them in this apocalyptic fire.

“The *Loyalty’s Reward*, the *Usurper’s Death*, the *Indestructible* and the *Shining Star* are gone, my Lord. We have also lost the armoured cruiser Blessed Knight, five battlecruisers including the *Destruction of Rebels* and the *Blackstone Fortress*, twelve to fourteen heavy cruisers, seven light cruisers, thirty-eight scout cruisers, the fleet carrier *Royal Eagle*, twenty-five light carriers and the near-totality of our escort carriers. Most of our starfighters have been disintegrated.”

The young man raised his head and in his blue eyes, Richard saw the same incomprehension he had in his.

“The reports on the ground...we have estimations the Cafferen divisions were in the thick of the inferno with the Crown forces, and we aren’t sure...the command structure of their forces is compromised.”

Richard’s fists tightened in powerless fury. There had been over two millions Storm regulars of House Cafferen parading around their capital, and one million detached Crown men. Assuredly, all these soldiers were dead, for not many things could survive the sheer force of the orbital strikes.

“The Behemoth *Royal Thunder* has been confirmed destroyed. Its two consorts are lightly damaged and regrouping east with our regiments. The starports have suffered high-level fatalities and roughly one third of our bombers and other aircraft support are gone...”

Why? Why had they been so willing to die for this insanity? So many deaths, the Storm Sector was now going to be at the mercy of the Reach for its defence, if the Dornish didn’t swallow them first, and...

And suddenly Richard Lonmouth understood with brutal clarity. This was no madness which had forced the Morrigen to rebel. This was a methodical and ruthless plan to butcher the First Storm Fleet.

This was the second act of the Usurper’s Rebellion, and while the very defences of Fawnton were annihilated in nuclear explosions and lasers, the jaws of death were closing on them.

“This is a general order on my own authority! Illuminate the entire system! All monitoring stations must pass on Condition Black-Royal-Two-Loyal! Contact the far-range pickets and tell all surviving stations to report any suspect reports!”

For several seconds, many of his officers looked at him like he was mad. Then after several seconds, understanding spread and as orders were executed mechanically, fear returned more pressing.

After fifteen minutes where the list of losses continued to increase by hundreds of thousands, the first red dots representing enemy units began to appear and multiply on their sensors.

“The Morrigen betrayal was the hammer. This...” He moved his hand towards the blazing crimson symbols, “is the anvil which will make sure our war is going to be a very, very short one.”

There was nothing they could do. Of the eight ships of the line, four were destroyed and two were in no state to fight against anything more dangerous than a light cruiser. The rest of the capital warships were similarly crippled.

“Three enemy detections detected. Designate them Traitor One, Traitor Two and Traitor Three. Emissions are consistent with the profile of warships from Houses Baratheon, Errol, Buckler, Wensington, Horpe, Dondarrion, Swann, Staedmon,...”

The litany continued for uncountable seconds and the magnitude of the treachery struck them in the face. Nearly every House which was not present at Fawnton for the war games had betrayed its oaths.

It was high treason of the like which had never been seen.

It was also happening right before his eyes and the squadrons supposed to crush them had just been devastated.

“Traitor One has come out the Summerhall jump point and is two hours away. Enemy strength estimates: eight ships of the line and eight battlecruisers. Traitor Two, four ships of the line strong, is moving away from the Gower’s Spear jump point and is on an intercept course for the gas giant of the system. They will come into missile range in four hours. Traitor Three has also four ships of the line and has emerged from the Poddingfield nexus and is using its acceleration to rush to the Grassy Vale jump point and avoid any escape or reinforcements for our side.”

“My Lord, given the number of Storm units, the...”

“Stannis Baratheon has betrayed us, I know. And it looks like he has convinced nearly all the other Noble Houses to follow him in his betrayal.”

Most assessments and propaganda had described the Master of Storm’s End as a sort of grim-like and uncharismatic creature no one would willingly serve. By all evidence available, this information was so out of touch with reality that their spies deserved to be shot for their incompetence.

“Order a general evacuation and demand a priority line to Lord Connington. We must save what we can from this trap...”

**Ser Renly Baratheon, 06.09.300AAC, Fawnton System**

No one was panicking in the headquarters of the Fawnton armed forces.

“Order the Behemoth to turn around! No, no this division must stay on its position! Don’t move there! You must go to the bunkers!”

“Don’t be absurd, this regiment must go to the spaceport!”

“The spaceport is not going to be repaired before days! Take these shuttles and go!”

Panic was a vast understatement for the chaos unfolding in front of his very eyes. There were officers running everywhere like they had their backside on fire, shouting incomprehensible orders, walking away, and then returning in a sprint to bark the exact opposite of the commands they had been uttering seconds ago. Flag captains were screaming, insulting and begging for new commands. Ship crew who had been unable to return in orbit were opening without orders new orders of communication.

There was no order anymore. And on every tactical display, the red waves of the Storm Traitor Fleet was getting closer, outnumbering massively the surviving loyalist hulls. Even if the captains of Griffin’s Roost and Nightsong had been unshaken and able to count on intact orbital defences, it would not have been a fair fight.

With the defences crippled and half of the capital warships dead or so badly damaged it made no difference, the fight could only end one way.

Renly didn’t care about that. Or rather, yes, he cared about the millions of dead, but it was a secondary preoccupation in his thoughts. For the first time in his life, he had realised his brother truly hated him. Stannis hated him. His eldest brother loathed him enough to unleash a betrayal so awful every turncloak in history would be forced to bow in approval. And it was Renly’s fault. Avoiding a slaughter and a generalised insurrection like this one was the very reason he had been sent to Highgarden as a hostage at first.

But Renly loved Loras and had believed him that in time, both the current Lords of Storm’s End and Griffin’s Roost were likely to be removed for their conspiracies and incompetence. And who better to choose for Lord Paramount than the young, fair and charming youngest brother of the Black Stag? He would have the support of Highgarden, the love of the people...

It had been a nice dream. But now it was just a nightmare of betrayal and star-like explosions.

“It’s my fault,” he murmured.

“No, it’s not,” answered Loras taking his hand and placing it on his heart. “You couldn’t know what was going to happen.”

“We were still imbeciles to go to Storm’s End and provoke Stannis like this,” Renly affirmed in a mournful tone. “We pretty much confirmed him we hadn’t a single idea how advanced his rebellious plans were.”

“Yes,” Loras growled angrily. “In hindsight, Rhaegar Connington’s strategy was...flawed.”

This was not the word Renly would have used, but since the red-haired idiot in question was shouting asinine orders at the other end of the room, maybe this was not the best moment to insult him.

And it wasn’t like it was going to make a difference, in the end.

“Can we escape?

“Your *Golden Stag* is severely damaged and most of his bay can’t receive our shuttles. We will have to leave it behind and take the *Golden Age* and pray our engines hold long enough to evade the Baratheon fleet.”

“Can we really escape this trap?” Loras had always been better at tactics and strategy, but frankly Renly saw no gap or weakness in the encroaching wave of traitor warships.

“I believe so,” Loras said darkly. “But we are going to pay it in blood and tears.”

The two young men watched the tactical displays for a few seconds, as Jon Connington, his son and his cousins gathered in the headquarters tried to scream louder than the rest. To his consternation, they were not ordering an evacuation but a consolidation of their effectives in the underground basements.

“What in the Seven Hells is he doing? There are not enough bunkers to hide a third of the men we have left, and the Grand Army is short three or four million regulars already.”

“House Tyrell should never have supported House Connington’s elevation the title of Lord Paramount. This was our great mistake and now...”

Yes, now they were in an ugly situation. Dorne declaring war and apparently destroying the forces of Nightsong in a single day was catastrophic. But compared to the beating they had already received and the additional casualties which were sure to come, Fawnton was going to make Nightsong looks like a pillow-fight.

“Our men are waiting for us, Renly. Let’s go back to the *Golden Age*. Someone has to carry the news of the Storm Lords’ betrayal to Highgarden...”

“Yes, I suppose so...” Fleeing the battlefield was leaving something bitter and unpleasant in his mouth, but there was no pretending the situation could be restored. As it was, it was going to be difficult enough to escape. The Connington forces wanted a glorious last stand, it was obvious they were not going to be granted one.

The lights flickered and shadows rose from the darkness.

Humanoid figures coalesced and they struck without a word. Screams of stupefaction and horror echoed but it was too late. Few were in battle-armours in this centre guarded by the elite’s elite of the First Legion, and surprise was total.

A tall creature raised a great blade of darkness and stabbed Jon Connington like the laws of reality didn’t apply to him. The Lord Paramount of the Storm Sector fell, and seconds later his eldest son was decapitated by the same dark monster.

“RUN RENLY! RUN!”

More shadows were coming and their weapons were cutting apart alloys, metal and flesh indifferently. On all the frequencies, terror began to spread. The lights were flickering and the temperatures were rising. They ran, shooting in pure loss the shadows and trying to fray themselves a way into the flow of soldiers running for their very lives.

The shouts changed of nature as the walls began to contort just as they left the grounds to rush towards Loras’ shuttle. There were flames. There were shadows. And the shouts had changed to something more awful and horrifying.

“DEMONS! DEMONS!”

**Senior Captain Dale Shouter, 07.09.300AAC, Fawnton System**

Three days ago, Dale would not have imagined commanding an army on the ground to face a demonic host. Why should he? He was the commanding officer of the *Strong Wind*, an Eastern Wind-class battlecruiser, and quite happy with his lot in life.

But it had been seventy-two hours ago, when the galaxy had still made sense. Before the betrayals, the treacheries and the massacres set the star system aflame and poured seas of blood in the stars and the hills. It had been seventy-two hours before the reality became horrific and the shadow monsters came, preceding the demons.

By all rights he should be dead if not the monumental incompetence of his shuttle’s pilot, who had been three hours late bringing him back to orbit. So when the treachery had taken place, the Strong Wind had lost over one quarter of its crew, the jump generators and most of the lower decks, which meant it couldn’t escape and he couldn’t go back aboard. He had ordered his second to obey whoever was in charge for a last breakthrough, and gone to organise the defence of the Shouter forces, Knightly House in service of House Herston.

They had taken refuge in one of the southern continent’s best fortresses, regrouped the artillery and waited for the traitors to come. But the Baratheons and their bannersmen had not yet arrived. Their opponents were shadows and demons.

“Stand your ground! Hold your positions!”

The laser batteries fired as fast as they could, but the monsters were countless and reality seemed to distort around them. The ground was burning. The skies themselves appeared to rain fire and blood, though Dale knew it was more likely these were the countless debris of wrecks and stations entering the atmosphere.

“For the Seven! Protect the civilians!”

Volley after volley of the guns decimated the red horde, but the thousands killed didn’t stop the hundreds of thousands to come after them. And civilian or soldiers, many men were screaming and becoming insane. The suicides were coming by hundreds as veterans of the Greyjoy Rebellion became unable to cope with this madness.

“FOR THE FATHER AND THE MOTHER! KILL THE DEMONS!”

Some septons tried to shout louder than the officers, pressing their men to fight harder, to have faith and to stay steadfast. But the flames were spreading, and the demons were coming closer. And when the creatures came closer, the Storm Captain noticed human faces piercing through a red haze.

“They are us...” he realised horrified.

The tanks launched their counter-attack and Dale and thousands of survivors followed them into hell. And into this nightmare, he saw his guards and those of different Houses fall one by one. The abominations were legion. They were death roused to exterminate humanity. Kill one, and ten took its place the next second. The vibro-sword and the rifle were getting heavier by the second.

The lethal blow when it came was too fast to do any other thing but try a slow parry missing the fiery demonic blade. The pain was devouring but as his eyes rose to the sky, Dale watched new lights appear. And those weren’t of demonic origin.

“The judgement arrives, monsters...”

And then his life ceased to be.

**Lord Richard Lonmouth, 07.09.300AAC, Fawnton System**

The *Harrenhal Triumph* was never going to leave the Fawnton System after all.

Richard knew it and he accepted it.

It was strange in a way. He should have felt fury or anger. And maybe he had hours or days ago. It was difficult to remember after these countless disasters. There was plenty of anger to rage at the betrayal of the Stormlanders, who had once been considered loyal and above all high suspicion by the Targaryen dynasty. There was disgust to have for Loras Tyrell and Renly Baratheon, who had used him to provide a large-scale diversion and escape with their carrier *Golden Age*, the battlecruiser *Tornado* and a couple of cruisers.

But why waste the time he has left? Let the credulous young stag and the golden son of Mace Tyrell escape to carry the news. They were young and had a few years left in them...if the galaxy had that long.

Moreover, such a disastrous defeat was going to need a scapegoat and since Jon Connington and all his friends were dead, he was the senior space officer left. He had left the last warships operational after the treachery bled them and condemned them to the night.

No, fleeing today was not the correct choice. There were millions of people devoured on the planet below by real demons. He had failed them, like House Connington and House Cafferen had failed them. No salvation would come, and the rare holo-displays had stopped showing the images after it had became extremely clear humans were just a source of food for these abominations.

“My Lord, we have managed to restrain the fires to the lower compartments. We should have...eight minutes before the protections cede and the *Triumph* is no longer operable.”

It had the merit to simplify his choices...

“How many missiles the traitors have sent our way?”

“I think close to six thousand. The impact will be in five minutes.”

The last Lord of House Lonmouth nodded, not bothering to hide his exhaustion.

“We can’t survive them, my Lord. And frankly even if we could...all the ammunition stores are blocked and half of our missile tubes are destroyed.”

There was an atmosphere of blood, smoke and death in the air as the young Lieutenant reported on the bridge, the corpses of those he had replaced in mortuary bags.

“There is still one target we can reach, Lieutenant,” Richard spoke, trying to ignore the pain in his legs and his chest, or how his uniform was soaked in his blood and those of his subordinates. “Override the last security protocol and under my authority...execute the Castamere Option against Fawnton.”

Words he had never believed that would reach his lips. But in this instance, it would not be a war crime, just the last mercy he could offer to the people of Fawnton.

“Yes, my Lord. It was an honour serving you.”

“The honour was mine...”

The *Harrenhal Triumph* began to accelerate, plunging in the upper atmosphere of the planet which had become in the next hours the antechamber of the Seven Hells. The armour of the ship of the line began to burn and a cloud of debris was expelled from the entrails of his flagship. The reality was thinning and though it was impossible, he saw the legions of demons pouring into reality, massacring Stormlanders by the millions. The clouds opened to reveal a spectacle of devastation and apocalypse. It was a vision which reminded him the Fall of Pyke.

Richard closed his eyes.

He never reopened them.

**Flame of the Pyre, 07.09.300AAC, Fawnton System**

The words the High Priestess of R’hllor used when she saw the great warship plunge into the atmosphere would not be repeated in public where her brothers and sisters of the Red might hear. And if the Red Voice had been here, she would not have allowed herself to express her frustration.

She had won. Jon Connington was dead, and the souls of the defenders and inhabitants belonged to R’hllor. The world was going to become a fortress for the Lord of Light, the brilliance and the majesty of his servants revealed to the lights of the unbelievers in millennia.

And at the moment of triumph, there was this.

The woman who had been once called Tysha Lannister had not received a well-rounded education, but you didn’t need to be a genius in physics to know that a two million-tons warship ramming the planet at a fraction of the speed of light was not going to be a pleasant scene.

The crater created by the impact alone was going to be phenomenal. Combined with the amount of debris, the aetheric disturbances she was responsible of, and the many disastrous explosions wracking Fawnton atmosphere and environment, and you obtained a mass reaction where nothing could survive.

In their ignorance, the unbelievers had chosen a method which was indeed going to prevent her from claiming victory in the name of R’hllor.

The Flame of the Pyre readjusted her red robe before standing on her two legs and spitting ten swords of command. Before she had finished speaking, a gate sufficient to let two humans of great size opened and the High Priestess smiled, for her God was thanking her for her efforts.

The Priestess threw a last look around at the ritual circles and the laboratory where the experiments had been stored before being unleashed. Ultimately, the main goal had been accomplished. Jon Connington and all his loyalists were dead, and the Red Voice would be able to direct the Crown Prince’s anger at the Lords and warriors who had betrayed King Rhaegar’s loyal servants. The influence of the True Religion would rise to new heights, relegating the False Seven to forgotten altars and dusty chronicles.

She stepped through the portal and grimaced as a second sun engulfed the world she had just left.

**Senior Captain Lady Brienne Tarth, 07.09.300AAC, Fawnton System**

There was not a whisper or a murmur on the bridge. For that matter, all communications from the other flagships, battlecruisers and lighter units had stopped too.

Brienne, like thousands of Baratheon officers, had only eyes for the planet below them.

For the first time of their lives, they saw a world die.

The impact of the *Harrenhal Triumph* with the planet was almost peaceful. A ship of the line, frankly, was a tiny thing compared to the sheer majesty of a celestial body. In the first seconds, you could almost believe the man-made creation was going to be insignificant.

Then the Behemoth-level shockwave spread like the first of ten angry Gods, destroying every surface structure, rivalling the strongest of earthquakes and natural disasters, erasing abominations, demons, traitors and monsters from the surface of the galaxy.

It was not over. The planet convulsed and the ripples spread. The Lonmouth capital warship had struck the ocean south of the Cafferen capital cities and now over five or six mega-tsunamis were ravaging the islands and the continents, submerging everything under waves so high it defied imagination.

And it was just the beginning. The debris of the satellites, stations and incinerated warships were also falling and adding to the toll of destruction now. There were secondary impacts and far less destructive, but they increased the rain of ashes and death.

Cutting-edge technology and underground bunkers or not, Brienne couldn’t see how anything could survive this...cataclysm. The equivalent of thousands of nukes had just saturated the air, and the winter age which was going to engulf the Cafferen domains was going to be awful. Earthquake activity was going to be multiplied by a hundred, no, a thousand. Massive volcanoes were going to rain ashes and cover the skies in a perpetual night. Temperatures would never have positive values for centuries. And who knew what else would happen, given the appearance of unnatural demonic creatures?

The single inhabitable world of the Fawnton System was no more. Perhaps in time the Noble Houses may gather the trillions necessary to regulate the climate and heal its wounds, but it would take decades and anyway, they had to wait centuries for the environmental disasters to decrease in intensity and danger.

Fawnton was no more, but the Rebellion lived, stronger than ever, and they would never forget.

“We have become Death, the destroyers of worlds,” concluded Lord Stannis Baratheon.

\*\*\*\*

*By the time the greater part of the Baratheon squadrons jump away, the Fawnton System is dead and the Storm Sector will never be the same. Houses Cafferen, Caron and Herston have been annihilated. In the case of House Cafferen, the entire population, all the Masterly and Knightly Houses have shared its fate. Houses Connington, Lonmouth and Musgood are still living, but they have lost ninety-five percent of their nobility and their holdings are now defenceless against the onslaught of their neighbours.*

*The casualty toll is atrocious.*

*Between the military and civilian losses, minimal figures are accounting for at least seven hundred and forty million dead.*

*The Loyalist Cause in the Storm Sector has suffered a blow it will never recover from.*

*The War of the Ten Warlords begins in treachery, heresy and genocide.*

Extract from the Lies and the Vengeance, Anonymous author, 320AAC.

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 08.09.300AAC, Highgarden System**

There were days where it was a pleasure to stay by the Crown Prince’s side, drink, feast, practise with weapons, try their new ultra-customised speed vehicles and watch young women compete for their attentions.

Today was not one of these days.

No, when there were very bad news, it was best to stay away from Aegon. Preferably several hundred kilometres away, if you had the choice.

The messenger who had brought in his hands the letter announcing the coup of King’s Landing had not been aware of this information and thus had taken no precaution. Now he never would, for Aegon had seized the first vibro-sword and plunged his blade into the heart of the servant.

Seconds later, every noble and guard in attendance had escaped in a hurry. And yes, he had been among them. Jacaerys may be a Velaryon and a cousin of House Targaryen, when Aegon threw a fit of anger, there was really no one safe from his wrath.

And to be honest, he had never seen the Prince of Dragonstone so furious and filled with fury and hate.

“I WILL KILL HIM! I WILL KILL THEM ALL! TRAITORS! INCAPABLES! COWARDS!”

It was all the more impressive he could hear his liege screaming an entire wing and a good dozen walls away.

“Maybe we should ask for his betrothed to come here...”proposed Theon in a hesitant voice.

“Are you mad?” Jacaerys retorted. “Political consequences aside, I don’t think he can be reasoned at all right now. If the Tyrell Lady went and got injured, Mace Tyrell would have all our heads.”

Margaery Tyrell was not one of the prostitutes or smallfolk hopefuls they sent sometimes to calm his stormy outbursts. She was the daughter of a Lord Paramount, and from the few points he had been able to understand before running out of the room, the Crown prince was going to need all the support he could get in the days to come.

“I WILL PLUNGE HIM INTO A SEA OF MOLTEN GOLD TO TEACH HIM LOYALTY! FIRE AND BLOOD! HE IS NO UNCLE OF MINE! HE IS NOT A DRAGON!”

No, not the Crown Prince, he corrected inside his mind. Aegon was the King of Westeros now, the legitimate Master of the Seven Sectors and by the Grace of the Gods, the new ruler of billions of souls from the Wall to the Marches.

The first part of the message – whose credibility he hadn’t been yet able to verify – was the revelation King Rhaegar Targaryen had been murdered. The second was the betrayal of Prince Viserys, who had returned the Crown forces against their legitimate masters.

Jacaerys didn’t know what was in the rest of the message, but he doubted he was going to like it.

“I WILL BURN SUMMERHALL AND COVER THE GROUND WITH SALT TO ENSURE NOTHING GROWS AGAIN!”

The noise which resonated...a large vase or a large glass object had been shattered against a wall.

“I agree we don’t want his future wife to be killed,” Aelyx Langward winced as more objects were thrashed by Aegon’s rampage. “But we will have to react to this and fast. If Viserys has taken the capital, it means the entire Crown Sector is open to attack. And with our fleet gathered here, the traitors have free reign to take a lot of systems before any defensive strategy can work.”

“I will place the fleet on full alert,” began Adrian Buckwell. “And I will try to see what sort of assets the Tyrells can give us for a rapid counter-attack towards the capital. We can’t afford a regime of traitors in control of the greatest industrial and trade hub of Westeros. The consequences...”

The voice of the Buckwell Heir failed him, but everyone’s imagination could finish the sentence on their own.

“DECIMATION IS A GOOD ANSWER FOR THESE OATH-BREAKERS!”

“I will demand audience to Lord Tyrell immediately after learning from our sources the full content of this message,” Jacaerys said grimly. “But I can tell you demanding his support is going to be hellishly expensive. As long as we were in full control, pressing him against the Lannisters was never going to be a problem. But with a single fleet and the Iron Throne in the hands of the enemy, I fear the Fat Rose is going to demand a heavy price for his help.”

“Hand of the King,” Theon affirmed more than he demanded. Jacaerys nodded while gritting his teeth.

“We will be lucky if we didn’t have to cede him half of the Royal Council and other privileges.” It went without saying they had also to make his daughter a Queen, of course.

“WE SHOULD HAVE SENT THIS TRAITOR TO BRAAVOS AND ALLOWED THE ESSOSSI TO CUT HIS BALLS!”

The Lord of Driftmark pinched his nose. His tiredness and the massive headache didn’t disappear.

“The next days are not going to be pleasant...”

**Queen Rhaenyra Blackfyre, 08.09.300AAC, Witch Isle System**

In theory, the Blackfyre fleet could have assaulted Gulltown directly as it left the Narrow Void.

It was only in theory, however.

When you sent hundreds of starships on a long travel like this, attacking a well-defended system as half of your fleet was a long snake-like formation with the rear-guard hours behind...it was the height of idiocy.

No, her commanders and the ships needed to refuel, take a short break and update their simulations a bit. The potential drawback of losing the surprise effect was really minor compared to the moral gains and the firepower increase her fleet was given.

Besides, the risks had not been that high, not when you had a Master of Whisperers on your side and House Upcliff had concentrated weeks ago all its major warships at Gulltown.

“The system is yours, Arch-Dominarch,” Captain-General Harry Strickland saluted stiffly.

“Very good, Captain-General,” she allowed him to see her smile. “You can give the order to your squadrons for twelve hours. They can enjoy the rest.”

“Thank you, my Queen!”

Rhaenyra didn’t roll her eyes, but Salladhor Saan was not making things easy for her.

“Don’t forget: twelve hours, not fourteen or fifteen. The captains to report late will suffer my full displeasure.”

Rhaenyra cut the communications and yawned. She was going to enjoy the rest too, as it happened. Not to mention she needed it.

Twelve hours, and the Blackfyre Fleet would jump to Gulltown.

It was time for the black dragon’s banners to be raised in triumph.

**Author’s note**: Operation Cataclysm has destroyed Fawnton and the dragons are returned...the galaxy will never be the same again. Next chapter will have a lot of events in the Vale and the River Sectors, I can promise that much...

If you want more to read, the maps and the warships I use as models or the tropes, here are the interesting links.

TV Tropes Page: / pmwiki/ / Fanfic/ LetTheGalaxyBurn

Alternate History page (useful for conversations, maps and ships models but you need an account, you have to remove the spaces): www. alternate history forum/ threads/ let-the-galaxy-burn- asoiaf-space-opera-au.396049 /

If you want to support my writing on P a treon, the link is: www. p a treon Antony444