**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 5**

**A Clash of Warlords**

*It was a beautiful dream three centuries ago.*

*The great and small kingdoms of Westeros, united under a single banner. It would be an end to the endless wars fought across thousands of battlefields for the most futile reasons. It would be the beginning of a golden age of prosperity and technology. Nevermore the Seven Sectors would be forced to endure with gritted teeth the ravages and depredations of the slaver fleets from Essos and beyond. Nevermore would the ambition of a cruel Ironborn reaver would strangle the economy of the River planets and drown in an ocean of blood million of smallfolk families. Nevermore. Aegon the Conqueror promised an age of justice, unity and peace. And for the last decades of his life, it seemed the Dragon accomplished that.*

*His successors, unfortunately, utterly failed to remember that vision and the real issues their glorious founder had left them to deal with. The Seven Sectors of Westeros, forged in eight provinces until Dorne joined later, were still separate kingdoms. Two population minorities, the Northerners and the Ironborn, had a different religion. The cultural situation was admittedly worse. There were over three hundred and forty systems in this new kingdom, and the overwhelming majority had their traditions, their triumphs, their feuds...and their long-established nobility. Aegon the Conqueror had replaced Kings with Lords Paramount, but had not reformed the system in depth. The rider of the Black Dread had added one position at the top of the hierarchical order, but the immense task of creating a more stable structure was left to his children and grandchildren.*

*Perhaps the First King and his sister-wives believed that with the dragons they were riding, the new dynasty had all the time in the world. If so, Aenys the Weak and Maegor the Cruel were going to break this assumption a few years later.*

*Maybe it was a strategy of taming the aristocrats with the financial benefits while they lost their privileges in their back. If so, it was a failure too. The monarchs willing to reform the realm like Jaehaerys I the Conciliator were rare, and in general their children or their grandchildren wiped out their legacy before memories of their reign faded. The good done by wise men and women was largely eclipsed by the debacle of Kings like Baelor I and Aegon IV the Unworthy.*

*And in the mean time, the Targaryens lost their dragons. The ultimate weapons which guaranteed any rebellion would be madness were gone.*

*With their loss, a lot of the legitimate fear in the potential rebels’ hearts disappeared. Rebellions were no more a disguised suicide attempt; for the first time new warlords could rise without receiving an inferno upon their defences before the month was over. The Blackfyres were the first to raise the banners of insurrection, but by no means the last.*

*If the Targaryens were average rulers, there would have been a lot of discontent. But many Kings revealed themselves to be the proud descendants of the Cruel, giving to thousands of regulars the opinion it was better to remove these fallen dragonlords from the Iron Throne.*

*The realm of Westeros, in quite simple terms, was in need of deep reform by the time the Blackfyres Rebellions began to be won more and more easily. The Seven Sectors needed a new economic, justice and social system. But without dragons, there was no hope a King would be able to convince a majority of his great bannersmen.*

*For all intent and purposes, the King on the Iron Throne was more and more the first among his peers than a true sovereign. The Targaryens ruled because a majority of the Lords Paramount were happy with them. The Crown Sector, for all the one-sided fund transfers and military armament programs, never rivalled the industrial forges of the Rock and the Reach.*

*In these conditions, reforms, ill-advised or not, were increasingly difficult to enforce. The Great Lords, whether they ruled a planet or an entire Noble House, were not going to accept an end to their privileges without a fight.*

*Many think the first years of reign under Aerys II before the Defiance of Duskendale were a first step on the road of unity and eternal prosperity. Many maesters support this version. But in political reforms and class divide, it was a long stagnation. And the flaws of the system imagined by Aegon I were worsening day after day. Dragons and extraordinary lawgivers could – maybe – have turned the tide.*

*Westeros had Aerys II Targaryen, followed by his son Rhaegar. One received the appropriate nickname of ‘Mad King’, the other was known as ‘the Rapist’, the ‘Calamity’ and the ‘Insane Prophet’.*

*By cruelty, malice and incompetence, the madmen created the seeds of the inferno to come.*

*The authorities on history, of course, gave a great name to this period of massacre, butchery and extinction: the War of the Ten Warlords. Rhaenys Targaryen, Viserys Targaryen, Stannis Baratheon, Eddard Stark, Rhaenyra Blackfyre, Victarion Greyjoy, Aegon Targaryen, Joffrey Targaryen, Jon Arryn, and Daenerys Targaryen.*

*But they were not ten; they weren’t twelve, fifteen or twenty. Joffrey Targaryen could not have pushed his claim for the Iron Throne if his grandfather Lord Tywin Lannister had not supported him. And if Lord Eddard Stark focused his war resources, armies and warships on the Wall, his subordinate Admiral Davos Seaworth certainly played his warlord role in the River Sector. Under the eldest son of the deceased King Rhaegar, Mace Tyrell and his children would certainly play their roles of warlords. Mance Rayder, once King-Beyond-the-Wall, kept a highly influential authority over his men and women. Several Essossi Admirals would write their names in blood and flames on planets they had never seen before. And the less said about the War of Terror and Death in the Iron Sector, the better.*

*There were too many warlords and the dream of peace was murdered. The Targaryen dynasty was more divided than it had ever been. Honour and unity had proven they didn’t work under a three-headed dragon banner. The era of cataclysms and unrelenting war was escaping all attempts to control it...*

Extract from the *Era of Warlords*, by Bran Manderly, 370AAC.

**King Viserys Targaryen, 19.09.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

It was a picture of ruin and civil war. Now that Viserys thought about it, was a too apt description of what the Seven Sectors experienced at the moment. Shops pillaged. The cobbles of the old streets had been taken to serve as projectiles against the Goldcloaks. Monuments built by Baelor I to commemorate the friendship between Targaryens and Dornish had been burned down or ransacked. Dustbins and improvised barricades’ remnants had not yet been removed.

It was not something he would have loved to see in a backwater province of the Stokeworth System. But these scenes were not one or two jumps away. They were happening here, at King’s Landing. And they were happening because people were becoming increasingly desperate. The purse of the smallfolk living in the capital planet’s chief cities had regularly lost most of its value in the last decade, but since the opening of the hostilities, the process was like an avalanche. The standard dragon had been in difficulty against foreign currencies, but the moment Dorne had decided to rebel everything had gone to the Seven Hells.

Now the economy was in shambles – from an optimistic point of view – kings and queens were crowned in every Sector and the flow of taxes had been divided by ten. Given that King’s Landing corrupt administration had never been supposed to function on the Crown Sector’s own resources, this left him with...let’s say interesting issues to deal with.

“Bring me back to the Red Keep,” he ordered, trying to keep a confident face when he wanted to sob at the aftermath of this riot. “And pass by the high-level channel I am summoning my Council.”

Four hours later, his key supporters in the capital were all there in the new Council room and the revelations were bad. It was the norm these days, apparently.

“I am sorry, your Grace,” Rylian Telmar said, “but I need more time. The Treasury...I don’t want to point fingers and accuse the previous administration...” There was an ugly grimace to accompany this comment. “But I still don’t know half of what they were doing with the kingdom’s money. There are so many ‘special projects’, so many ‘exemptions’, so many dark holes the funds have disappeared into...I fear we will be bankrupt before the end of the year, no matter I or my new accountants do.”

“Is it that bad?” Ser Varon Darkwood questioned before raising his hands in appeasement as Rylian glared at him. “I don’t doubt your words, Master Rylian. Finance and economy are your prerogatives, not mine. But I was given to understand that between the cancelling of the subsidies, the repudiation of Reach loans and several other instantaneous measures, we could save two thousand trillions dragons.”

The Master of Coin made a curt nod in return.

“I did all of that and more. By our first estimations, we saved about four thousand and six hundred trillions in twelve days. The problem is that it isn’t enough.”

Viserys opened one of the ledgers in front of him before wincing.

“It is the military expanses, isn’t it?”

“It is, my King,” Rylian Telmar bit his lip before continuing. “The estimations of Lord Walter Whent and his ‘administration’ for a full mobilisation were totally off-target, and it didn’t help many of the funds in reserve for such an eventuality were pilfered or confiscated before this year’s first day.”

The eyes of the man who had become effectively the chief copper-counter looked at each of the Councillor before turning on him in the end.

“I could lie and lie again like our predecessors liked to, but it wouldn’t be any use. At this very moment, we are spending money we don’t have and delivering bank notes we haven’t the first star to reimburse. We will not be able to reopen the Great Stock Exchange before six months in an optimistic scenario. Despite the grabs we ordered on the attainted lines, these billions are just a drop of water in an empty bathtub.”

“How...how in the name of the Crone did the situation get so bad?” Perwyn Rosby demanded, his young visage showing genuine astonishment. “We were all told the loans had all been repaid before the Greyjoy Rebellion...”

“Military armament programs cost a lot,” Ser Sal Blackrock replied darkly, “and between the ‘favours’ our predecessors loved giving to their clients and the fact no one was in charge, I suspect our coffers were already near-empty after the Greyjoy Rebellion. A decade of unbridled corruption, inefficiency at all levels and reduced income worsened the problems.”

“And now all we’ve left is an epic quest to save something shiny in the middle of the darkness,” the former merchant now Master of Coin continued. “I know very well we can’t cut the funds for the army and the navy, but we will be forced to make unpalatable choices soon...more unpalatable choices, I mean. At the very moment we’re speaking, we can only tax the Crown Sector at best...I’m sorry to say, but we can’t field our warships and our regiments for many months. We are restructuring as fast as we can, but the sad reality is the edifice is standing by sheer inertia right now. I’m doing all I can to preserve the illusion, but at some point someone is going to realise our economy is working on thin air and prayer.”

“We will do what we have to do. Let’s begin.” Damning his eldest brother for the mess he had left, Viserys forced a smile on his visage and began to approve more urgent and desperate measures. Over two dozen architectural and culture projects formulated to please the Faith were outright cancelled. New and old traitors were going to experience a significant increase of their taxes in addition to the fines already demanded of them. Luxury goods’ contracts with Lys, Tyrosh, Braavos and Myr about to expire in several days were not renewed. Celebrations for diverse local remembrance days were slashed down and official celebrations were reduced to the bare minimum. Institutions which had somehow managed to worm their way into receiving heavy subsidies were going to have to do without.

It was just the surface of the dark sea of bribes, nefarious manipulation and betrayals of the last two reigns, but it was a start. After two hours, Rylian Telmar, Sal Blackrock, Varon Darkwood, and Perwyn Rosby stood up and departed, a long and exhausting evening awaiting them. Of the Small Council – now even smaller – only Lord Baelor Staunton, Lord Adrian Celtigar and Lord Guncer Sunglass were left in the room.

“How many warships do we have to stop the imminent counter-attack of my nephew and his war dogs?”

Ardrian Celtigar bared his teeth in a parody of smile.

“On a tactical display, our situation isn’t so bad, your Grace. We have been able to prevent all the heavy units from escaping or turning pirate. The overwhelming majority of the light units are sworn to you, and the major repair shipyards will put back our damaged hulls into service before Rhaegar’s spawn arrives to High Chelsted. All in all, we have two super-battleships – the *Vhagar* and *Victorious Dragon* – and thirty-two ships of the line, eleven old armoured cruisers, five fleet carriers, and thirty-six battlecruisers for the capital units. In addition, there are ninety heavy cruisers, one hundred and fifty-eight light cruisers, three hundred and twenty-nine scout cruisers, seventy-six light carriers, two hundred and twenty-seven escort carriers, over one hundred thousand starfighters and ninety-seven frigates.”

“And in reality?”

“The situation is...catastrophic and calamitous, my King,” the old High Admiral admitted. “The modern warships of the fleet are the Deep Space forces we built at Dragonstone or with our own contractors. Aegon and his Velaryon allies took the most disciplined and well-supplied squadrons with them to Highgarden. The *Vhagar* is technically operational, but it has grave engine problems and my engineers are of the opinion we may need to rebuild the entire thing given how screwed up the conception was. The *Victorious Dragon* is more or less obsolete if you want a missile exchange. It is also too old and too slow, by the way. There are similar problems with the rest of the Crown Navy. While the heart of Westeros was bickering, the military programs were sold to the highest bidder and the most incompetent contractors. We had a first experience of the efficiency of our hardware and material against the traitor units, and it is incredibly worrying. The new Magma starfighter is a disaster in the making and we are applying corrections as fast as we are finding the problems. The scout cruisers have several heavy fire-control issues. The heavy cruisers’ armour is not compartmented enough to survive long the fire of Northern cruisers, in my experience.”

Guncer Sunglass intervened to help his superior.

“We are making a lot of progress and the trial by fire received in the last days is giving us plenty of ammunition to remove the stupid, the defeatists and the potential traitors in our ranks. But we need time...and we need resources, your Grace, if we want to forge anew the Crown forces as a worthy blade.”

“I am tempted to grant what you need.” The warnings he had received from his niece and several other sources had not been the shrieks of doomsayers, obviously. If anything, it seemed they had underestimated the scale of the disaster preparing in the shadows. “But you heard Rylian with your own ears. We have no more money to spend. And if the reports of our last spies can be trusted, we also don’t have much time left to mount a defence. Aegon needs King’s Landing. He needs the Iron Throne given the recent reverses his allies are suffering everywhere. It is not a question if he will come with the Crown warships loyal to his cause; it is a question of *when*.”

“Yes, your Grace,” Celtigar replied. “Though with all the admiration and the respect I have for the Master of Coin, I will make the argument it is better to increase a bit further our debts. After all, as expensive as the bill will be when the cannons will fall silent, I think it will be cheaper to buy a fleet or two than to buy an entire new kingdom.”

Viserys shrugged before nodding.

“A good point, Master of Ships. I promise you to study in detail the...implications of the future military spending.” It would not do to sigh. Being a King was supposed to be enjoyable, but in spite of having a grandiose cushioned-throne for his noble backside, Viserys didn’t feel cheerful at all. “But before that, I’m afraid I will need a more comprehensive explication on our defensive plans against a combined Crown-Reach offensive.”

“Of course, my King,” And just like this, the smiles disappeared. The Lord of Claw Isle threw a miniature holo-projector on the table, which after one second materialised a precise map of the Crown Sector.

“High Chelsted and Cressey Hall were supposed to be our shields against any conventional threat coming from the west, be it the Western or the Reach Sector. With the River Sector in the middle of a fourth-way civil war and High Chelsted in enemy hands, the defences of the Sector are heavily compromised. And to make it worse from our point of view, Bywater Rest, which was already a system tactically difficult to protect, was completely thrashed when we took it.”

“Could we not try another attack against High Chelsted?” Viserys proposed for the form more than any true hope. “If we could take the system before the arrival of Reach or other reinforcements, it wouldn’t matter how lightly defended Bywater Rest truly is.”

“No, your Grace,” Lord Staunton said after a loud grunting sound. “This attack, whether it succeeds or not, would cost us two-thirds of the supplies we are preparing for the next operations. It would force too our shipyards to release many units before all their repairs and overhauls are fully done. Moreover, we have lost the effect of surprise at High Chelsted and the ruling Noble House is surprisingly popular.”

“In the best case, we would need to throw millions of men to crush all resistance and undoubtedly our fleet will be forced to blast away a sizeable portion of the fixed defences,” Lord Sunglass added. “The likely result would be an enemy fleet entering the system and fighting our depleted squadrons and armies, while our forces are exhausted, short on ammunition, food and medicines, surrounded by a very hostile population. And the defences of the system would be in ruin so it’s not like being on the defensive would help us.”

“But if we leave High Chelsted like that, Aegon and his Tyrell friends will have a massive depot supply next door.”

“I’m afraid it’s unavoidable your Grace,” by the Mother, how he hated hearing this sort of answer. “And unless the reinforcements coming from Highgarden are limited to the 1st Crown Fleet, I think we will have to abandon Bywater Rest too.”

“Are you sure?”

“Optimistically, we will be able to deploy twenty-five ships of the line against the forces of the Reach. The Deep Space fleet must stay at Dragonstone to counter any possible Blackfyre large-scale raid and even if it wasn’t, I can’t justify maintaining them in the order of battle when they will be slow-moving targets on a conventional space battlefield. The 1st Crown Fleet, on the other hand, has three super-battleships and fourteen ships of the line. I don’t care how modern they are, under the command of these arrogant youngsters, the fleet can massacre them if they dare fight our forts head-on.”

“And if they are reinforced by several battle-squadrons of the Reach?”

His three senior military subordinates grimaced with an impressive coordination.

“Every Reach squadron accompanying the 1st Crown Fleet diminishes our chances by more than twenty-five percent, your Majesty. The Reach warships are not invincible, but they are relatively recent and unlike us, they have not been forced to fight a civil war and purge two-third of their previous commanders. I don’t expect genius commanders on the other side, but the men in front of us will be adequately trained, their spirits will be good and their technical problems will be insignificant compared to ours. Not to mention they will not have any loyalty problems like we do. If the three super-battleships are used to their full potential and whoever is in command of the Reach forces has over fourteen ships of the line, things are going to get ugly fast. King’s Landing is heavily defended, but the Reach army is the largest land force of Westeros. If they have the time and the men available to crush our defences, they will take King’s Landing.

I’m sorry, your Grace, but we can’t promise any other outcome.”

As the problems became a mountain tall enough to reach Rhaenys’ moon, Viserys wondered if it would be so bad to lose before killing the idle idea and refocusing on the grave topic.

“In this case, we will have to prepare contingencies, both for the military forces and the civilians. I want...”

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 19.09.300AAC**, **The Ring System**

The answer was easy to give, King or no King.

“No.”

“I gave you an order, Jacaerys!”

“And I tell you, your Grace, there is absolutely no way we can accelerate our advance towards High Chelsted. I have to work with the assumption your traitorous uncle can and will sabotage the military facilities he has captured during his coup. And even if he doesn’t, I doubt he is going to surrender them at the first shot fired. Thus I have to work with the assumption that for the next two years, any warship we will have to defend your throne is here.”

“Mace Tyrell will send his grand fleet once he has killed my whore of a sister!”

“Perhaps,” personally Jacaerys had his deep reservations on the subject. The Storm Sector was for all intent and purpose lost, and given the terms and the outcome of their first defeat, Jacaerys was sure they were going to put up quite a fight before they surrendered. “But the Lord of Highgarden still needs to recapture a lot of systems before he can consider his eastern galactic frontier secure. No, we can accelerate our schedule. Our maintenance and refuelling operations are necessary, and once we reach High Chelsted, we will be on the frontlines.”

Jacaerys shook his head in refusal.

“I won’t send our capital warships into the fires of battle lacking ammunition and fuel. If you want to countermand my orders, I’m afraid you will have to find another Admiral for the 1st Crown Fleet.”

He was taking a risk voicing this, but not as much as it would have been at King’s Landing or at Highgarden. The Lord of Driftmark – in-exile – had prepared the travel times and the war operations’ rhythm with Mace Tyrell and his key lieutenants. Consequently, if their new King wanted to modify largely the details of Operation Scarlet Revenge, neither Highgarden nor Admiral Mathis Rowan commanding the 7th Reach Fleet were going to be very amused. And it avoided the elephant in the corridor: unless his cousin wanted to place a Kingsguard in command of the fleet, there was simply no one left with an Admiral rank. The loyal Crown Lords who had survived the onslaught of Viserys Targaryen were waiting at High Chelsted and none of them had studied hard the art of space warfare.

Still, it was easy to rationalise this before staring at the furious purple eyes of King Aegon VI Targaryen, by the will of the Gods and the Laws of Men legitimate King of Westeros and Sovereign of the Seven Sectors.

“Have it your own way,” Aegon turned away after five seconds and stormed out of the conference room. “But I want improvements!”

Jacaerys waited for half a minute after the footsteps faded before swearing loudly with a rude word in five letters best not uttered in polite company.

“Yeah, it’s appropriate.” Theon Greyjoy said behind him. “I wonder if he truly listened to a single word you said. You might have to make the same speech in a couple of days.”

“Since he didn’t listen to Aelyx and Adrian the next time we gave him the options available to him...” Jacaerys stopped before he started to lash out what he had inside his heart. There had to be monitoring devices and while he was the King’s cousin and heir at the moment, there were some lines better not crossed on a whim. “Give me the bad news.”

“I think you already know them,” the young man who was in theory the Lord of Pyke replied, “most of the Reach maintenance ships have low compatibility with ours and since the majority of our supply train was in the Crown Sector when the war began...” A new fatalistic shrug accompanied the sentence.

This had been a mistake they were paying over and over in the last days. Thankfully High Chelsted had remained loyal and held against the traitor’s attack. It should give them a nice depot, base and shipyard in one before they moved on King’s Landing.

“On the other hand, I’m a bit worried how...short-lived the secondary components of our warships are. There have been hundreds of malfunctions reported, and our fleet is relatively recent.”

“It’s concerning, but I don’t see what we can do.” Jacaerys pinched his nose but the problems didn’t magically vanish from his mind. “The shipyards and most of the data-files are in enemy hands, and it’s likely the traitors shot a lot of the persons who screwed us in the quality department.”

“Agreed,” the Ironborn hesitated before continuing. “But as part of the King’s staff I must advise the sheer necessity to take back the capital’s infrastructure and reforming severely the whole logistic structure of the Crown Sector. Building a new generation of space-worthy warships will require more than a year. We need some months without a disaster striking us from nowhere and a secure power base. Our men and our ships have been plunged in this war with absolutely no warning, and while their loyalty remains steadfast, we can’t hope to endure blow after blow every morning without disastrous moral consequences.”

“That goes without saying,” Jacaerys said. “We can’t stay idle and accept the current strategic situation. Without the Crown Sector, our warships won’t survive more than a couple of years in war-time. Attrition will kill us if battle does not. And if we don’t have King’s Landing, we have no more legitimacy than all the other...warlords taking their cruisers and proclaiming rebellion.”

“And our lines of communication with our allies are getting more and more difficult to use,” Theon reminded him. “I’m sure a lot of systems and Houses like the Darrys stayed loyal. But since the Crown Sector isn’t secure, we must risk either raven-drones or sending couriers in the war-zones of the River systems.”

The two young men looked at each other with gloomy expressions. This was definitely not the walk-over they had envisioned when they were playing war games.

“You think Aegon is going to be in a better mood to the war council of tomorrow?”

“Unlikely, you know how much he was...frustrated by the night with Margaery Tyrell,” the wedding night had according to all the rumours been a fiasco, as the virgin bride had refused to behave like one of his cousin’s lovers. “And since he’s already tired of the girls we have aboard...”

“I can’t wait to return to King’s Landing...”

**Queen Rhaenys Targaryen, 20.09.300AAC, Harvest Hall System**

“This plan is complex, Rhae.”

“The overall plan isn’t, Ari. It’s the details which are complex.”

Arianne mumbled something under breath that sounded suspiciously like ‘damn my cousin’ or something like that.

“If you say so,” her best friend and cousin spoke after about fifteen seconds watching the stars shining millions of kilometres away. “But I will remark you already changed the plan once. The second phase was supposed to start with a new lightning-fast attack on Ashford. While we all agree the plan was going to receive modifications, the one-sided triumph we won at Nightsong made me believe we were going to continue the original offensive without changing anything.”

“Unfortunately, the Reach Admirals at Ashford have refused to cooperate,” Rhaenys replied, flexing her muscles as she marched in her vast quarters in battle-armour. “If things had gone according to the plan, we would have demolished them the moment they arrived to ‘liberate’ Harvest Hall. Our squadrons would have crushed them in a couple of hours, and I would have personally led the counter-attack in the Ashford System.”

“But it didn’t happen.” This evening, her cousin was fond of voicing the obvious...

“No, they didn’t,” Rhaenys agreed, “but the more I think about it, the less I am convinced it is a bad thing. While there wouldn’t have been many survivors, the more we fight Reach warships, the more ‘surprises’ we are forced to unveil and the Tyrell bannersmen are given more opportunities to study our tactics and our new weapons.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Arianne contorted her visage in a thoughtful pout. “However, you can’t deny you are taking a tremendous risk. You have in this stellar system ten ships of the line and forty battlecruisers...it’s the next best thing to half of our capital ships. And by our spies’ assertions, the Tyrells have already over seventy ships of the line at Ashford now. That’s more than ten battle-squadrons, and their reinforcements are still coming.”

“You are concerned, Ari.”

“I am,” her cousin took a statuesque-like pose in her yellow robe of seductress. “Are you?”

“I am, yes.” The admission was followed by a roll of shoulders. “Only an imbecile wouldn’t be apprehensive being outnumbered seven to one, and I can assure you I am not a doll with an empty skull.”

Rhaenys turned her head to watch the lone white star of the Harvest Hall System.

“On the other hand, I have been given enough days to make this system a deadly trap for the Tyrells and whoever will accompany them when they jump in-system. Between our aggressive patrols and our raids everywhere, the Reachers and their allies haven’t the slightest idea what is waiting for them here. And since we beat them like centuries-old mules at Nightsong, their knowledge about our ion cannons and our starfighters is really bad...and they don’t have a clue about the rest of our surprises. I am not too apprehensive about the outcome of this battle; the real challenge is to make sure most of the warships our enemies will launch into our web will not survive this battle.”

Arianne made a move towards the holo-device and after the console confirmed her identity, music began to play an opera melody she didn’t recognise.

“Your plan...it wouldn’t work against Stannis Baratheon.”

“No,” there was no point using this stratagem against someone like the Lord of Storm’s End. “And before you ask, no, I wouldn’t try this against any veteran of the Usurper’s Rebellion. Eddard Stark or Jon Arryn hare far too cunning and experienced to be beaten like that.”

“Tywin Lannister and Mace Tyrell are veterans of the Usurper’s Rebellion too, you know,” the future Princess of Sunspear joked.

Rhaenys shook her head negatively.

“No, they aren’t. Being a veteran implies to be at least once in the middle of the battle and fight with your ship a force which has some chance to hurt you back. These two Lords Paramount have pushed their expendable bannersmen before them in every battle...they mark points for ruthlessness and self-preservation, but it does not make them good tacticians.”

“Be careful, Rhae. Mace Tyrell is not the brightest mind of the Reach, but his total lack of talent makes him...a bit unpredictable.”

The Queen of Westeros – though of course her claim was only recognised by Dorne at the moment - chuckled at her cousin’s affirmation.

“I don’t intend to fight fair with him, don’t worry. In fact, I don’t intend to let him be predictable or unpredictable. The very basis of a trap is to kill the maximum of his troops without giving them a chance to fight back.”

Rhaenys taped a new combination on her console and the opera music was replaced by something more pleasant to dance upon the beaches of the Water Gardens.

“That is, of course, if he one day arrives at Ashford. Even considering the communication loops and the chaos our raids caused, it has been eighteen days Midnight struck them, and Ashford is not that far from Highgarden. And yet so far, none of the flagships the Fat Rose loves to use has been reported by our scouts.”

“You repeated a hundred times their logistical system sucked, Rhae.”

“True, but to this degree...”

She raised her eyes to the ceiling and unavoidably Arianne profited from the instant of inattention to change her choice of music for something more...adult.

“You didn’t tell me the name of this operation, by the way. You chose Midnight then Nightmare with Nymeria. Did you choose Darkness for the third phase of the Great Plan?”

“That’s not a bad suggestion, but no.”

It could have been a worthy name, but this time her uncle himself had used his rank to prevail. The opening declaration of war was given at the midnight hour and the Fall of Nightsong was to be a nightmare for the Tyrells and her ‘brother’. And indeed Mace Tyrell and his Admirals were as she spoke in the dark concerning her plans. But Harvest Hall’s trap was not going to rely too much on subtlety past the initial deception.

The Reachers were going to march to their doom, and destroy decades of investment in a single battle. They would do it with eyes wide opened, sure of their superiority. And she was going to bear them at a game they knew they had mastered in the last two wars.

“It will be Operation Graveyard.”

**Lord Varys Tivario, 20.09.300AAC, Gulltown System**

On the good side, he was now the Master of Whisperers of a Queen listening to his advice. This was a pleasant change after the last two decades, Varys had to admit. No more ‘burn them all, I am a dragon’ five times per day. No more ‘the prophecy is clear, we must do this’ even if it was clear the false-seer’s ramblings were vague and impossible to decipher.

His long era of service in the Targaryen realm was over, and Varys couldn’t say he was going to regret it any time soon. He slept far better, for one. In the last days before Rhaegar got himself removed from power, there had been so many crises and so little competent players the master-spy couldn’t close an eye before two in the morning, such was the fear there wouldn’t be a realm when he woke up in the morning.

On the bad side, the strategic situation for his side wasn’t what he could call ‘good’. The map of the Vale Sector was flashing in three different colours: red for the Aegon loyalists, blue for the systems sworn to the Arryns and purple-black for the Blackfyre cause.

Force was to admit that for the moment, the blue was drowning everything else. The Blackfyre icons were only superposed to three systems: Gulltown, Gull Tower and Witch Isle. The red was in an even more perilous situation: while they nominally controlled more systems, nearly all of them were today under siege. Wickenden was surrounded by the forces of House Redfort. Newkeep having surrendered, Ironoaks was the next focus of the main Vale’s fleet wrath. Snakewood and the Lynderly survivors had House Belmore to contend with.

So far, the only Targaryen loyalists who weren’t under attack were the Three Sisters, and it was more due to the fact said Lords were non-entities in the grand scheme of things. Varys had a suspicion it wasn’t going to save them in the end. His niece had pulverised the majority of the Deep Space warships of the Vale, but the Sistermen were close to White Harbor and the Manderlys were known to nurse a grudge against their southern neighbours. If Varys was in the shoes of Eddard Stark, he would have left a squadron or two of battlecruisers available to help his long-standing ally.

But returning to their modest problems, there was no denying there weren’t in a very perilous situation.

“I don’t see how you intend to win, niece,” in private he could allow himself to be less formal and married to the protocol. “Jon Arryn is outnumbering you by more than two-to-one in warships, and his advantage is greater in land troops.”

“Don’t forget the economic output of the core Vale planets,” Rhaenyra said, playing with a diamond necklace she must have ‘freed’ from its Gulltown owners. “The Lord of the Eyrie has also the upper hand in war experience. Other strategists further south might mock him, but I am not going to underestimate the Old Falcon. Westeros has been a snake’s pit these last decades, you don’t reach such an advanced age if you are *weak*.”

The last word was uttered with the derision it deserved. The propaganda of Gulltown and King’s Landing had been far too prompt describing the Old Falcon as an old man on his death’s bed. The fate of Hardyng Hill and the Newkeep systems, where the majority of the Noble Houses had been put to the sword, was a loud signal these affirmations had been way too premature. And there were disquieting whispers – all true, as far as he could tell – Robin Arryn had been disinherited and sent to the Moon cells. His mad mother was going to enjoy the legendary hospitality of the Silent Sisters.

“I know I am outnumbered and facing the Old Falcon directly will only result in disaster, uncle. I have one super-battleship, fifteen ships of the line, eight armoured cruisers and thirty-five battlecruisers. The Arryns have one super-battleship, at least thirty-two ships of the line, sixteen armoured cruisers and sixty battlecruisers. Worse, many ships of my order of battle are Deep Space purpose-built. If I am delusional enough to engage him around Ironoaks, my fleet is going to take a hammering for no gain and his damaged warships will be repaired twice faster than mine. ”

Varys could not profess himself a military specialist, but the argument appeared logical.

“In this case, I suppose the great question is what brilliant strategy you intend to employ to break this deadlock.”

The Master of Whisperers was perfectly sincere when he spoke the word ‘brilliant’: he had given the first reports on the state of Gulltown defensive force, but the plan to crush Grafton and his allies had been Rhaenyra’s from its first stages to the end, as had been her command during this battle.

“I want to bring Jon Arryn and his bannersmen to the negotiating table,” the young Blackfyre declare bluntly. “But for the moment, the emissaries we sent were politely turned back empty-handed. Jon Arryn believes he has all the cards; I must convince him this is no longer the case. The best way to achieve this in my mind is by combining a feint and a strike in the heart.”

“You have not the strength to storm the defences of the Gates of the Moon,” Varys narrowed his eyes.

“When I speak of the heart, uncle, I don’t speak about the capital system of the Vale. I speak about their greatest weakness: fuel.”

Several systems on the map were lightened at the command of his niece.

“The Vale, unlike many Sectors, had not that many gas giants to extract fuel in the quantities needed to feed the industry of dozens of planets. Add to the fact we took Gulltown, which was one of these refinery sites and depots in one, the destructions and sabotages caused by the civil war, and the Vale fleet is rapidly in danger of being short of fuel if we capture their last refineries. Thanks to the imbecility of the two previous Kings, the Arryns have not been able to invest as heavily in this sector of the economy as they wished.

Redfort, Egen Fort, Longbow Hall, Old Anchor. These are the four systems producing ninety-six percent of the fuel the Vale starships are using if Gulltown is not included. If I manage to capture these four systems, I will be able to...return to the negotiation table in position of strength. Jon Arryn is good, but I don’t think his charisma and his iron-forged will can do anything to compensate a fuel shortage.”

“It could work.” Varys told her after examining the flow of data pouring on the screens in front of him. “You are at least correct about the fuel issue. I suppose it factored in your reasoning to storm Gulltown in your opening offensive?”

“It did, uncle.”

Well, at least it was nice to see Illyrio and Serra had raised Rhaenyra well and given her a nice education. His niece was going to make mistakes, but it wouldn’t be the ones this cretin of Crown Prince and the decadent young generation of King’s Landing made.

“Tell me more,” the Master of Whisperers spoke as the dots moved in a somewhat random fashion.

“I intend to keep my strategy simple for the next wave of offensives,” Rhaenyra explained. “I will keep Strickland here at Gulltown to fortify it and suppress the potential rebels. Our Volantene allies are going to be in charge of the feint directed at Runestone. On the official communiqué, they will be supposed to take the system. In reality, they will just exert enough pressure to crack the outer fixed defences and exhaust the Royce supplies.

In the mean time, though, my fleet will attack the fuel refineries across the Vale Sector and try to subdue them as fast as possible before fortifying them against the unavoidable counter-attack. I intend to command the attack against the Redfort myself. It is a heavily fortified system, and the reserves from the Bloody Gate will be deployed for sure once news of my attack are underway. Saan will be charge of the raid against the Egen Fort. It’s close to the Arryn domains, so he will be given orders to destroy the infrastructure if he can’t hold it. The most reliable units of Pentos will be on charge of the Old Anchor operation.”

“And Longbow Hall?” He had a feeling he knew he answer and it wasn’t going to be to his taste.

“Your last reports implied a certain Baelish is back and playing...his games with the succession in this system. I thought we could use him.”

“Baelish is a snake, niece, and absolutely not to be trusted,” Varys declared flatly.

“But for the moment, we may have to use him,” the purple eyes were apologetic, but stood firm. “I have not the strength to pulverise Longbow Hall, not if I want to take Redfort and Old Anchor. And I would prefer not to, really. If I want to push out of the Vale by the first days of 301AAC, I will need the local infrastructure productive and reasonably intact, not blown to bits.”

Varys winced before examining all the data on his personal data-slate. Unfortunately, his niece had made several good points. Longbow Hall was hardened against external threats, it was far more vulnerable to a decapitation strike from the inside. Still, he couldn’t pretend the notion of having one of the former Council’s members on his side was making him jump in joy.

“I will give my support to your scheme, under the condition this silver-tongued bastard is removed at the earliest opportunity. Assassination or public execution, I don’t care. Baelish dead will give us fewer problems than a Baelish alive.”

“As you wish, uncle,” Rhaenyra put one hand in her silver hairs and showed a disabused face. “I really don’t like working with this kind of ambitious crook, but...”

“You don’t have to apologise, Rhaenyra.” Varys sighed. “I fear this is the first ugly necessity of many we will be forced to swallow in the days to come...”

**King Joffrey Targaryen, 20.09.300AAC, Old Oak System**

When his tutors at the Naval Academy of King’s Landing – most of them retired Rear-Admirals and high-ranked Captains – had taught him the very basis of naval warfare, all of them without exception had told him the importance of speed and manoeuvrability.

An infantry army bogged on a long conflict in a hilly countryside could always dig trenches and take a defensive posture before resuming its advance. A space fleet could not build its own fortifications that easily. To be sure minefields could be emplaced and forts towed from other systems, but it took time, too much time in general to be of any use.

As a consequence, warships thus chose to be very mobile once they had broken through whatever defences defending the jump point they arrived from. Even systems who neglected their fixed defences could maintain a tremendous amount of fixed firepower to defend their planets, and obviously a sane Admiral preferred to engage the enemy fleet rather to bleed his squadrons against targets which were going to surrender once the rest of the system had surrendered.

The battle which had begun two hours ago was not following these noble tactics. Forget the elegant positioning, the speed advantages and the races across the stars.

The Battle of Old Oak was a slow slugging match between the Lannister fleet and the defences built by House Oakheart. There was no subtlety, no elegance, and no grand strategy. A torrent of turbo-lasers and missiles was slamming repeatedly in the forts barring their way and once one target exploded, they went after one another. ‘Sweeper’ anti-mines ordnance unleashed an inferno as they wiped out the clouds of defensive mines. Plasma batteries annihilated the hulks and the debris left.

It was an astronomical waste of ammunition. It was brutal, uncompromising and in his opinion totally unnecessary. For all their numbers, these defensive positions were more or less what would have been considered average for a system in 285AAC. In this era, it was evident they were obsolete. Destroying them served really no purpose and if the Reach forces managed to take back the system in a fast counter-attack, they were sure to build new and far more dangerous defensive measures. The Seven knew Aegon and his new father-in-law were idiots, but it stood to reason hundreds of officers were going to realise their defensive doctrine was going to need a few modifications after today.

“Lord Tywin is about to break through the second layer of defences in fifteen minutes, your Grace,” Lancel Lannister said.

Joffrey curtly nodded. His new flag captain was not a genius, but he was reliable, and he shared his disdain for the hammering strategy employed to crack Old Oak.

“Thank you,” he gave a glance at the tactical display. “I suppose there are no further orders from the flagship?”

“They aren’t, unfortunately.” Lancel’s emotions on his face showed his words were heartfelt. Joffrey understood it, since he had the same frustration burning in his chest.

It was bad enough his grandfather had rejected in less time it took to say it his strategic ‘suggestions’ without explaining why. As the crowned King recognised by the Western Sector, Joffrey’s rank entitled him to at least an explanation or two. How was he supposed to learn how to rule if it was his Hand doing ninety-nine percent of his royal duties? And really, his proposed attack against Goldengrove was not insane: with Westbrook ruined by the Dornish, the advance by this axis would be far easier than the Old Oak-Dustonburry line.

But what made it worse was the fact he wasn’t involved in the battle in any way. His grandfather had divided his fleet in two, each one super-battleship, thirty ships of the line, sixty battlecruisers and three fleet carriers strong. One was the formation battering at this very moment the forts of the second defensive layer. The other was the reserve, staying as silent and quiet as possible with their furtive systems at maximum power. The Lord of Casterly Rock had of course taken command of the first formation on the brand-new flagship *Lion’s Domination*. Joffrey had believed he was going to be authorised to command the reserve.

Clearly, his belief had been in error. While he was the supreme commander of the old super-battleship *Victorious Lion*, he was not in command of the reserve or any squadron. This honour had been given to Lord Lefford on the Victory-class ship of the line *Golden Sword*.

“If we keep this pace, how long will it take us to blast the multiple layers of defence and engage the fortresses orbiting Oak Prime?”

“About eight days, your Grace,” Lancel answered after a few seconds.

Eight days. It was an eternity in space warfare.

Whatever Reach fleets were available, the Tyrells were going to have the time and the motivation to send them right at their throats. The few battlecruisers and heavy cruisers waiting four million kilometres had already sent scout cruisers and raven-drones to Highgarden, and even if they had missed the reserve, thirty ships of the line were not something you could dismiss.

Oh, his grandfather was going to win. Aside from the massive Western fleet, there were millions of men in the transports waiting at Crakehall to storm the Oakheart bastions. But it was so...inefficient. Fleets were meant to be an instrument of precision, a rapier to be wielded with devastating accuracy. That this mass of warships was used like a gigantic hammer striking and striking again ruthlessly everything in sight was offending him. Was the fleet commander going to break Dustonburry the same way? Were the same tactics going to be applied to Highgarden? The strain in ammunition re-supply was not going to be light and their supply convoys would have to make far more rotations between the battlefield and the Western bases...

“The loss of such an important industrial centre will hurt the Reach, if they don’t send a fleet to defend it,” Lancel told respectfully.

“It will,” the system of Old Oak had only a single inhabited planet, but it was an ancient settlement and by the latest figures, they were close to three billion and one hundred million souls who considered their planet their home. “And after the Dornish burned a fire under Mace Tyrell’s backside, I don’t think the Tyrells will be able to write off any key system without facing...interesting political repercussions. It doesn’t mean they won’t do it if they feel they have a better strategy, though. Our information about Reach deployments is far from complete. We know my...half-brother,” by the Gods, recognising a familial connection with this arrogant imbecile was hard, “is on his way to King’s Landing and Mace Tyrell is moving towards the Storm Sector. But since I doubt these fleets have yet been engaged in battle, they can be recalled to face our forces.”

And if this happened, it was not going to be pretty. Mace Tyrell could bury them under the numbers. It would cost him heavily and the destruction would be incredible...but the Western warships would still be dead, especially if his grandfather used the same direct ‘tactics’ he did today.

“But if they aren’t recalled...” Lancel smirked.

“The road to Highgarden will be arduous, but we can walk it...” Joffrey finished.

Highgarden was the key in the end. The Reach was bloody huge, but it had never been united the way the Storm or the Western Sectors were. Remove the Tyrells, and you removed the thorn-binders leashing a thousand greater and lesser nobles. Without Highgarden to control the field, it was a guarantee hundreds of pretenders would rise to take the vacant seat.

And his revenge against Aegon would begin. The decadent ‘Crown Prince’ had taken Visenya, and treated her like a whore instead of the jewel she was. For the last decade, this idiot had humiliated him and been granted everything because an accident of birth had made him the eldest son and their genitor was utterly insane.

“Before long, the great Aegon VI will have lost everything...”