**Regent of the Reach Willas Tyrell, 16.10.300AAC, Highgarden System**

The holographic representation in other times would have filled his heart with delight and a certain sense of satisfaction, for it showed his home system.

The three planets of Highgarden Prime, Gardenia and Red Floral were like jewels in the void. The multitude of shipyards, orbital habitats, mining exploitations and starships proved beyond doubt the power and the influence of House Tyrell.

The main problem with this idyllic view was the massive fleet encircling Red Floral, the most exposed world of the system to an attack by the Dustonburry jump point. Six months ago, there would have been no conceivable reason for these hundreds of warships to be there.

Now, however, their deployment was not only prudent, it was absolutely necessary and below the numbers Willas and the inhabitants of Red Floral truly wanted. Because as much as fifty-plus ships one the line, one hundred battlecruisers, nine fleet carriers and hundreds of heavy and light cruisers sounded, the Lannisters had an even bigger fleet waiting one mere jump point away.

The Reach was on the defensive, and the battle to come was going to decide for decades to come whether they were still a faction worth remembering in the Game of Thrones or merely the failure of a kingdom.

“Before we speak of the battle proper,” Willas started, “I understand Admiral Hightower has more unpleasant news for us.”

“I have indeed, Lord Regent,” Baelor Hightower made a step forwards and replaced the holographic star of Highgarden by a map of the Reach Sector, and immediately focused it on Cider Hall. “The Dornish have taken Pommingham and are preparing for a double assault against Ser Garlan. I suppose we can’t forego the proclamations of bravery and defiance, and tell the ugly truth: the remnants of the Grand Fleet haven’t the strength to stop a double-pronged assault spearheaded by these hellishly-effective starfighters and ion-armed battlecruisers.”

“This is defeatism!” Arthur Ambrose, Lord of Ambrose and Admiral protested loudly.

“No, it is the painful and awful truth,” General Branston Cuy declared bitterly. “Almost every heavy unit of Admiral Garlan Tyrell will need months of reparations to be considered battle-worthy again. As it stands, most of the opposition which convinced the Dornish to not try their chance storming the system consists in fixed defences: forts, starfighter bays, minefields and missile platforms. But the quantities available to Cider Hall are enough to protect from a one-front offensive. There isn’t enough for two.”

“But...”the Lord of the Ambrose System turned his head quickly to watch everyone in the command assembly. “But if we abandon Cider Hall, it will be Ambrose’s turn to be on the frontlines!”

“We all must do sacrifices,” a Tyrell General Willas didn’t remember the name affirmed.

“And Ambrose is far more defensible than Cider Hall now.” The Hightower Admiral pointed out.

“I’m not too comfortable with this strategy, Admiral,” Willas voiced his opinion. “To begin with, despite the best efforts of our workers and spacemen I am quite well aware we have not yet evacuated a single percent of the industrial effort the Cider Hall System is providing the Reach’s war and civilian economy. Not including the military potential of the warships and divisions my brother saved from the Graveyard, the Fossoway domains are a first-tier system of over four billion souls. Should we lose it, the effect will be...economically and military unpleasant.”

Willas had wanted to say ‘catastrophic’, but even here in the heart of the Tyrell headquarters, there were things best left unsaid. Because as realistic as his sentences would be, certain nobles were sure to desert if they acknowledged the war was lost and their best option was to cut a deal with Tywin Lannister.

Unfortunately, it didn’t change the situation. The Reach had suffered a series of disasters that would have utterly destroyed any other part of the Seven Sectors. For the moment, Highgarden had been able to withstand the hurricane. But the eldest son of the now loathed Mace Tyrell feared the cracks were already there waiting to swallow them whole. The coming months were going to be very, very bad, whether they managed to repel the Lannisters or not.

“The Dornish have now Ashford, Cockshaw Plains and Pommingham in their possession, Lords and Sers. This is respectively two billion and eight hundred million, three hundred and thirty million, and nine hundred and twenty million of our subjects who are right now living under enemy occupation.”

This was four billion Reachers neither House Tyrell nor any loyal Lord could count on, and the Reach in the first place had ‘only’ one hundred and seven billion inhabitants.

And they had lost more systems, Willas knew. Old Oak, captured by the Lannisters, had three billion one hundred and sixty-eight millions. Longtable had surrendered to Stannis Baratheon and this was a wealthy system of two billion one hundred and ten million men and women. Grassy vale, Dustonburry, Dunn...the list was lengthening and since the communications with the eastern Sector were thoroughly cut, the Admiral of the Fourteenth Fleet presided what was in effect the most calamitous period of defeats bar none ever experienced by the Reach in the last five hundred years. Yes, they were beating the Field of Fire without trying.

“I understand, Lord Regent,” Baelor Hightower looked sympathetic, but he didn’t refute his previous assessment. “But we can’t allow our forces to suffer a second terminal defeat. I will grant you the chances of victory if we make a firm last stand at Harvest Hall aren’t zero. But if we lose Cider Hall and every warship and asset we have in the system right now, this war is over. It doesn’t matter if we win without losing a single warship against Tywin Lannister; the gates of the Ambrose System will be wide open and in three or four days it will be the turn of the Dornish to threaten Highgarden.”

“But if we choose to let Cider Hall fall with only a delaying action of scout cruisers and starfighters, Starpike and House Peake are going to find themselves in the same situation,” Lord Ambrose objected. “And the supply line to keep them in the fight is far, far longer.”

Willas winced. This was definitely a good point. And to complicate the issues already present, the loyalty of Lord and Lady Peake was not considered absolute. The system of Starpike falling under a double attack would be disastrous, but would undoubtedly cost a lot of ships and men to Dorne. If House Peake turned its cloak and rallied the cause of Rhaenys Targaryen on the other hand, the Dornish battlecruisers would capture everything until Horn Hill.

“Can we afford to take these risks, Admirals?”

“Yes,” Baelor Hightower answered without the shadow of a hesitation. “I will be clear. If the Dornish fleet attacks in strength the Cider Hall System, we will lose it. No ‘buts’, ‘ifs’ or ‘we are loyal servants of the King’. The only fleet that could stop the Dornish blow is needed here to stop Tywin Lannister. So in the end, it is a choice between Cider Hall and Highgarden.”

As much as he enjoyed the company of House Fossoway boys and girls, Willas wasn’t going to suggest they sacrificed the capital system of the Reach. Not because it was his home, though the Regent would be lying if he said this didn’t factor in his mind.

Ultimately though, losing Highgarden was tantamount to lose the war in one afternoon. The economy, the military effort, the interstellar trade, and the alliances of the Game...everything was vacillating or outright burning. It didn’t matter who were the culprits and how many errors had led to this dark day. If they lost control of Highgarden, it was all over.

“I understand.” And he would make sure to write it explicitly and in bright letters he really, really hated it. “What about the fleet of Tywin Lannister?”

“We have recalled all the assets here to deal with the Westerners, but we are still outnumbered in every tonnage category save the starfighters.” There were many whispers and curses following this announcement. “The fleet stationed in the Dustonburry is reinforced and resupplied. And their plans don’t need to be complicated in order to achieve victory over us.”

The Redwyne Rear-Admiral who had spoken shook his head in apology.

“I’m sorry, Lord Regent, but if we execute Plan Gardener, Plan Shield or Plan Thorn, there will be nothing left of the Third, Fourth and Fourteenth Fleets by the time the battle ends.”

“Is it really that bad?” asked another General.

“It is certainly not good,” Willas said as the system of Highgarden reappeared on the holographic display, “since the Lannisters have added their ‘het-lasers’ to their ships of the line, our range of strategic options is drastically limited. We must either stay at maximum missile range and bombard them into submission, or accelerate deep into their envelope and shatter them at short laser range. The former will take days, and we will probably lose forty or fifty percent of the system’s infrastructure. The latter will be decisive, but we have no good counter to the two super-battleships. Are there additional plans and stratagems we might use?”

They were to his satisfaction, and a lot of them included requisitioning untested experimental equipment or civilian-grade materials. But promising or not, there weren’t many things which made him think they could stop cold a fleet of sixty ships of the line before it destroyed the priceless orbital infrastructure of the planets and the entire star system.

That was the moment his sister chose to intervene.

“You’re doing it wrong, my Lords.”

“My Queen,” Baelor Hightower said after a small inclination of the head, “I do not doubt our plans are not satisfactory to your ears, but to beat the large fleet Tywin Lannister has invaded the Reach with, we need to accept losses will be extremely high.”

Margaery gave their cousin a thin smile, and at this moment she looked like the Maiden in her long green-black robe.

“This is certainly true, Admiral Hightower. But you still want to destroy the Lannister fleet.”

“Yes, of course....this is the only way the Reach will be saved from...” Baelor’s eyes widened almost comically as thought about something. Willas didn’t see...

“We don’t need to destroy sixty ships of the line to destroy this invasion, my Lords.” His sister told the assembly. “We need to kill Tywin Lannister. The Old Lion is the strategist, the financier, the supreme commander, and the chief Lord Paramount of the Gold Dragon. Remove him, and the bannersmen of the Western Sector are leaderless.”

“This is dishonourable!” a Rowan officer barked like reflex. “We are the paragons of knighthood and nobility! We do not try to murder enemy leadership...”

Willas closed his eyes for a second before reopening them and giving a quick order.

“Remove this man from this room. Unless you’ve lived deaf and blind for the last two months, chivalry is long dead and now we must survive the storm. Admiral Hightower, on the basis of your last two battles with the Lions, is the physical elimination of the enemy leadership possible?”

“It will certainly be easier than to destroy the entire Lannister battle-line,” the Oldtown commander said after fifteen seconds of reflexion. “But if we decided upon such a radical course, we will need to make major alterations to the existing plans...”

**Queen Rhaenys Targaryen, 17.10.300AAC, Ashford System**

“Well, well...it looks like someone on the Reach side had a crisis of intelligence.”

Speaking like this of any enemy leadership should have been incredibly arrogant on her part. But where the Tyrells and their bannersmen were discussed in this war, it really wasn’t.

“They can’t always decide to do the stupidest thing when there’s a choice,” Arianne said after sipping the Red Arbor wine in her cup. “It’s a pity, though.”

“Oh, absolutely,” she had intended to slam two-thirds of the Dornish fleet under Ynys Yronwood, the Fowler Twins and some of her most aggressive commanders by the Pommingham jump point. Given the spatial coordinates of the Cider Hall two inhabited planets and the relative distance between the Ashford, Pommingham, and Ambrose jump points, all conditions had been fulfilled for an unprecedented encirclement of the Reach forces and the capture of trillions of dragon in orbital infrastructure, fuel refineries, warship construction, agricultural engines and civilian starships. In other words inflict the equivalent of a second Graveyard to the Reach, and neutralise hundreds of thousands soldiers and sailors. “But the fact they have at last started to send some of their most valuable assets away from Cider Hall won’t save them totally. Even our most frenetic evacuation plans in Dorne take weeks to be fully implemented, and you and I both know Dorne has most motivations to study the problem.”

“You have a good point,” her cousin and confident told her. “Since they have begun to tow away the damaged warships and a lot of mobile shipyards, those in all likelihood are going to escape us. But our offensive is going to roll into Cider Hall in five and a half hours. Everything able of interstellar travel may be able to flee when they see the first missiles fly, but most of the system infrastructure certainly won’t.”

“The special forces are ready?”

“Obara has given them their briefings, though I don’t expect problems on that front,” the de facto Princess of Dorne smirked. “Their precious Seven know they haven’t given us much concern until now.”

“Let’s be careful and avoid overconfidence.”

“Yes, mother,” Rhaenys chuckled as they sipped their wine and watched the stars from her private quarters.

Like Arianne – and most of her senior commanders, honestly – had said, the performance of the Reach forces to resist the assault of their infiltration and boarding teams was less than stellar. In fact, it was an understatement of the highest order. The Reach security and the defence procedures of its military forces were utterly incompetent, and should a Dornish Commander of One Thousand be presented in front of a court-martial with the charges the average Reach Colonel was accused of, there was no doubt a firing squad would be convened within the week.

Rhaenys and every Dornish flag officer had thought they would obtain a lot of information about the Reach Sector when they broke the defence of the Marches. They had not expected to get *everything*. Well, maybe not everything. Some command centres had the reflex to erase or blow up their data-servers before surrendering. Many warships’ commanding officers were throwing informatics viruses into the machines’ systems seconds before they were officially prisoners of war. But these acts were few and far between. Of the three Reach systems Dorne had conquered, ninety-eight percent of the civilian and infrastructure was intact and already churned resources for the Dornish machine of war. Some lines had even been repurposed to produce specific Dornish ammunition and machines under the gaze of Sunspear’s overseers.

“I am extremely satisfied, of course.” Rhaenys said, likely for the hundredth time. “We have more than a month of advance on our schedule, and the losses of the enemy are already over two hundred percent our most optimistic assumptions.”

This was in fact more and more a recurring problem since Operation Midnight had been executed and her forces had pulled the trigger upon House Caron’s defenders. For the next best thing to an entire decade, Dornish commanders had played tens of thousands simulations, played uncountable war games, and studied extensively their potential opponents, all in order to have the most accurate and complete holo-picture of the Reach that military intelligence could possibly have.

And unfortunately, these analysts had seen their immense work collapse in the first weeks of war. The assumptions they had based themselves upon had proved useless, because they had been based on Reach top-secret figures, and the Tyrells had spent seventeen years auto-congratulating their ego.

“No matter who wins this war,” Arianne said with non-disguised satisfaction, “House Tyrell isn’t going to be in charge for much longer.”

Rhaenys raised a sardonic eyebrow.

“You want to see the Tyrells and the Lannisters cripple each other without our forces raising a finger.”

“Because you don’t?” the Queen supported by House Martell saluted mockingly, conceding the point. “If the Tyrells and the Lannisters slaughter each other and both lose two-thirds of our battle-line, we will have our own chance to cut through the remnants of the Reach and end the cause of the spoiled brat here and there! Highgarden is the last bastion of resistance! If it falls, the banners of the Red Dragon won’t be worth their price in toilet paper!”

“That’s a very enthusiastic speech, Ari. And yes, it may happen like this...in a perfect world. I don’t think we can count on it.”

“There are only three possibilities, Rhae. Either the Tyrells win the battle to come, or the Lannisters win, or nobody wins because the two fleets have slaughtered each other. First is the worst case for us, but the roses will suffer losses winning. If Tywin Lannister takes Highgarden, he will have to garrison it and force many other planets to submit on his flanks. Since his methods of governance are the iron fist and not much else, the Old Lion is going to make quite a few cities burn to crush rebellions and armed uprising. And the third is the best from our perspective, allowing us to take systems after systems without interference.”

Rhaenys wanted to say her sister in all but blood was too optimistic, but for the moment the facts in the real galaxy were supporting this view. The Reach Sector was disintegrating. The fleet of her mad brother had gone somewhere in direction of King’s Landing, and if the competence of Mace was any indication, he was going to bleed and cripple it in short order. There was a last Red fleet under Lord Redwyne, but it was a Deep Space one and it was covering the Arbor and Oldtown. Besides, she had one of his twin sons as her hostage – and the other had been lost when his flagship disintegrated at the Harvest Graveyard.

It had many ingredients to increase the instability of the Reach...and then there was this evacuation of Cider Hall. It was a bit unsatisfying on the military side of things, but from a political eye, oh the possibilities...

“I know we are listening to the Reach communications all along the frontlines.” And if the fact the Reach had not yet considered the fact their communications were utterly compromised after the mountain of functional codes which had arrived on her lap wasn’t an indicator of their imbecilic attitude, Rhaenys didn’t know what was. “Have there been any indications they announced it to Lords who aren’t in bed with House Fossoway?”

“No, they aren’t. In fact, no Fossoway spokesman has come forwards on Galactic Targaryen News to make it official.” Arianne bared her teeth. “I think they are trying to evacuate the nobility and their most valuable cash reserves and resources before panic fully spreads. Why? You think we should inform the smallfolk and watch the fireworks?”

“I...I didn’t think about that aspect.” Rhaenys frowned. “No, we won’t do this right now. In the middle of a battle, the Fossoway forces will be dispersed and unable to stop riots and insurrections. It could easily create a climate of chaos and societal collapse. I prefer to take this system reasonably intact. We will ‘inform’ our new subjects of their perfidious lords’ betrayals when we are in charge. That should pretty much kill the credibility of the Tyrells and their allies for decades at Cider Hall, not to mention make any attempt of reconquest a nightmare.”

“I will pass the orders,” Arianne replied. “But if this wasn’t your goal...”

“Starpike. They haven’t informed Starpike and Lord and Lady Peake can rightly consider this manoeuvre a betrayal of Highgarden, especially as they haven’t been informed of this strategic decision.”

Until now, the negotiations conducted in secret by the intermediary of non-recognised diplomats had been limited by design. Not because the inhabitants of Starpike had a well of deep and unconditional love for Mace Tyrell. After several decades of the Tyrells forcing them to swallow insult after insult, their patience was very much exhausted. But Lord Peake and his young wife very much wanted to be on the winner’s side when the peace treaty would be signed. It was out of the question they would be sold as bargaining ships to an irate Tyrell when they became inconvenient pawns.

The Dornish Queen approved their prudence, though a more conciliatory attitude would have made things far easier. But ultimately, this was going to cause even more problems for Highgarden if House Peake turned its cloak now.

“Yes, I admit they are going to love hearing they have been thrown on the path of the super-battleship,” her cousin giggled and her eyes shone with glee. “And by a splendid coincidence, a large percentage of their fixed defences has been moved to the Nightsong jump point. As such, the very thing that has convinced the Tyrells to retreat to Ambrose has now a chance to happen to House Peake...but they haven’t been sent the same orders.”

Rhaenys nodded. Of course, there were many rational decisions why a sane commander wouldn’t have ordered that for Starpike. She could think of at least three. The disruption of available hulls: with the catastrophic blows on the civilian shipping lines inflicted by the conflict, it was unlikely there were a sufficient amount of starships to move a system’s invaluable infrastructure. Dark Dell: it was the system behind Starpike and was less defended, as it had none of the improved defences built by House Peake. Morale: the political earthquake of having lost Cider Hall without putting a real fight was going to be bad enough, but doing it a second time would be tantamount to admit the Reach couldn’t defend its own systems.

Not that they could, of course. The Harvest Graveyard and Mace Tyrell’s belief that warships were more important than adequate fixed defences had done an excellent job ruining the Reach before the first stellar system fell.

“What systems will be targeted assuming the negotiations are successful?

“Three. Dark Dell, Varner Plains and Hutcheson Hill. Advancing further would be dangerous and unproductive.” It would also put a considerable strain on their logistics. As it was, the offensive was already going to run out of energy soon. They had entire conquered planets to garrison and administer, millions of prisoners of war to interrogate and decide the fate of, and an entire antiquated society to break. And it wasn’t like they could go further anyway. Horn Hill was several times more defended than Starpike, and Rhaenys left attacking Highgarden to the Lannisters.

“Good. Do you think Lord Peake will mind if I invite myself in their marital bed? The new Lady Peake is truly *ravishing* with her skin-tight dresses...”

Rhaenys was really happy she wasn’t drinking anything at the moment Arianne had said that, because otherwise there would have been plenty of wine soiling the carpet...

**King Joffrey Targaryen, 19.10.300AAC, Highgarden System**

Being part of the vanguard when you invaded a capital system and a major fleet was sure to wait for you was not exactly a safe position.

Still, when the tactical display updated and showed the size of the debris field his flagship had translated into, Joffrey couldn’t help but gape with his mouth wide open.

That was a lot of debris.

At the speed they were moving, there was no hope to look for details, but sadly they didn’t to have them. The terribly low number of scout cruisers, light cruisers and anti-mines starships who had advanced first into the Highgarden system was evidence enough the way had been cleared at a terrible cost.

“How many ships did we lose, Lancel?” Joffrey asked as the first echelon of the Lannister fleet shifted in an aggressive but conventional formation.

“We have not the definite numbers, but the four heavy cruisers and the six light cruisers commanding the assault have all died, your Grace. Preliminary figures are estimating we lost two-third of the starships used to clear the minefields. The scout cruisers’ losses are...considerable. We think between forty and forty-five are gone, and over twenty are severely damaged.”

Joffrey tried to show a confident face, but he doubted his attempt was very convincing. This was an appalling rate of losses for fifteen minutes of battle, especially as the enemy fleet had declined to engage around their arrival point. A part of him was whispering this was an ugly but necessary cost to remove the threat of House Tyrell forever.

The other part of him snidely remarked at this rhythm, the smallfolk and the Noble Houses of the Western Sector were going to be very, very unhappy at his grandfather. Thousands of deaths had been lost in a vain attempt to surprise the defenders...and all of this for nothing. The massive Reach fleet was standing between them and Red Floral, but far out of range of the longest ranged missile.

“It appears they intend to fight a conventional fleet-to-fleet battle after all,” Joffrey said in a low voice.

“That doesn’t sound...particularly good for them, your Grace.” Lancel declared carefully.

Joffrey chuckled before deciding the situation could very well tolerate some bluntness.

“It is folly for them to adopt this sort of fleet tactics, I mean.” The young King studied the battlefield for several seconds before speaking again. “By staying on the defensive like this, they will be able to launch limited and devastating counter-attacks like they did at Dustonburry. The Reacher Admiral in charge that way has two choices he can switch between at any moment: long-range bombardment or combat at short laser range.”

“But we aren’t at Dustonburry, your Grace,” Lancel replied.

“Indeed we aren’t. And the Tyrells can’t afford to lose this system. It would be like House Lannister being dispossessed of Casterly Rock, and if our spies and information networks are saying the truth, their morale must be shot to the Seven Hells now. You can’t lose battle after battle and hope the population will stay happy and confident in the future.”

The green-eyed Targaryen stopped there. King he may be de jure, but the level of critics he could level at the Master of Casterly Rock wasn’t infinite.

All the while they continued their conversation, a wave of two hundred starfighters which had stayed cold and silent lit their reactors and launched a suicidal charge against several escort carriers. The distant was so short and the neutron charges so powerful that there was no warning before an immense flash of blue-white lit the star system and thirty escort carriers disappeared forever.

“Two hundred starfighters for six hundred of ours...” And the ‘trade’ was worse than that, because they had also lost all the carriers’ crews with it. “I sincerely hope the Tyrells and their bannersmen have not based all their tactics and battle-doctrine on a fight of attrition.”

This worried him, and not just because he was in one of the warships which were sure to attract the heaviest concentrations of enemy fire. The Western Sector, for all its wealth, excellent strategic position and large population, couldn’t afford to expend for a single battle millions of well-trained crewmen. The Tyrells were their enemies, of this there was no doubt, but there were other enemies waiting several systems away. The Dornish came to mind. And judging by the vast Reach fleet opposing them here at Highgarden, it was likely the Western Navy faced between eighty and ninety percent of the surviving Reach Navy. In other words, the rest of their Sector was protected by obsolete fixed defences, scout cruisers and starfighters.

“Lord Tywin is ordering the fleet in Formation Ruby-4, your Grace. The Fire Plan to execute in...three minutes and twenty seconds is Panther-2.”

“Acknowledge and execute,” Joffrey replied, feeling distinctly ill-at-ease. The more he observed the battle of his grandfather, the less he was fond of his tactics. Tywin Lannister was not a subtle tactician, and his moves consisted in exploiting to the maximum his advantage in numbers and giving as little opportunity to his opponent to invent genial stratagems and innovative assaults.

It was working. In Joffrey’s opinion, the Reach Admiral who had fought them at Dustonburry was a far better tactician than the Lord of Casterly Rock, but in the end the Lannister numerical superiority, advantage in fire-control at mid-range and the presence of two super-battleships had made sure the Reachers had to retreat at the end of the battle and abandon the Dustonburry System.

It had not been a cheap victory, both in blood and lives. Tens of thousands lives had ended in a relentless clash of laser and plasma explosions, and the slaughter was still giving him cold shivers during the night.

Joffrey could not help but think that if the Tyrells had the numbers’ advantage, they would have been able to inflict a decisive defeat to House Lannister. It was possible he was wrong. But his access to archives of past battles had revealed to him never in his entire career Lord Tywin Lannister had been outnumbered by an enemy fleet or army when he was present on the frontlines.

And the Tyrell fleet opposing them today was close enough in size to give him really bad vibes.

“The Reach fleet is changing its formation...again. It is a sort of...half-circle, this time.”

“Yes, it’s like the enemy Admiral can’t decide which formation will be the most useful to fight us.”

“Is it likely?” Lancel wondered.

Joffrey shook his head in denegation.

“I would love to believe this is the case, but we can’t assume we are so lucky.” The silver-haired King tapped his chin with two of his fingers in a pose none of his King’s Landing tutors had ever managed to get out of him. The fact they had been his genitors’ tutors had helped in his defiance, of course. “If Mace Tyrell was here, the moron would have tried to take command just to satisfy his sense of self-entitlement and the confidence in his prodigious military skills.”

The contempt was, in his humble opinion, perfectly justified. Mace Tyrell had repeated endlessly for half of his life that it was his leadership which had permitted the loyalist victories of the Usurper’s and Greyjoy Rebellion. But when for the first time he had a non-crippled opponent his bannersmen had not already severely weakened, the Lord of Highgarden had blundered like no one else had.

The Harvest Graveyard had been a disastrous defeat which wouldn’t be forgotten for centuries.

That was the *true* legacy of Mace Tyrell. To be the symbol of military failure all screw-ups would pale in comparison to.

More explosions flashed out. More Lannister ships died. The scout cruisers who had somehow managed the first brutal actions were vaporised or broken in half.

“The bastards have installed another minefield mid-way to Red Floral...”

“Starfighters, hundreds of thousands of starfighters! Estimation...sixty thousand starfighters!”

Joffrey gaped at the numbers, but the sensors and the tactical displays revealed the colossal waves of green dots launching from the ‘derelict foundries’ they had not even bothered to board. The starfighters were coming right from behind, and the Lannister fleet couldn’t fire at them without changing brutally of formation and course.

And of course...

“The Tyrell fleet is advancing. They are adopting a two-column all-out attack....wait, they are attacking through the minefield?”

This was like watching a nightmare. Joffrey, like every person on the bridge of the *Victorious Lion*, desperately hoped the Tyrells had suddenly become insane. Maybe the enemy Admiral had taken lessons from Aegon and decided to pave his way to victories by marching on an avenue of skulls and corpses.

But in mere seconds the stratagem was revealed. The enemy had left two small corridors in the minefield. And now it was using them to close the distance without fearing the power of the turbo-lasers and the barrage of Lannister capital warships, which were too busy trying to avoid the minefield.

“They are going to cut our fleet in two.” Joffrey couldn’t say he was a tactical genius, but by now the plan of the enemy was revealed in all its simplicity. “The first sub-fleet and the starfighters are going to strike us so hard we will have to take a swarm-like defensive posture. The second will hammer one-third of our ships of the line until they break and...”

The first Lannister ship of the line died. Its name was the *Pride of the Golden Tooth*, a brand-new Victory-class capital ship of two million and one hundred thousand tonnes. It was the flagship of Admiral Leo Lefford, and a magnificent warship.

It received over eight hundred missiles and six hundred more killing blows in less than ten seconds.

More than five thousand Westerner lives were lost, and like void predators, the shiny void behemoths of the Reach rushed into for the kill.

“Inform my grandfather,” Joffrey managed to articulate, “to change his formation and get the hell out of here. The enemy’s target is the fleet flagship. They are going after the super-battleship *Lion’s Domination*.”