**War of the Ten Warlords Arc**

**Chapter 7**

**The Siege of King’s Landing**

*It had existed for only three hundred years, but for the men and women living during the War of the Ten Warlords, King’s Landing had always been there.*

*It was a sea of starscrapers and monuments proclaiming the might of Westeros.*

*It was the most populated planet of the Seven Sectors. It was also the most populated system of the realm. Not even great, mighty and ancient Oldtown came close: King’s Landing had seventeen billion to Oldtown twelve.*

*Thus as the first battles were waged, there was still a certain optimism in the streets, despite the terrible financial difficulties met by the new government of King Viserys Targaryen.*

*King’s Landing, despite a Behemoth fratricidal battle, a coup, and perhaps the greatest civil war ever fought in this quadrant of the galaxy, stood. It was not unmarked, it was bloodied, but it stood.*

*And it was not defenceless.*

*Setting aside the massive defence fleet of the system, which was considerable and had plenty of capital ships to boost its tonnage, King’s Landing was a heavily defended world, as befitted its status of capital.*

*The Crown Army on 01.06.300AAC had been close to seven hundred million men strong, but in all urgency and with the desperate hiring of sellswords from Essos and the mustering of many hordes of militia-conscripts, this number was now close to a billion men...and women.*

*Such had been the desperation and the meagre resources the previous edicts forbidding women bearing arms had been rescinded in urgency. Of course, it had only been a mere two weeks and not many female adults had been willing to enlist.*

*There were also two hundred and ten million Marine Infantry to reinforce them, but many had joined the side of Aegon VI Targaryen, more were mustered aboard the King’s Landing Defence Fleet or required to garrison the arsenal-planet of Dragonstone, or were deployed across the Crown Sector to suppress rebellions and insurrections.*

*The regime of King Viserys III had a huge list of problems only military force could solve, they could not deny this.*

*But at all times, King’s Landing was the capital, and prestige if nothing else demanded it was heavily defended.*

*As such the planet garrison – Gold Fists, Goldcloaks, militias, conscripts, noble’s private guards and sellswords companies all included – was approximately worth six hundred million men and women.*

*And it didn’t count the Behemoths, the gigantic anti-air batteries, the electronic scramblers, the artillery continental city-killers, the nuclear silos and diverse earth-shattering weapons the Targaryen dynasty had accumulated in three centuries of reign.*

*The civilian underground refuges were legion. The military bunkers were likely greater in numbers.*

*A campaign in this maze of streets promised an ocean of blood and entire field armies crippled for months.*

*Orbital superiority was not a priority; it was an absolute necessity to have a chance to limit your own losses. As Galactic Targaryen News had prattled endlessly for years, even the Rebels and the Ironborn, utterly insane in their usurpation attempts and crimes against their legitimate monarch, had not dared attack straight on the defences of King’s Landing.*

*And Operation Downfall and the demise of King Rhaegar had proved it was infinitely preferable to have your own men in the place to take the capital.*

*Therefore before the terrible date of 01.01.300AAC, many Kingslanders were debating if this war was as terrible as the rumours made it to be.*

*Yes, there were awful whispers from Fawnton, the River Sector and elsewhere, but King’s Landing stood. And as long as the capital stood, the edifice could be rebuilt, beginning from the Crown Sector. King Viserys III appeared the kind of sovereign who took his duties seriously. The fleet was stronger than it had been in months, as corruption was no longer tolerated and incompetent officers were court-martialled.*

*The Conqueror Himself had created the Seven Sectors starting only with Dragonstone and Driftmark. Nowadays, the industrial resources and the pool of manpower available to the Green Dragon were incomparably stronger.*

*As long as King’s Landing stood, everything could be rebuilt.*

If *King’s Landing stood.*

*There still were armies and fleets available to crush the terrible uprisings and civil rebellions everywhere.*

If *the Red and the Green Dragon didn’t destroy each other first.* If *they didn’t condemn humanity to the darkness...*

Extract from the essay-pamphlet *The Dragon loves to bathe in human’s blood*, author unknown, proscribed text of 301AAC.

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 03.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

Three more scout cruisers died before the orbital defences of the capital were neutralised.

In the grand scheme of things, it was a small number. And scout cruisers were hardly the more difficult warship to build once war-times measures and construction priorities were implemented.

Or at least it would have been, if the shipyards supposed to build said warships were not currently self-destructing, venting air and debris, or suffering the delicate attention of nuclear detonations courtesy of the incoming bombardment.

Under his eyes, trillions, maybe hundreds of trillions of Golden Dragons’ investments were pulverised or rendered unusable. Plasma and laser batteries roared a new salvo before being silenced forever. Missile tubes larger than those embarked on the flanks of battlecruisers became dispersed in dozens of parts with their gunners and whoever had been nearby.

It was a massacre. There was no point to pretend otherwise.

And yet as long as there was no surrender from the Red Keep or any of the senior commanders left in system after the stampede of Viserys’ fleet, everything was done according to the laws of war.

*Nearly* everything was done according to the laws of war. Certain of the most bloodthirsty officers had to be reminded that shooting the escape pods of the enemy was simply not done.

“I don’t know where we are going to find the supplies and the fuel to continue this war, but it won’t be here,” Theon Greyjoy murmured.

The two of them were completely alone on the secondary bridge of the Balerion, but Jacaerys had activated all the possible anti-spying measures at his disposal and a few more he wasn’t supposed to have in his possession.

“We will in all likelihood have to withdraw back to High Chelsted,” the Admiral whispered back.

It was something which would have to be done...assuming the warships in this fleet still could do it. High Chelsted, for those who didn’t know how to read a star map, was two jumps away from King’s Landing, and Jacaerys could name without effort ten warships which would not endure a short jump, never mind two long ones.

“We should stun him, confine him to his quarters, and withdraw from this bloodbath,” the legitimate Lord of Pyke said in a very, very careful voice, “our fleet is more or less gone and we won’t be able to launch any operations for at least a year, and that’s if we are lucky and the other fronts have accomplished their objectives. The...the last thing we need is to lose the army we have in our transports.”

Jacaerys returned to him a grim expression.

“Yes...and no. Suppose we turn around right now. Sooner or later, and I’m ready to bet it will be ‘sooner’ than ‘later’, Viserys’ fleet will come back, they will transfer shipyards and repair ships from the rest of the Sector, and we will have a population of millions if not billions of Green supporters ready to rebuild the orbital damage we have done. If we leave King’s Landing intact and loathing our guts in our rear, we will regret it in a few months as they cut down our last bastions and bases in the Sector.”

“At least it would preserve the Army,” Theon retorted, clearly unconvinced. “You have seen like me the natural strategic and tactical talent of ‘His Grace’ when he is opposed by someone who is not throwing victory away to please him. We have twenty million Crownlanders and about fifty million Reachers in the transports and auxiliaries’ hulls. If we take the same ratio of casualties the capital ships did...”

Jacaerys shivered. This was a good point. Unfortunately, it wasn’t like he could do anything to stop this disaster. He could do nothing to stop another disaster, if he was adopting a realistic perspective.

“But we can’t stop him. Aegon often listened to us before, but now how little advice he is willing to not reject out of hand comes from his Red Witch. So if we tell him to take a prudent course, at best he will ignore us, at worse he will execute us to prevent further desertions and mutinies.”

“Even though it would kill his Presumptive Heir and make sure Driftmark will never kneel to him ever again?”

“He already did it for the Antlers,” the silver-haired highborn reminded him, “and I doubt he paused a single second to consider the consequences.”

And the consequences were already really bad. Adrian Buckwell had been far from perfect, but he had been the Heir of the Antlers, and fairly loyal when it came to his sworn regiments.

Maybe they could have tried to spin a fabricated story with some preparation. But there had been no damage-control and no communication lockdown when Aegon had decided Adrian was to die. In mere hours, hundreds of thousands men had known of this murder...and the Antlers soldiers and sailors had not been exactly happy to hear that what were legitimate concerns before were now worth a death sentence.

There had been furious fights aboard many warships and transports. By all accounts, the casualty number was close to twenty thousand already. And the Seven only knew how many Buckwell loyalists had stayed quiet but were now bidding their time, waiting for their revenge.

“No Theon, we can’t rely on our birth, our titles, or our value to remain alive.”

Internally, it made him sick and tired. Hundreds of hours trying to be the best, thousands of hours of devotion and unquestioned obedience, and as a result they had a madman who thought their very lives were his to end by the millions when he wished it.

Perhaps the titles, his name, and the honours had made him close too often his eyes on the flaws of the Targaryen dynasty.

Alas, now that his eyes were wide open, it was too late to take the helm and purge the problem.

“In this case, I think it is best we prepare some...contingency plans.”

“Theon, we can’t kill him. If we do, the Reachers in our rank will run back to Highgarden without a second thought...and I fear many Crownlanders will imitate them.”

“I was more thinking along the lines of removing the Kingsguards, the Red Witch and her fellow cultists, before locking him down in his cabin,” said the Lord of Pyke with one of his infamous smirks.

“I’m listening.”

Under their feet, the Balerion fired once more, but this time it was different. This time the onslaught wasn’t directed at the crumbling orbital defences.

This time it was the planet itself which was the target.

**Ser Justin Massey, 03.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

Justin had never had the leisure to be on the receiving end of an orbital bombardment in his life.

Now that he and his entire command were though, he knew he would have dearly liked to never have experienced the feelings which came with it.

At the risk of repeating himself, it was not a pleasant experience. Despite being close to three kilometres below the surface, the walls were shaking, and it was no natural series of earthquakes. There was dust coming from micro-fissures which had not been there hours ago.

Some part of him wished to be outside, killing the defilers of the capital, unleashing the fury of the Behemoths under his command.

The other part of him knew doing such a thing would be a death sentence. Behemoths were kings of the land battlefields, as long as there was no orbital support involved. Dozens of fliers, they could handle. Thousands of tanks would be destroyed in mere minutes. But a heavy cruiser hundreds of kilometres above their heads? The enemy could be at Casterly Rock for all the range the Behemoth’s weapons had. Behemoths were colossal machines of war, but the first Targaryen Kings, for what had to be excellent reasons three hundred years ago, had divided the area of responsibilities: to the Behemoths the honour of crushing everything walking, running, crawling or moving in any fashion on a planet; to the dragons the honour of setting the void and crushing everything the Behemoths couldn’t handle.

It sure must have been a fine arrangement at the time. The tiny problem was that dragons had been a bit extinct for the last century or so. While some part of him was glad this was the case – Aegon the Mad was as insane as Aerys, best not face him with a dragon by his side – in desperate situations like this, a big nasty fire-breathing reptile would have been a nice thing to have on their side.

“The bombardment has destroyed the anti-air batteries of Quadrant 4, Ser,” informed him one of the sensors-technicians he had kept with the small army of assistants, guards, and Behemoths pilots. “The sub-cities of Canter and Blue Field have been completely destroyed. Reports are partial, but two of the pre-war behemoths underground mustering points did share this fate with fifty-seven percent certainty.”

Sometimes, the General admired how these bureaucrats in technician robes managed to deliver bad news in a monotone voice.

Admiration was not how he felt today. He knew that bunkers or not, shelter or not, tens of thousands people had just died in brilliant flashes.

Justin was not going to pretend he descended every day from his Behemoth to dine with smallfolk beggars, but he had sworn vows to defend the population of the capital from the monsters Aegon the Mad had mustered to kill them all.

“General, priority communication from Lord Staunton,” the lieutenant he had charged to oversee communications announced.

“Put him on personal display,” he answered.

The visage of Baelor Staunton looked far more livid and exhausted than he had ever seen him. The Lord of Rook’s Rest was in general taking great care of maintaining an immaculate appearance, but today his greying hairs were dishevelled and he looked like he had slept in his uniform.

It would have been funny if they all didn’t look the same.

“The Daeron Fortress is gone,” began bluntly the man that for best or for worse was now the supreme authority of King’s Landing. “They have razed it by orbital strike twenty minutes ago.”

“They are completely mad,” before he would have put some outrage in his voice. Now it was just a matter of conversation. “There were three massive industrial nodes surrounding it!”

And if they had struck that hard the Fortress, there was not a lot of doubt the settlements and the underground shelters had been incinerated along with it. This was what? Three or four million people killed in the blink of an eye.

“If the inferno they create is any judge, they are wiping out all the suburbs, starscrapers, buildings and cities of Quadrant Four to make sure their landings will be unopposed. If it was any other opponent, I would be a bit less confident about predicting their moves, but it’s obvious by now our dear Crown Prince is not a master in the field of subtlety. My analysts and I predict he will try to pour his troops by the Red Banner’s starport and the surrounding fields four hundred kilometres to the north.”

“For a direct assault against the Old and the Dragon Gates?” He had heard some stupid tactics and strategies from officers who really should know better, so this move wasn’t the most idiotic move he had ever heard. It still figured in the top ten, though.

“It would be good for his ego. The Dragon’s Gate is the only defence to never have fallen since King’s Landing exists.”

“Unless my memory fails me, isn’t the reason for this invincibility the astounding number of macro-plasma weapons and expensive top-secret devices emplaced everywhere near it?”

“Why, I believe you are right, General Massey.” Baelor Staunton gave him a thin smile before turning deadly serious. “As you pointed out, it would be something exceedingly stupid for him to do. So we can’t be certain he will try to fight the strongest defences of King’s Landing in a frontal assault without more of his...sorcery and heretical deeds. On the other hand, if he does try, he will certainly have to send the Behemoths he has left against our walls.”

“Leaving my Behemoths free to rampage in his rear and cut supply lines and reinforcement waves while he’s busy hammering the walls.” He finished grimacing. “I will try, but I must warn you my Lord that if they continue this bombardment for a few more days, even my Behemoths will have serious trouble walking through this hellish landscape.”

“If they continue to bombard us a few more days, Ser,” the Commander of the Red Keep declared in a fatalistic tone, “everyone on this planet is going to die...casualties are already in the millions and climbing.”

**Robb Stark, 03.10.300AAC, White Knife System**

“You have done a miraculous job, Ser Manderly.” The Heir of Winterfell affirmed.

It was not flattery or any attempt to convince the second son of the White Harbor Lord of his House’s indefectible support. The work accomplished by the tens of thousands of workers mustered by the authorities of the southern North was absolutely defying human imagination.

Six months ago, there had been only small villages and hamlets in the cold plains and valleys of Cregan’s Howl, third and least inhabited continent of the planet White Knife. Now? Gigantic cities had materialised out of the ground, fields which had been judged too costly to prepare were harvested and thousands of shuttle were providing an endless flux of supplies and materials to the world.

White Knife had never been a huge centre of population like Winterfell or White Harbor. It was right in the trade corridor between the two stellar systems however, and before the grand muster ordered by Father it only had one billion and four hundred and thirty million people residing in its hilly landscape.

And from transports waiting in orbit around the planet, thousands of wildlings were moved to their new homes. It had begun four days ago, and the torrent of humanity showed no sign of stopping.

“Humph,” the Knight of House Manderly shrugged, “it’s my workers who are doing a miraculous job, young Stark. I’m afraid I don’t have much competence building houses and digging foundations...”

Robb Stark didn’t believe a single word of what had just been said. He had been warned every member of House Manderly was always more intelligent and competent than they chose to appear, and in this case it certainly applied. Someone had to juggle with the crazy logistical requirements, the infernal rhythm of transport rotation and the food everyone had to eat every day.

“Congratulate them in my name, then,” Robb replied before moving on the most important question. “How many people do you think you will be able to accommodate in this system?”

“In two months, assuming our construction rhythm is up to the job, we will have enough to lodge ten million people across the planet. If we can maintain this rate for next year, we will have the next best thing of two hundred million Free Folk living in this system, orbital and planetary habitats included.”

Ah yes, now they were supposed to call them ‘Free Folk’, not ‘wildlings’. Something he had to constantly remember...the galaxy had really become crazy when they were supposed to be courteous to their ancient enemies.

“But I fear,” and Wendel Manderly was showing no sign of his familial happiness now, “our efforts will mostly stop here. White Knife may be able to absorb one or two millions of surplus, but we have to balance the Free Folk’s needs with ours and the war effort at the Wall.”

“The same I suppose applies to the nearby systems were similar efforts are done.”

Wendel nodded vigorously, giving him for a few seconds the appearance of an enthusiastic walrus in the back of his mind.

“Absolutely, absolutely! The forces we have requisitioned in urgency are doing better than I expected, but we are not the South. A lot of our planets are not wilderness because we love nature but because the environmental conditions are too extreme. Hornwood, White Harbor, Wolf’s Den, Oldcastle and Rasmgate administrators and builders are doing what they can, but in one year we will barely be able to welcome something like a billion Free Folk. Accepting more, I’m afraid, would require more industrial requisitions and diversions.”

“Which are alas unacceptable in the current climate of hostilities.” The Heir of Winterfell said for the form, though his interlocutor knew very well the decision had already been taken, and by people of far more august ranks than theirs.

It was not as bad as it sounded. White Harbor and its neighbours had the most clement living conditions of the whole North, that was unquestionably true, but the Free Folk men, women and children were used to rough life, which meant colonisation for them was not limited to one or two planets. As such, system like Dark Holt, Barrowton, Torrhen’s Square and Blackpool were largely available for colonisation. But there were only thirty billion Northerners in a single Sector, and no one had ever imagined there were going to receive something like one-tenths of their pre-muster population in refugees.

The very notion would have been thought as ludicrous ten years ago...and now they had to do this and continue the ammunition production levels and the war plans in the shipyards and the orbital factories.

Somehow.

It was good the warriors of the North loved to prepare against the worst, because the dark storms which had begun to brew on the horizon promised to be violent, logistically, economically, but above all culturally and militarily.

“Forgive me but...”Wendel pinched his lips and caressed his massive moustache before opening his mouth again. “It seems to me some planets are not welcoming refugees in great numbers.”

“Per Lord’s Stark will, it would be extremely risky to give new homes to women and children close to the frontlines. We all hope the Wall will hold against the Enemy, but we must avoid a situation where we are forced to choose to evacuate our own bannersmen or the families of the Free Folk auxiliaries.”

It had the merit to be a valid argument, and yet this wasn’t the whole truth. The problem, in reality, was that many Lords and soldiers of the systems bordering the Gift were not happy at the sight of their former enemies settling in the North. Umber, Karstark, Wull...all of them had endured raids and skirmishes for centuries, and there had been no effort to change this before this year.

“As for settling them south of Moat Cailin...it depends on the loyalty of the populations which have surrendered to Twelve Fleet. If they try to rebel after having promised to stay loyal to Winterfell, we will have a free hand to send colonists that way.”

He really hoped it wouldn’t come to that. The Northerners, to a few rare exceptions, had accepted the necessity of making common ground with the wildlings, because the Others were so dangerous human-against-human grudges were petty and not worth pursuing if it led to their combined defeat.

In the South, it was the opposite. Seagard and Raventree were on their sides and unquestionably loyal, but since they were already straining to meet all their military demands, House Stark couldn’t ask much more of them. A few thousands Free Folk would stay there, maybe, but it would likely stop at these levels.

The Twins, on the other hand...

“i have no doubt our people will do their best,” the red-haired young man acknowledged. “Speaking of the South, do we have news about Vice-Admiral Seaworth?”

“We have, we have! The offensive to finish the remnants of the Twins’ coalition has begun, and we have confirmation Charlton has surrendered...”

**Princess Visenya Targaryen, 03.10.300AAC, Bear Island System**

It was an open secret at King’s Landing that King Rhaegar and his main councillors were convinced there was a Northern shipyard somewhere where dozens of ships of the line awaited construction.

In the news, the Master of Information had qualified it as a ‘most egregious breach of the terms negotiated at Maidenpool’, never mind over two-thirds of the articles had never been respected by her genitor before the Greyjoys decided to rebel, and the rest had been utterly ignored or discarded in the decade after.

Years ago, Visenya had found it ridiculous. First, her genitor had negotiated with Mace Tyrell the terms for hundreds of ships of the line to be built at Westbrook and Highgarden. And that didn’t count the dozens of Storm, Vale, Crown, and of course Western ships the Master of the Seven Sectors could call upon. Since the Vale was watched over at every moment of the year, it really didn’t matter if the North was building more ships. The economy of the South was over ten times the size of the one the Starks controlled in their Sector.

As long as the South stayed united and strong in face of adversity, the North couldn’t win...and her genitor had obviously failed to notice the same thing, because the last decade had been spent ensuring a succession war would begin before his eldest son celebrated his twentieth name day.

The paranoia of King Rhaegar had not stopped, of course. The Northerners were obviously hiding a massive shipyard somewhere, in the most total illegality. This was obviously the reason they were refusing the so generous demands and taxes impositions of the Iron Throne. As a consequence, scout cruisers and stealth frigates had crossed the Narrow and Sunset Voids and patrolled tens of thousands hours in the Northern Sector trying to discover the mysterious *Base* *Shadowwolf* that some of the Crown’s best spies had heard whispers about.

Spy-ships had searched hundreds of empty stars and their surroundings, but in pure loss. If the Northerners had a secret shipyard, the Captains sworn to the King had never found it. Lord Varys, the redoubtable Master of Whisperers, had been the only person of the Council and the Court to admit in public three years ago that perhaps, there was no *Base Shadowwolf*. But her genitor had thrown a tantrum, the rest of the Council had kissed his boots – to stay polite – and the investigations had continued until their recall in this war...actually had said spy-ships ever been recalled? Logic dictated they would be, but logic and the government of King’s Landing often had conflicting priorities.

Ultimately, it appeared the eunuch had been right. There was no ‘Base Shadowwolf’. The Starks Admirals and infrastructure-builders had invented the whole thing as a joke to distract enemy spies – with more success than they had dared imagine in their wildest dreams – and basically increased the size and the capacities of their existing shipyards, followed by a massive overhaul and technological transfer from Braavos.

In other words, the new Northern warships had been built directly under the nose of the Targaryen dynasty, while the imbeciles in charge were searching for ghosts, rumours and incorporeal gossip.

Sometimes she wondered how the administration of King’s Landing had continued to work after the Greyjoy Rebellion. It was certainly not because they had a fever of competence and brilliance.

“The *Heart of the North* shipyards became by default our third most important warship construction site,” Baela explained, continuing the visit of the massive construct orbiting around the Mormont planet. “By 296AAC, we were able to build eight ultra-modern ships of the line in the same generation here, and the ammunition lines, the maintenance operations and practically everything that can be humanly done can be done there. You must have noticed the five fuel depots and the refineries...”

“I did. I also noticed the massive plasma guns. This system can hold a siege for quite time, and builds everything for its survival.”

She didn’t voice it because she knew her twin couldn’t ignore it, but neither her genitor nor any of the other Lords Paramount loyal to the Iron Throne would have tolerated an instant the idea of one of their major bannersmen having this sort of firepower at their disposal.

“That’s not exactly true,” Baela admitted after a long frown. “Something like twenty-five, twenty-six percent of the workers in this station alone are Winterfell personnel. The Bear Island System is extremely rich in rare and common ore deposits – one of the reason the Ironborn always coveted it in the past – and fuel, but the climate of the planet is...frosty and hard on human organisms. Orbital farms and habitats included, there must be something like three hundred and sixty million humans living in this system right now.”

Visenya whistled. That was...not a huge number at all. In fact, back in the Crown Sector, such a paltry number would not even qualify someone for a Masterly House, never mind a Noble House.

In hindsight, the risk of rebellion from a bannersman was not that big for the Starks.

“I could not help but notice the majority of the ships of the lines and their escorts here are not very advanced,” the Targaryen Princess said as they walked down several hangars and shipyards avenues. The Northern workers and navy personnel were familiar sights by now in their black and grey voidsuits, but there were a few groups of wildlings here and there...strange humans, in hygiene, customs and traditions.

Though obviously, two silver-haired girls with dragons circling above their heads must seem extremely strange to anyone having not met them before.

“The last generation of warships was officially commissioned a few months before your arrival, sister. Except the Twelfth Fleet of Vice-Admiral Seaworth and the reserve squadrons to protect the critical systems, all the new constructions must be guarding the Wall by now.”

“Your Admiralty really plans to fight a long conflict.” It was an affirmation, not a question.

“Millions of records were lost in eight thousand years,” her twin made an encompassing gesture in direction of the stars and the white-green planet on the other side of the bay. “But while much has been forgotten, the sheer terror of these times was not forgotten. The moment we were certain of the monsters’ return, the order was given to prepare for total war. We don’t know if victory is possible, but we certainly won’t go down quietly into the night.”

If only the Small Council or some of the people they shared the blood with had a quarter of this foresight and willingness to defend their people...

“Will the Northern economy handle the strain?” Visenya gave Baela a humourless smile. “I confess I have no talent with numbers, but piloting a very expensive pilot forced me to study certain things about trade exchanges, military contracts, and other unpleasant realities of the military life.”

“I am not privy to this information, but there have been certain papers I watched when someone important had his back turned...” Baela tried an unconvincing ‘totally innocent, your Honour’ expression. “I think the North can fight with this level of commitment for something like seven, eight years, maybe a bit more now that we have millions of wildlings...”

“We are not ‘wildlings’! We are the Free Folk!” A sort of re-haired tornado shoved them aside and continued in its way through a gateway on the right.

“You have just made yourself a friend, sis,” Baela commented with a chuckle.

“Bah, this station is big and has hundreds of thousands of workers, pilots and officers...I’m sure I will never see again before five or six months...now show me where your new starfighters models are tested...”

**Lord Eddard Stark, 03.10.300AAC, Castle Black System**

If he was a man without any duty save those of a simple soldier of the North, greeting his brother would have been done in a tavern with several large beer mugs.

But really he had never been too fond of getting himself dead drunk in an old crowded tavern. He had done so long ago with Robert...but Robert was gone, dead for something like seventeen years. And there was too much to do these last weeks to justify spending a few hours dead drunk near the barracks of the Night’s Watch and the Army troopers.

The irony did not escape him. In many ways, the forces he had gathered here at Castle Black and around the Breach-in-the-Stars were the more powerful fleets and armies the North had ever mustered in the last millennium, and there were only a fractions of what was available to him, for he had not let the Northern systems without defence in his absence - the Rebellion had told him there wasn’t such a thing as enough contingencies when disaster struck.

And yet holding this command like a proper Northern commander should...it took close to nine hours out of ten of his time, and the last hour served to oversee the administration and the measures taken by his bannersmen away from the frontlines. He had only been able to seize a few half-hours here and there these last fortnights to write messages to his children and nieces, and read their answers.

Fortunately, everything was proceeding well on this front. All of them were healthy, alive, and reasonably happy. Eddard knew all of them had wanted to fight with the Northern hosts, but his heart and his brain had been forced to tell them no. Robb could not be in the frontlines, as tempting as it was to give his approval. If he fell in battle – something that was far from impossible given the danger represented by the Enemy – the North would need someone to rally behind. His eldest son would be followed and receive the oaths of the Northern Lords and Ladies, but he wouldn’t be able to do so if he lied dead in a trench on some forgotten battlefield. Joanna and Sansa had received his benediction, but except in his eldest niece case, it had been dire necessity who had forced his hand. Winterfell needed a loyal commander with Tully blood to hold Riverrun, and while Brynden alone could have done the job, his absolute refusal to marry anyone was sure to lead to a succession crisis eventually.

The thought was unpleasant. How many times in recent years had he been forced to sacrifice his principles on the altars of necessity and pragmatism? Honestly he had lost count, and few of them had given him any joy when the outcome had been announced. The figures and the analysis from his best experts telling him this was the correct decision were giving him little comfort when he went to his bed at night.

But he had done his duty. Winter was coming, and House Stark had gathered the North once more to fight the coming darkness. If nothing else, he hoped to be remembered for these preparations...preparations which might be the only thing between them and the extinction of humanity.

“Many in the Night’s Watch are not happy with your orders, brother,” Benjen observed with a non-committal voice. “They fear you want to use them as cannon fodder.”

And just like this, the hopes he could have a conversation free of politics with his younger brother were ruined. Eddard hid a sigh and his feelings of regrets behind an expressionless face. Seventeen years ago, he had considered Benjen his best confident and one of the few persons he could trust with his most intimate secrets.

Today, he felt he was talking to a stranger.

Benjen had not changed that much physically. No, his brother looked very much a long-haired and bearded version of him. But mentally...

“I wish I could assuage their fears, but I can’t.” He said coldly.

“Surely there is a better use of the black brothers!”

There wasn’t, and he had thought about it long and hard.

The problem, or at least one of the foremost problems among the ancient Order, was the ugly reality it was a host of rapists, thieves, burglars, gang members and murderers.

Now, every army, his included, had its fair share of black sheep, but the proportion of those in the Night’s Watch had grown so far out of control it had ceased decades to be categorised as ‘unacceptable’. For every Waymar Royce and Lord Jeor Mormont, there were hundreds of rapists and honourless scum who had signed in to avoid the rope, the executioner or a lengthy prison sentence.

“There isn’t. Lord Karstark has found six hundred thousand black brothers he felt they can be trusted working in a starship or manning one of the vital fortresses commanding the chokepoints. The others...”

“The others are all men of the Night’s Watch, brother! They swore vows! I will not let you sacrifice them in desperate last stands just for you to purge the prisoners you are taking in the South!”

Yes, in hindsight, there had been something wrong with Benjen from the moment he had come back after the Rebellion. Benjen had rapidly admitted to him it was his fault Lyanna was gone...something which was an outright absurdity, for he certainly didn’t see how the presence of a young man and a single unarmed starship – or a battlecruiser for that matter – would have changed anything against a battle-squadron of royal rapists.

Apparently, he had not managed to bring back his younger brother to something looking like sanity before he left one year later.

“Do you really believe I want to sacrifice them, brother?”

“Do you? Everyone in the North knows how much you hate those grovel at the feet of House Targaryen...”

Eddard posed his cup on the table and looked at Benjen with disappointment.

“I do not hate the men I will put on the frontlines. I will not shed a tear for them, that much is true, but I do not hate them. If there was a way to preserve their lives in the long-term I would do it...”

“Then do it!”

Eddard watched his brother for long seconds before deciding the First Ranger needed a fresh reminder where his loyalties should lie.

“Winter is coming, *brother*. You may have fled your duties and your responsibilities for the Night’s Watch, but I did not.”

“Brother, I...”

“I have not finished! Winter is coming. When we first came to the Wall to see the real state of the Night’s Watch, we saw a pathetic spectacle. Oh, the commanders were certainly happy to take supplies, weapons, and starships when my bannersmen gave them, but the management and the maintenance were done so poorly I thought it was a joke at first. Men who should have known better were busy ‘ranging’ when they should have first taken care of the foundations. You could never have stopped Mance Rayder by yourself, and there had been so many desertions before the great reforms that I think Lord Umber and his sons all got their first hundred kills executing black brothers!”

“This is the honour of the Night’s Watch you are insulting,” Benjen answered icily.

“The Night’s Watch has little honour left, and most of it remained in the hearts of men like Jeor Mormont and Waymar Royce. The young and the old remember their vows; for all the rest, I see a few millions souls like Mance Rayder. You speak the words, you don the black cloak, but as soon as it becomes really difficult, the halls are curiously empty and silent.”

Maybe he should not have said that. Maybe this conversation shouldn’t have been searched for in the first place.

But if their father had been here, his reaction would have been far harsher and violent. That Benjen wore the black cloak would not have protected him in the slightest.

Fortunately, Eddard was not Lord Rickard Stark, and he was not Brandon or Lyanna, who would have both given him some memorable lesson.

“The black brothers are still standing and fulfilling their vows. We can be the equals of any of your Northern regiments.”

Too bad Jon Umber had not been invited in the room. The Lord of Last Hearth would have probably died from laughter.

“I was forced to acquiesce when Euron Greyjoy was put in command of the planetary defences of the Nightfort, brother. What does it suggest to you in terms of suitability and willingness to fight?”

Frankly, and as much as it had not been written anywhere, cannon fodder was pretty much the only use he had for half of the Night’s Watch. They were, as distasteful as he found the notion, the perfect counter for his plans to stop the legions of wights waiting on the other side of the Breach.

Benjen stood from his seat and left the room without one more word.

“Winter is coming and my duty goes to the Northern men, women, and children,” the Lord of Winterfell whispered. “My heart belongs to the North. Always.”

Then Lord Bolton and Jory returned with more reports about the latest convoys to arrive to Castle Black, and the day continued speaking logistics and more plans about the fortifications of the Wall.

**Colonel Ayric Sarring, 03.10.300AAC, Outpost Diamondback, Iron Sector**

If you watched a star map of the Iron Sector, you realised that there were not many stellar systems of importance to learn the names. There were ten to be precise, and of those eight had major centres of population. Two others, Storm’s Wrath and the Sunset Gates had some mining conglomerates regularly operating inside their asteroid belts, but some kind of natural disaster had destroyed whatever inhabitable planets there were around their stars long ago.

It may be the truth for all Ayric knew. But after his past experiences, his mind was thinking about a more horrific scenario. The two systems had not been destroyed by some natural cataclysm preordained by gravity or a cosmic storm. Not unless you considered giant krakens, sorcery and Others’ abominations part of the cycle of life and planets. No, these two systems certainly had been wiped out thousands of years ago, in a conflict the archives of the Iron Sector didn’t remember. They had been crushed and all life had been purged. The identity of the perpetrators was still in doubt. But these systems had received the same treatment Great Wyk, Saltcliffe and the Lonely Light had just received.

There were other locations where a convoy or a battle-formation could gather, though. Outpost Diamondback was one of those. The system the station was located was north of Pyke, and had been as far as he knew an attempt to build some sort of secret base for Ironborn loyal to Balon Greyjoy should the ill-conceived rebellion of the madman end in tragedy. Alas for the Ironborn, the warships of the Crown Fleet had not had a hard time to locate it in 290AAC – radio silence was a thing the Ironborn reavers had apparently difficulties to understand.

It was an ugly station, the corridors were old and not healthy to live in, but it provided a rally point for the forces which had managed to evade the tides of destruction engulfing the Iron Sector. Some mining ships regularly operating at Saltcliffe, a few old hulls and an obsolete scout cruiser which until recently had been in service of House Musgood, and the Lannister ships he was nominally in command.

“We can’t stay here for long, I’m afraid,” Lord Gylbert Farwynd declared. The man was old and looked close to death’s door, but Ayric supposed that after his decade-long trip in the wilderness of an ice-covered planet, no man above fifty would be good-looking. It was already a near-miracle he wasn’t dead and buried. “Victarion, damn his soul for eternity, knows where Outpost Diamondback is located. His warships may have gone in the direction of Old Wyk to force a coronation from the surviving Void Priests in hiding, but Pyke sooner or later will be his target. And before he attacks his homeworld, he will send one or two of these Tyroshi spheres here.”

“The problem is where to go,” Ayric said, looking at the crude map at the centre of the table. It was just an outdated holographic representation, impossible to modify, but it served their purposes here. “Our ships are old, full of refugees and civilians, and fuel is soon going to be an issue. Bronn?”

“I think we will all agree surrendering Victarion Greyjoy is not an option,” the sellsword began with a predatory smile and received nods from everyone present. Everyone had seen the images of armies of dead rising from the battlefields to march in service of the treacherous Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet. Thanks whatever deities existed, the kraken of Great Wyk had destabilised the core of the planet before fleeing when it came under the fire of the ex-Tyroshi units. “Since Old Wyk is certainly gone at the moment we speak and Orkmont will certainly not manage to stop him more than a few days, the real dilemma is between Harlaw and Pyke. I fear going back to Blacktyde would lead to certain...complications.”

“Too true,” Ayric agreed. The complications would certainly include firing squads and court-martials. The latter if they were lucky. Some Lannister officers may be willing to listen to his arguments. But in the end, they would obey the orders of Tywin Lannister. And the soulless creature which had held the leash of the Beast for decades. “Militarily, which system has the biggest defence fleet?”

“Pyke certainly,” replied a Stormlander teenager who seemed far too young to find his way on a warship, “House Redwyne and House Hightower had detached a large naval squadron to make sure the locals didn’t try anything funny.”

“Did it work?” Sandor Clegane growled.

“No,” the red-white uniformed young man admitted, “the planet is constantly experiencing small insurrections.”

“Harlaw is less defended but will be probably a calmer haven to sail to,” Gylbert Farwynd spoke. “I sailed a few times with the young Reader, and I know he will listen to what we have to say.”

“He has a large Reach garrison to contend with,” a young Ironborn spat, certainly one with Farwynd blood in his veins given the resemblance with the Farwynd patriarch. “Our ships may be fired upon before we have the time to open a communication. The Reachers and the Lannisters are at war, now.”

“The risk will certainly be lower than at Pyke,” another Ironborn protested. “By all reports, Harlaw remains prosperous. I doubt they achieved it by shooting every ship which came fleeing problems in the last five years.”

“There are risks everywhere now,” Gylbert Farwynd intervened, and his grim expression was a painful reminder this was a man who had given everything to his world...only to see the krakens feast on it and render it into a lifeless ball of rocks in front of his very eyes. “The Night has come and if we survive, it will not be by scurrying in holes and waiting for the storm to abate. At some point, we will have to find an anchor and prepare our counter-attack. My vote is in favour for Harlaw.”

“I vote for Harlaw too,” Ser Raynald Westerling followed three seconds later. “What do we do about the Orkmont garrison? They are not allies, but if they don’t know Victarion is coming...”

“Send them one of our last raven-drones,” Bronn proposed, “any damage they can inflict Victarion or the krakens is something we won’t have to fight.”

“The problem,” declared the Musgood youngster, “is that if they have raven-drones too, they may be able to warn King’s Landing of everything that has transpired here, and...they may send a retribution fleet.”

Ayric could not help but laugh at this one.

“Don’t worry. I think the top commanders have some other things to think about than our nightmare-fuelled civil war...”

**Ser Bastian Cave, 04.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

The bombardment had stopped.

 For several minutes, there was no change in the behaviour of the tank’s crews and the infantry waiting in the underground barracks. This was not the first time the earthquakes-like attacks ceased, only to begin mere minutes later.

Bastian didn’t know if it was a semi-intelligent attempt of their enemies to convince them to leave the safety of the great bunkers, and to be honest he hadn’t asked to anyone the question. A few civilians and young recruits had tried the first time to go outside by sewer-turned-exit...mere minutes before the bombardment began again.

Not one scout had come back, and the exit they had taken had been sealed before the clouds of dust and the mountains of debris buried everything.

And so they waited. Minute after minute, the Kingslanders and the thousands of Crown forces who had been assigned to this bunker and the defence of this Quadrant waited.

By this point, they didn’t know what to hope anymore. If the bombardment ended, it would mean the waiting would be at an end. No more nightmares wondering if the cannons of the Mad Dragon’s fleet was going to pierce the protections of their base and give them a death by structural collapse of their subterranean bastion.

Of course, if the guns stopped the bombardment, it could only be for one reason: the enemy was landing its troops and soon they would be fighting for their lives.

If, on the other hand, the bombardment resumed, bad emotions would continue to spread. Soldiers and troopers were feeling awful. They knew very well there had not been enough bunkers able to resist a massive orbital bombardment of this power and length. Prayers to the Father and the Mother were whispered every hour, asking them to mercifully intercede with the Stranger for the salvation of millions of souls. And each hour of bombardment was one which could give them a forgotten death in the depths of the capital world.

But the bombardment didn’t resume.

And one by one, the last sensors they had on the surface began to shine in a malevolent black. The enemy had at last committed its forces for a landing in their sector of responsibilities.

“The wait is over!” Bastian proclaimed. There was no cheers, no explosion of joy. There were just grim visages, and eyes and bellies full of spite. “It’s time for our retribution to begin. Prepare your tanks, we are going to open the gates and ride out. Whatever you see, no matter what happens, know I am proud to fight with you today. Death to the traitors! Avenge King’s Landing!”

“We will avenge King’s Landing!”

The tunnels had resisted and the Salamanders 297 light tanks opened the advance of the column, followed by the Battle tanks Firewyrms 297 and at the rear came the handful of super-heavies Drakes 297. This was all. Over two thousand tanks, escorted by thirty thousand infantrymen, against the Warrior only knew how many traitor regiments and armoured divisions.

It took fifteen minutes for them to reach the surface...and for a long minute Bastian wondered if he wasn’t on the wrong planet.

But no, there were thousands of traitor flyers screaming above his head, and the ruins of starscrapers were familiar, like the memory of some dead friend.

“What...this isn’t possible! What did they do to our homes? What did they do to our cities?”

“Damn them! Damn them all! Death to the Tyrell dogs! Death to the traitors!”

“The three heads of the red dragon must die! Kill the Mad King! Kill the Mad Aegon!”

The city they had in front of them looked like it had been carved apart by the vengeful fist of an angry God. Four of of five starscrapers had been broken in half and more, the streets were filled by mountains of debris, and there was fire, smoke and dust everywhere. And then there were the odours. Every officer and trooper who had been able to find a gas mask was wearing one – Bastian counted himself among them – but the odours were so powerful and so distasteful he could nonetheless smell the shadow of them.

King’s Landing had smelled awful on the best of days, but this was something else. It was the odour of corpses, fire and death in one. It was the touch of disease mixed with water, excrements and blood. It was the radiation of capital-grade weapons added to black dust and the ravaged stores and buildings.

There was nothing to save. There was nothing to protect. King’s Landing was a murdered carcass, and everyone who had been in this city when the orbital strikes began was dead, and if the Gods were really merciful it had been quick.

For their killers, he wasn’t going to be so gentle.

“There!” His fist pointed at a large camp the traitors had managed to transform into an improvised landing zone. “There Kingslanders, here are your targets! Remember: no quarter!”

“KILL THEM ALL!” roared his men and the tanks accelerated to meet the enemy.

The green armours of the Reach saw them coming, and ten seconds later, several artillery pieces began to fire. But it was an imprecise bombardment, and it lacked the power the warships in orbit took for granted. One or two tanks stopped in flames, but three massive armoured columns entered the battlefield.

“FIRE! FIRE AT WILL!” The battle became sheer chaos. His personal Firewyrm destroyed three Hunters of House Oldflowers, and one medium Messenger, but the rest...there was simply too many fires and dust. It was lining targets after targets. Infantry perished in bursts of lasers and plasma.

There was so much blood...

“KING’S LANDING! KING’S LANDING!” This was poor radio discipline, but it gave hear to his men and by now they were all engaged. Messengers were massacring Firewyrms. Hunters were arriving by the hundreds to face his Salamanders. There were even half a dozen Punishments appearing like ghosts and tracking his Drakes.

They were facing a torrent of divisions...and more were coming, the starships could not fire on them without murdering their troops, but the atmospheric fighters were not so limited. Missiles and machine guns scythed down his men.

“COURAGE! COURAGE! We have them where we want, boys! One more effort, boys, and we will send them back to their traitor of Prince! One more...”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

An ocean of green surged on the battlefield, and for a moment Bastian thought his eyes were playing a trick on him. But no, there were really hundreds of thousands enemies bearing on his position.

“Reform the column!” He barked. “Reform the column before we are...”

A plasma warhead exploded three metres away and the participation of Ser Bastian Cave in the Second Battle of King’s Landing came to an end.

**Lord Baelor Staunton, 04.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

“Sweet Maiden, forgive us for we didn’t know where we were doing...”

The words were annoyingly religious, but alas Baelor could not disagree with the sentiment. Thanks to the new sensors, gravitic arrays, improved communication devices and their spies all over the system, the officers present in the new command centre of the Red Keep – the previous one was unfortunately still closed for heavy reparations – they had an excellent view of Quadrant 4 and the battle unfolding on the ground.

It was a butchery, to sum it up in a few words.

Everywhere they directed the drones and the cameras the brutal scenes were repeated by the thousands. Assault shuttles were landing and soon were coming under attack. It did not matter how many Reachers and Crown divisions were descending and storming the ruins of the Quadrant, the forces of King’s Landing were attacking relentlessly, in a desperate attempt to stop the gigantic assault from gaining a foothold on the capital world.

For the moment, the Lord of Rook’s Rest was forced to admit it wasn’t working. The enemy commander – no doubt Aegon Targaryen, this straight and stupid assault had all the marks of his ‘genius’ – was fuelling more and more artillery, infantry and tank divisions into the drop zones.

“The reserves of Quadrant 4 have reached a critical point, my Lord,” one of his assistants informed him. “We have less than forty percent of the men we garrisoned and the losses in tanks and heavy weapons are even more severe. If we do not order their retreat in the next hour or command General Massey to intervene, we are going to lose them.”

“Then they are lost,” the supreme commander of the military forces of King’s Landing said darkly. “Whatever reinforcements we can send them in time must either be taken from the capital city itself, or use quantities of flyers we keep hidden. And no, we certainly won’t use General Massey to save them. The enemy has not yet deployed his Behemoths and siege-breaker engines on the ground. If our Behemoths intervene, I doubt the traitors will hesitate five seconds before hammering his positions with orbital strikes.”

“My Lord, we are speaking of over a million men...and women.”

“And there are nearly ten million waiting inside King’s Landing the greatest battle of their lives,” he retorted immediately. “Allow me to speak in clear and concise words. Quadrant 4 is lost. Our forces have done their best, but their best was not enough and they have failed. We can’t reinforce failure. We need every man we have to be sure they will not breach the walls of King’s Landing when the forces of the Mad Red Dragon will advance in our direction.”

Five of his subordinates looked mutinous and rebellious, but the majority – between forty and fifty – were approving his words.

“I hate the idea of abandoning millions of civilians and soldiers to a grisly fate, but we have to be careful and choose the battles we may able to win. We will wait them at the Walls. May the Warrior grant us victory and protect the innocents.”

It was more for the form that he added the last lines. So far, the Seven had been singularly unhelpful, quite unlike Aegon’s pet witches and whatever heretical powers he had hired for his service. Commanders assassinated right and left, the sleep of every officer plagued with nightmares, certain secret shelters which had been dug in the last month torn apart in the first seconds of bombardment...

Baelor Staunton was going to the septs once every seven days, but this piety and respecting the tenets of the Faith had not been rewarded by anything but the silence of the Gods.

Cities had been razed to their foundations. Millions of civilians were dead, and if Aegon decided to focus on the other quadrants of the planet, the casualties’ lists would soon explode in the billions. The planet had already received too much damage to avoid a terrible economic, industrial and social collapse.

A monster with silver hairs and purple eyes was going to kill every defender until they lay down their weapons or he had no more troops to send on the bloody ruins which were by default the new battlefield. Why? Why weren’t the Seven intervening to stop this? Surely they didn’t want a heretic like Aegon VI to sit on the Iron throne?

“Tell the 70th Division to begin a fighting retreat to the Iron Gate,” Lord Staunton ordered at last. “They are the least exposed of our armoured formations, and the Tyrell troops are not pressing them hard. Tell all the other surviving commanders to act on their own initiative. They are too far for retreat to be possible...”

He winced as the lights representing four more regiments went dark. So few of the knights, officers, veteran troopers and conscripts were left. The trickle of green units was surrounded by an ocean of black dots.

“I hope that by the time you reach the Iron Throne, you will be forced to walk on the corpses of your last soldiers, Red Dragon,” the old commander whispered.

**Prince Oberyn Martell, 04.10.300AAC, Water Gardens System**

The Water Gardens were still an oasis of peace.

After the uncountable changes Westeros had experienced in the last decade, Oberyn supposed it was a small blessing. And yet...yet there were slight alterations his eyes couldn’t help but notice.

It was not his fertile imagination playing with his memories – though his critics would replace ‘fertile’ with ‘depraved’. Oberyn prided himself to have something close to an eidetic memory. A gift from the Gods, some said when he wasn’t around. The Red Viper had taken to see it his personal curse as he aged. Whatever he did, he could not help but remember Elia as she had been over two decades ago, and rage and anger lighted his chest into an inferno of spite.

As such, he was well aware the great pools of the Water Gardens had about one-third of the children usually playing with them. Hundreds of middle-aged servants were not present. Some fruits were smashed on the ground, when in 298AAC it would have been a great dishonour to present the avenues and the surroundings of the Gardens’ heart to a Prince in such a neglected state.

Oberyn would dearly like to say it was the war which was to blame. But while millions of young Dornish men and women had flocked to the banners and departed for the greatest war of a hundred generations, he remembered giving clear orders to keep the servants, gardeners and maintenance personnel to their pre-war numbers.

No, the fault the Water Gardens were suddenly reaching a massive decrease of popularity could not be blamed on the war.

Internal politics and the behaviour of his brother were far more likely culprits.

“Are you satisfied, brother?” Doran asked him loudly, making sure his ten bodyguards, the massive axe-wielder behind him and more than thirty servants heard each and every one of his words. “You have your war. You have evicted me from power. You have accomplished everything you wanted to do.”

“Oh stop being so melodramatic, Doran,” Oberyn answered in a far more conversational tone. “This last decade, you were Prince of Dorne in name and nothing more.”

It still hurt watching his eldest brother looking like a fragile old man. Doran was not that old. He was born in 247AAC, and by all rights given the advanced medical treatments, hospitals and medicines available to him, the Prince of Dorne should be in superb health. The Maiden knew Elia had had quantities of health problems, but several cures and long-term research medical projects had ensured she lived through two pregnancies and many health issues and emerged more radiant than ever.

Doran by contrast...the doctors were convinced part of it was psychological, not that the personal healers of the man who had once been the uncontested Master of Dorne had been eager to say it to him directly. But these loyal servants had informed him. And the reality was that Doran, under his civilised appearance, was a horrible patient to care for. Half of his medicines were lying ‘forgotten’ by noon, and healing recommendations were rarely followed if there were not two dozen people to enforce them.

The result was obvious. Doran looked like an eighty years-old man, not a fifty-three name day Lord. It pained Oberyn immensely to see him like this. But there were pain and brother’s love, and there was duty and the future of Dorne. And Doran had acted in a way which made clear there was no common ground with all these points.

“I am the ruler of Dorne by right and the line of succession,” said weakly Doran.

“No one disputes this, brother.” It had the great advantage of being the truth. “But Dorne needs a ruler who *rules*. You didn’t leave your personal resort here in the last two years, and the planet we’re on in the last five. There are children at Sunspear who have never seen your visage. There are teenagers for who you are nothing but a faded story. Rhaenys, Arianne, your sons, my daughters; all of them are popular and well-known to the people of Dorne.”

In other times, he would not have been so blunt and brutal, but he was leaving for the Reach tomorrow, and he didn’t know if he would ever have an opportunity like this to speak hart-to-heart with Doran.

“I should have stopped Arianne and Rhaenys’ ambitions from the start...”

“Then why didn’t you?” Oberyn demanded, genuinely curious. “You only had to give a command, and I would have told them to abandon their preparations and stopped the navy and army officers from listening to them.”

“I had plans, and I refused to believe they could turn on me...”

“They didn’t.”

“I beg your indulgence, I must have misunderstood what you uttered?” there was genuine incomprehension in Doran’s eyes. Merciful Crone, even now, his eldest brother understood nothing.

“Brother, unless my memory fails me, you always insisted you were going to make plans in order to have our vengeance. Elia’s murder could not go unanswered. Rhaegar and all his supporters had to know the wrath of Dorne.”

“Yes, but not like that. I wanted...” the Prince of Dorne shook his head slowly. “I didn’t want the monsters to claim the lives of more children of Dorne. I wanted...any vengeance...to be quick and not set Westeros aflame....”

“This is hopelessly naive, brother.”

“Say the man who with his niece launched a thousand torches on the pyre,” retorted snidely Doran Martell.

“Say the man who did absolutely nothing.” Oberyn sighed. “Let’s assume the plan which you only shared the vaguest lines with me could be implemented to perfection. At best, we would have Stannis Baratheon and the entire Storm Sector entirely destroyed, the Lannisters crippled, the royal dynasty annihilated, and the wolves rampaging across four Sectors, with the Reach launching punitive expeditions on our planets. I won’t pretend Rhaenys’ brainstorm is perfect, but at least it will let us weaken the Reach sufficiently to have a fighting chance.”

“And how many sons and daughters of Dorne are going to die for your plans to have a chance of success?”

“A lot,” Oberyn replied unflinchingly. “But it will, as you say yourself, give us a chance to repair for the first time the damage done by the dragons to the ecosystems of our planets. The technology, the manpower and the flora of the Reach can and will be used for our purposes. In the mean time, we will have no need any more to enforce policies limiting the number of children per families. And for the first time in centuries, we will be genuinely capable to assimilate foreigners into our culture and traditions.”

“House Tyrell will try to wipe us out for this,” his brother coughed a lot after this declaration.

“Mace Tyrell is now our prisoner, I’m sure you are aware, and the Reach has not the kind of strength necessary to go on the offensive. Rhaenys may be the sword of Dorne, but Arianne and my daughters have worked very hard to supply and fortify the systems we take. Even in the case of severe military defeats, we can withdraw and adopt a defensive posture. The Reachers did not find a solution against Eddard Stark, and we have a few surprises we have not yet revealed to our enemies.”

“This is madness.” Dragon coughed again, and under the light of the afternoon sun, his brother looked sicker and weaker. “You have no allies. Do you really believe Stannis Baratheon isn’t going to betray you in the end. Do you really flatter yourself to think Aegon will not sink the economy of the Crown Sector to build new fleets? Do you think Tywin Lannister will tolerate a powerful, independent Dorne on his doorstep should he emerge victorious from his Southern offensive?”

Oberyn looked at his brother sadly.

“The fact you read my reports and still feel the need to ask these questions, brother...I am glad I accepted Rhaenys and Arianne arguments.”

Oberyn stood from his seat, watching for long seconds the calm and the serenity of the Water Gardens, a last memory to carry to war with him.

“My plans would have seen us victorious, you know.”

“No, they wouldn’t.” Oberyn murmured as he walked away. “Plans require someone to do something, and you would never have given the first order on your own.”

**Princess Daenerys Targaryen, 05.10.300AAC, Braavos System**

The crown was beautiful.

But that was kind of the point, wasn’t it? Crowns were created to be beautiful, flatter the ego of its wielder and proclaim a sense of superiority to those who didn’t own one...not necessarily in this order.

Still, Daenerys was forced to admit that the master artisans of Braavos had done an excellent job. The crown’s base had been forged in platinum and shaped like a roaring dragon. Seven jewels had been masterfully imbedded, each worth a highborn ransom such were their brilliance and their size: one ruby, one sapphire, one emerald, one amethyst, one onyx, one aquamarine, and one diamond.

It was the crown of a sovereign. No, let her rephrase that. It was a crown the sovereign of the Seven Sectors should wear. Something Daenerys was not.

Alas, it seemed her interlocutors didn’t share her opinion, judging by the way they had presented it on a purple pillow with the arms of House Targaryen.

“You should offer this crown to my brother,” the Targaryen Princess, seizing Anarax by the neck before he tried to lick the crown. Like every dragon, the small black-scaled reptile was fascinated by shiny objects, and this crown with all its shiny metals and decorations was temptation incarnate. “He would thank you fervently for it.”

If only to melt it the second after and sell it to erase the abyssal debt the Seven Sectors of Westeros owed to various Essossi and Westerosi financial parties.

“The intention is noble, but you know it is impossible, your Highness” at the very least, Tormo Fregar, newly elected Sealord after the death of his predecessor from old age two days ago, was gallant. “The reforms attempts of your brother, as promising as they are outwardly, are too little and too late. Assuming he managed to cure King’s Landing of its terrible economic woes – and I honestly believe he will do his best to make a heartfelt effort – it will come to naught. At the moment we’re speaking, the self-proclaimed Aegon VI Targaryen must have launched his attack on your brother’s seat of power. Our analysts do not give him good odds to hold the assault without crippling losses.”

And the Republic of Braavos had no interest in supporting a candidate which could begin the long list of reforms and changes the Targaryen monarchy desperately needed for its survival.

“It may be so,” Daenerys agreed. “On the other hand, I think you will agree neither I nor your Free Planet, Honourable Sealord, want to contemplate a victory of certain claimants fighting for the Iron Throne. The Blackfyres are by their very nature allied with Pentos, Tyrosh, Volantis and many slaver factions. My nephew Aegon is raving, barking mad. Stannis Baratheon is perfectly willing to burn everything on his path to a throne as long as he has his vengeance. Joffrey Lannister-Targaryen has no need of your economic and military weight when he is backed by his grandfather. Rhaenys of Dorne will rather void all debts than pretend Braavos exists...”

 Even by watching the foreign holo-papers, military and social specialised books, Daenerys had been surprised by the nuclear explosion the declaration of war from Dorne had provoked. It seemed that a metaphorical stockpile of planet-shattering weapons had been waiting just for this moment to explode. The Gods only knew how many warlords were now fighting over the planets which had once been a single, united realm.

The worst surprise from the start of this war, unfortunately, was not the monumental incompetence of Rhaegar, the reformist tendencies of Viserys or the dozens of genocidal massacres caused by several factions.

It was the re-emergence of the Black Dragon. Long-though extinct, the Blackfyres were back, and had begun their campaign of usurpation by winning a massive space victory over Gulltown.

And no one, save the Arryns of course, was doing anything to stop the return of the last descendant – in spirit, because Maelys the Monstrous had no children – of Daemon the Traitor.

“There are many Braavosi who would be unhappy with my new government if we let a slaver-friendly Blackfyre kingdom on the other side of the Narrow Void,” Fregar answered prudently.

“In this case, why aren’t you proposing the crown to Eddard Stark or Jon Arryn?” Daenerys wondered out loud, voicing a question which had burned her lips for long months. “I suspected for the last couple of years the Republic sold many of its second-grade technology to the opponents of King Rhaegar. Why not offer them the crown in the bargain?”

“What makes you think we haven’t already proposed it to them?” Bellegere Otherys, the Black Pearl of Braavos, courtesan and Fregar’s lover, spoke for the first time. “Jon Arryn expressed accurate reservations from the start. He only had two children, and in his own words, he told us it was unlikely he was going to live long enough to see the end of this war. Since his son tried his best to stab him in the back, he only has a daughter for Heiress, and he prefers to solidify the power of his line over the Vale.”

Yes, clearly the Seven Sectors could not afford to proclaim a King in this age of chaos and war if next day he was dead of old age. That left the North, though.

“And the North?”

“Eddard Stark isn’t interested by the Iron Throne, your Highness” the Sealord said. “All his policies, be they military or economic, are turned towards the great fight waiting for him at the Wall. He was willing to support his allies in the River Sector and give some help to his Arryn mentor, but his interest in anything south of Moat Cailin stops there. Besides, there are two decades of anti-Stark propaganda waiting for him if he sails in direction of the Crown Sector.”

Daenerys frowned.

“But without him there are no Seven Sectors, right?”

It was ironic, given how removed the Northern Sector had been isolated from the rest of the realm. But it was true. Daenerys had studied enough the lineage of the Great Houses to know that whatever unity was left in the realm began and ended with Winterfell. Lord Stark’s wife was a Tully, former Paramount house of the River Sector. His foster father/mentor/teacher was the Lord Paramount of the Vale Sector. Dorne would have no enmity with them. The Storm Lords following Stannis Baratheon fiercely respected him. And he had the reputation and the influence to make the Reach and the Western Sectors kneel if he mustered his forces against Lannister and Tyrell.

No Targaryen claimant could boast that much respect and familial alliances. Not anymore. Not after Rhaegar, King of Idiots, had torn asunder the realm.

“It is...an original manner to describe the situation,” Fregar raised an eyebrow. “What do you have in mind your Highness?”

“I want a meeting with Lord Eddard Stark and his two nieces before I touch this crown,” Daenerys caressed Anarax, and her dragon hissed in pleasure before asking for more when her hand stopped moving.

“The Wall is soon about to become a war zone, your Highness.” Bellegere warned. “From the report of our captains and engineers we have provided to the Night’s Watch and the Northern forces, there is likely going to be a massive assault on the Wall before this month is over. Travelling there is...not prudent.”

“I am willing to wait. But these conditions are not-negotiable.” Daenerys told her two visitors before leaving the room, a disappointed dragon in her arms. The black-scaled rascal would have no problem being crowned, that was for sure.

Too bad for him, crowns had strangled too much in the egg for her to take any risk now.

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 06.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

It was taking too long.

Jacaerys knew very well with his new war experience that most military plans didn’t survive the first exchange of fire, but this one had gone so far off the redline of operations that it wasn’t even worth reading anymore save as a ‘oh I said that, didn’t I’ instant of dark humour.

The siege was still taking too long.

What should have been a thunderous attack overwhelming and shattering the defences of King’s Landing was turning into a massive slaughterhouse, and a battle of attrition to boot.

The bombardment he had been forced to order to have a chance to make some landings uncontested had been a thing of nightmare. The second round had been worse. As the first waves were forced to fight for every metre of ground before they had the time to count to ten when they left their shuttles, new orbital strikes had fired everywhere.

It had not been sufficient. Even now that roughly one third of the planet was rubble, debris where millions of corpses waited, the resistance was continuing. The supporters of King Viserys were bloodied and on their knees, but the knock-out blow to kill them was yet to come.

The walls of King’s Landing City were still standing, defiant and unbroken. And as long as they stood, millions of men were free to retreat behind the great fortifications.

And in the mean time, the armies of the Reach and the Crown Sectors they had brought here to fight were decimated.

The capital world was swallowing entire army divisions and spitting them out as disparate and crippled companies. The holo-projectors were showing images of uncountable atrocities. They were tens of thousands of heads on pikes made by one side or the other. Starscrapers in ruins were all what was left when victorious regiments marched after eliminating the resistance. The streets were red and black with blood. The last Behemoths lied broken, titans of once a previous age now a monument to the fury of the civil war between uncle and nephew.

It was a nightmare, and Jacaerys knew that he was one of the damned now. His soul was going straight to the Seven Hells when he died, no ‘buts’, ‘ifs’ or ‘I only obeyed my orders’. At this hour, the ships he commanded had without doubt killed more civilians in a single battle than the Usurper’s Rebellion and the Greyjoy Rebellion together. Propagandists may be able to satisfy with empty litanies of ‘they were rebels and this is the price of betrayal’, but at this moment the de jure Lord of Driftmark knew whatever legitimacy was granted in blood would not help rebuilding from this disaster. There had been no slaughter like this in three hundred years...and it was not happening in a distant and isolated Dornish backwater where the news could be safely edited and proclaimed to be ridiculously assertions. No, there were too many witnesses here.

Some may still follow Aegon VI because he was the Heir of Rhaegar. But it would not be enough. The fleet was crippled or vaporised. And their army was dying when it was not pillaging and raping the very world they were supposed to protect.

How could they win against the Lannisters or the Baratheons when they were busy making the enemies of the very people they had called neighbours and friends a year ago?

“Theon, Aelyx, I hope you have good news for me.” Jacaerys said as his two friends arrived on the first bridge. “I had enough bad ones in the last hours.”

Aelyx winced at the reminder. Losing their last Behemoth had hurt, especially as the walls of the capital were not breached. Yet he understood that from the announcement that neither their King nor any Red Priest or Kingsguard was anywhere near the bridge right now. Otherwise there would have been empty platitudes spoken, and no real thing of import would have been said in public.

“In fact, the frontlines are rather promising, this time.” The Langward Heir told him. “The last two cities of Quadrant 4 appear to have been broken, and we seem to have neutralised the majority of the Behemoths the enemy had rallied to its cause. Massey and his command Behemoth have escaped us, but the rest of the traitor engines’ destruction have been confirmed.”

“I would have preferred if they had not incinerated half a million of soldiers first,” Jacaerys bitterly regretted.

They had not been there to watch the first Behemoth-versus-Behemoth battle, but they sure as the Seven Hells could not have missed the second one, even from their position in high orbit. Tens of thousands of tanks, dozens of Behemoths, orbital strikes by the hundreds and artillery and infantry had clashed and murdered each other in the dust and the ruins of the mega-cities.

It went without saying that ‘half a million’ dead was a generous and optimistic estimate how many men this mutual slaughter had cost them.

“Err...yes. That said aside we have other good news.” Theon lowered his tone. “The bitch is grievously wounded.”

Jacaerys immediately stopped watching his personal display.

“Really?” He tried to feel calm and keep an unconvinced visage.

“Really,” Theon repeated. “Apparently, she tried to lead a group of her fellow sorcerers in doing some magical devilry to the walls, but for some reason instead of their usual heretical attacks, they all began to scream rather loudly and then most of the red cultists’ heads exploded. The Red Witch herself survived, but my agents reported she was in a very bad state. I don’t know why...”

“I do,” Jacaerys interrupted. “The northern walls were built in the Age of the Conqueror. But he did not supervise their construction. He gave the honour to his sister-wife Visenya. And we all know the rumours circulating on this Queen.”

Aelyx whistled before grinning.

“You mean the Sorceress-Queen has beyond the grave managed to strike the Red Witch? Awesome!”

Jacaerys internally smiled but outwardly he did not.

“I will celebrate when she is dead and buried, not before. Where is she now?”

“Her last supporters are transporting her back to her hideous Asshai ship,” Aelyx replied. “I think they will attempt to heal her there.”

“And they will likely succeed,” he did not pretend to know how this demon-thing witchery functioned, but alas the magic produced by Melisandre of Asshai worked and produced results that mere technology failed to achieve. “How many Red Priests accompanied her?”

“If mortal eyes can be trusted in her case, approximately fifty,” Theon provided after two minutes of research. “The last days have been pure murder on her effectives, though given the damage they did...”

The three highborn shivered. No one on the flag bridge could pretend they had cherished the lives of the traitors sworn to Viserys Targaryen, but there were deaths which were too awful to wish on someone, even your most despised enemy.

“In any case, there must be something like twenty Red Priests left on the planet.”

Jacaerys hesitated...and then decided they had gone too far anyway. Aegon was going to kill them in the end, either by launching them at an enemy their fleet couldn’t handle, or executing them for enunciating him a ‘truth’ he found defeatist and treasonous.

“Contact two Langward Senior Captains you feel you can trust, Aelyx. The moment we can get away with it, destroy the Asshai ship.”

**General Janos Slynt, 07.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

There was no glory in this war. No, there was no glory in any war. This was the truth of conflict, Janos had learned. Ultimately, in a war, there were the survivors and the dead, and the lucky ones were often not the ones the bards loved to praise.

Despite the sensors of his second-hand battle-armour and the air-filters, everything smelled death now. There was so much death, so many bodies and so much blood even the protections could not prevent the odours to arrive to his nose.

And he Janos Slynt, humble son of a butcher, was in the middle of this, leading a group of Goldcloaks and Gold Fists that had been pompously been designated the 2nd Army.

A year ago, he would have been proud of the honour. At this time, the 2nd Army had been an elite force. Now? The fact that he, a Goldcloak supposed to play the role of rear-guard duty had been thrown with ninety percent of his effectives on the walls of King’s Landing City and took command from the cold dead hands after the first four 2nd Army Generals were massacred was not exactly filling him with delirious optimism.

Thousands pieces of artillery fired again on both sides, shields were down, and the massacre continued. For the fiftieth time today, Janos wondered what was driving the enemy to attack like they did. Sure enough the Kingslanders were fighting like heroes, but they were defending their homes, their cities, their families, and the hope for a better future. But the enemy in front of them had none of these things, and the ‘tactics’ – let’s be generous and call them that – were as suicidal as they were insane. The defenders lost more because the invaders had complete orbital superiority, but they must have lost millions of soldiers in a few days, and even the Reach was not populated enough to tolerate this list of casualties for a single world, even the capital of the Seven Sectors.

A scream resonated suddenly, and it was one Janos had never hoped to hear in his time.

“BREACH! BREACH! BREACH IN THE WALLS!”

For a second Janos Slynt hoped this was just a dreadful mistake. It could not be true. The walls of King’s Landing were tall, strong and defiant. Visenya Targaryen herself had erected them, and as the Red Bitch of the Lord of Demons had learned in blood and tears, the defences stood true and no servant of evil would pass its gates.

But alas, it was not to be. About a kilometre to the east in direction of the Dragon’s Gate, a gigantic cloud of dust was rising.

And suddenly the enemy artillery stopped firing.

For a blessed moment, the entire battlefield was a centre of silence. And then the scream was shouted to the heavens, poured from hundreds of thousands throats.

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

“General! General! What are your orders?”

Janos looked at the Lieutenant, wondering what the man wanted from him. The senior commander for these walls was the General of the 1st Army, Lord Brune-Mobersomething...unless...unless...

The General of the Goldcloaks tried to contact any of the last five Generals left and realised with horror there were only junior officers answering him.

He, Janos Slynt, was the senior officer left on the walls...what was he supposed to do?

“General! Orders!”

“Order the last reserves to take the positions on the wall! They must buy us time! The rest of the forces are to converge on the breach and close it until dusk! We need to hold it until the engineers can close the gap in our defences!”

Just as he was saying the words, he realised how bad this sounded. It was three in the afternoon, and judging by the endless green and gold waves running or riding towards the breach, virtually the entire Red Army was coming straight for the kill.

“FOR KING VISERYS! ONWARDS KINGSLANDERS!”

This was not the battle-cry he wanted to shout. But perhaps it was the one his men needed...

**Ser Justin Massey, 07.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

He, Ser Justin Massey, was commanding the last of the Behemoths of King’s Landing.

The thought was completely wrong, and he coughed blood as he tried to chuckle.

The Crown Behemoths who had stayed loyal to this monster of Aegon, the *Crown Prince* and the *Victorious*, were gone. The Hightower *Green Dragon* – yes, irony was a bitch, wasn’t it? – had been ravaged by flames and destroyed in a thousand fragments. The Reach behemoths had died hard. The Merryweather *Will of Flames*, the *Red Vengeance* of House Bulwer, the *Royal Victory* of House Oakheart...they were all gone.

There may be a few Behemoths which survived, but Justin somewhat doubted there were many. War. War was everywhere. He coughed more blood. No, he had to stay focused. If he tried to rest, he would not wake up. The last shadow monster had...had killed him. His left arm was gone, and he felt the other wounds were slowly killing him.

Thank the Gods King Viserys had been wiser than him. The Dragonstone Behemoths were guarding the rest of the Crown Sector, defending the granaries and the people. They were the last hope. They were...they were doing what the *Exemplar* had failed to do.

 “Someone should have drowned Rhaegar at birth...” Justin cursed as each order he gave to his Behemoth caused agony in his muscles and his bones. More than once he cried and screamed. More than one he prayed that there was someone else who had survived in the damaged carcass of the metallic giant.

But there was no one else breathing in the Exemplar. Just like there was no one to provide escorts for the crippled Behemoth. The *King of the Battlefield*, the *Undaunted Conqueror*, the *Wise King*, the *Furnace of Dragonstone*, the *Explosive Illumination*, the *Night Sister*...they were dead. Along with tens of thousands of men he had personally joked, laughed, trained and fought with them.

His priority line buzzed and screeched, making him blink in surprise. The devise was still on line? The engineers and the scientists had made a better job than he had thought...

“General Massey! General Janos Slynt of the 2nd Army speaking! Do you hear me?”

Justin had never been of a General Slynt...but given the casualties of the last hours it was likely he was the last one of the original Generals chosen to defend King’s Landing.

“This is General Massey. Speak.”

“We have a massive breach in the walls five kilometres south-south-west of your position. Unless something is done in the next hour, the city is lost. Do you understand?”

The next words made him cough more blood in despair and frustration. No, that was not going to happen! Not...not like this, not after the millions of sacrifices he and his men had done!

“I understand. The *Exemplar* is coming, General. I will try to buy you the time you need.”

Hiding in the ruins of a civilian shelter painted in blood was of no use if the City was about to fall. The *Exemplar* may be repaired, but only if they held the capital world at the end of the day...and now this hope was more or less inexistent.

“Thank you...my Lord.”

Justin laughed. The pain...he was still alive.

“I am no Lord. But...I appreciate...the gesture.”

Each command was more dolorous than the previous one. Several times he cursed the engineers for all the passwords his sub-commanders had placed on the systems, but at long last the fusion engine roared, its builders’ limitations removed.

There was not a single minute left to spare. The allied General had said there was one hour left before the city fell, and Justin did not think it was a figure of speech.

The *Exemplar* charged in the dust, straight at the breach. There was no delay, no time to give the enemy fliers time to acquire data on him.

And suddenly he was out of the dust.

King’s Landing City was in flames.

And there was a massive breach in the walls.

Justin overrode the last protocols and pressured his Behemoth to accelerate further, crushing enemy infantry and tanks under the armoured pillars that were the feet of the Behemoth. The last operational weapons he had fired at close-range, and he heard a clamour mounting from the breach.

They began to fire at him, and the impacts shook the *Exemplar*.

In a more rational battlefield, he would have heard the screams of his crew, but they were all dead now. Damn the Red Witch. Damn Aegon Targaryen.

It was a race to the breach. If he could use his Behemoth to fill the gap, if...

The plasma missile struck the ammunition sections and suddenly two-third of the remaining systems indicated critical damage.

“Looks like...I will...not...be...the hero...” He was tired. Why was he so exhausted?

“This is Ser Justin Massey of the Behemoth Exemplar. Code Alpha- Alpha-Alpha-Zero-Zero-One,” in his haste, he had forgotten to change it when he had taken command, “Protocol Valyria. I demand the core’s overload, fusion discharge immediate.”

“Received and Acknowledged.”

He could not save King’s Landing, but he was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of troops. All of them deserved whatever he did to them, for their allegiance to the monsters they had chosen to follow. And they were going to pay dearly. The explosion of a Behemoth in the middle of an army was going to be something to remember.

“King’s Landing expects everyone will do its duty.”

Five seconds later, Justin Massey and over four hundred thousand soldiers vanished in a colossal explosion of light.