**Chaos Arc**

**Chapter 1**

**Victory or Chaos**

**Regent of the Reach Willas Tyrell, 07.11.300AAC, Highgarden System**

A year ago, it would have been child’s play to summon the Lord of the Horn Hill System and give him his marching orders.

Seven Hells, House Tyrell had done exactly that when they sent him to the Iron Sector far away from – in theory – any significant conflict! And it had been after the damn Dornish blew apart the shipyards of Westbrook, Ambrose and Honeyholt in their never-damned-enough Operation Midnight they boasted about everywhere a Reacher ear was near.

If the position was less advantageous than the total superiority his Lord Father had enjoyed so much, Willas would still have summoned his bannersman in a hurry at his return from Pyke.

For all the official apologies that would be given afterwards, it was better not to give the Dowager Lady of House Tarly the time to coach her son. And no, the Regent of the Reach hadn’t needed the loud ‘advices’ of his grandmother to realise that letting the ‘heroes’ of the Iron Expeditionary Force contact their spies and gain the full picture of the disaster was a very bad idea.

The problem was that they hadn’t given him the choice.

Lady Melessa Tarly had requested three days for her son to rest before they answered positively his ‘generous invitation’, and everyone aware of military realities knew how much the excuse was worth. After a long journey in Deep Space, anyone who wasn’t rested was likely on death’s door.

And Willas could do nothing but accept it.

His grandmother had whispered some of the most acidic expressions he’d ever heard – the ‘Queen of Thorns’ persona had regained a lot of her strength in the last seven days – but it didn’t change the truth.

House Tyrell had suffered humiliations after humiliations in the last months. House Tarly had not. The two systems where the son of the man who had killed the Usurper exerted an overwhelming influence were Horn Hill and Hunt Fields, and both were fortified and untouched by war. Assuredly they were on the frontlines with Dorne now, but the same had been said for Highgarden against the Lannisters not so long ago.

Worse, Lady Olenna’s ‘friends’ had whispered to her that Tarly officers had been introduced to local industrialists and influential aristocrats of Hammerhal, and this with the benediction of Lady Cordwayner. One year ago, Willas would have stopped it in the cradle – or any other member of House Tyrell would have. His father and Lord Gerold Cordwayner were great friends, and so were Loras and Arthur, Gerold’s eldest son.

There was a minor problem, however. Lord Gerold Cordwayner had died at the Harvest Graveyard when his ship of the line broke in two or suffered one of the numerous catastrophic blows the Reach battle-line took on that cursed day. Arthur Cordwayner had been on another ship of the line, but it hadn’t saved him either. In the end, the Lordship of House Cordwayner had gone directly to Bryan Cordwayner, the second son...who also happened to be a prisoner of war of the Dornish.

In practical terms, this meant Willas had exactly zero authority to tell Lady Cordwayner and the Dowager Lady Tarly to stop whatever game they were playing.

The boot was on the other foot, and not just because they were on the banners of House Cordwayner.

Yes, Willas was aware how bad the pun was.

The ‘Regent of the Reach’ groaned deep inside. Day after day, the *de facto* Master of Highgarden wondered why he had accepted the job. The power of his House was fissuring itself wherever he looked, and he spent close to twelve hours a day buried under problems which would give him plenty of grey hair if he was allowed to survive long enough.

“The Honourable Lord of Horn Hill, Wielder of Heartsbane, Lord Samwell Tarly! His Honourable Wife, Lady Asha Tarly!”

Willas and Garlan abandoned momentarily their chairs as the duo entered the large conference room. For the sake of the illusion he was still in control, the young Tyrell Regent hoped his exhaustion wasn’t too visible on his face.

As their ‘visitors’ took a good half-minute to walk the space separating them from his brother and himself, Willas focused on the young Lord. Given the rumours of heroism and peerless tactical skills spreading everywhere, had suddenly Samwell Tarly changed into a second Usurper’s Bane?

The reality appeared disappointing...at first glance. The brown-haired boy was still fat for his age, though war appeared to have forced him to lose a little weight. His wife had not changed either. Whether her name was Greyjoy or Tarly, Lady Asha was moving like an animal in cage, perpetually trying to bite the hand which fed her.

Yes, Willas could recognise that with the benefit of hindsight marrying those two together had been a monumental mistake. It had likely saved the Iron Sector...or what was left of it anyway. But the price had been far too catastrophic in exchange. They had lost House Peake, House Rowan was a planet-sized warhead waiting to be detonated, and House Tyrell had received no gains from arranging this union...and would never will.

Of course, until the real reason he wanted to summon them was spoken, they all pretended to be the best of friends. Drinks were ordered, a peaceful music began to play, and there were compliments for the flowers sent and money spent on various charity organisations.

“We are glad you’re properly rested, my Lord.” Willas rolled his eyes. Garlan could have ignored the ‘excuse’, but with so many things going wrong, the ‘Gallant’ had his legendary patience on a constant decrease since the conflict had begun. “Since we have lost enough time, I will be blunt. We want to give you a new command, which, we all hope, will stop the next Dornish offensive before it can claim more of our systems.”

“I see.” Samwell didn’t look at him, instead he took one of the treats presented to him by the Tyrell butler...and posed it in front of him without eating him. That’s of course when his wife intervened.

“In this case, Lord Regent, Ser, we will be honest and straightforward. When this war began, House Tarly supported it because it was a *just* war. It was an opportunity to crush the arrogance of House Lannister. It was promises of great economic prosperity and important trade agreements which convinced the workforce of Horn Hill and our main partners to support the military operations. And it was oaths to Mace Tyrell and the so-called King Aegon VI Targaryen we were sworn to obey.”

Willas felt a growing pit opening in his stomach, because even if plenty of Houses no doubt felt that way, you never placed the oaths to your Lord Paramount like they were an afterthought at the end of a tirade.

“My Lord Father being indisposed, I am the Lord Regent of Highgarden and the Reach until his return.”

Which wouldn’t be for tomorrow, no matter what happened to the frontlines. Their rare agents among the Dornish had told them his Lord Father had been sent to Sunspear along with the other highborn hostages too valuable to be wasted in the prisoner camps. Rescuing him would require House Martell suing for peace...or paying a kingly ransom House Tyrell couldn’t afford.

“Yes. I notice you don’t speak about the mass-murderer waiting in orbit above this planet. You know, the one who killed ten billion Crownlanders because if he couldn’t claim the capital world of the Seven Sectors, no one would have it.”

Willas recognised immediately what Asha Tarly was doing. The black-haired Ironborn was playing the role of the ‘bad bannersman’, leaving her husband the good role. Had it been Melessa Tarly’s idea in the first place? Most likely. The Lady Dowager was born in House Florent, and the fox was a cunning animal.

“King Aegon...” Garlan cleared his throat, “King Aegon, the Sixth of the Name, has not-“

“Oh, please.” The Tarly Lady snorted, martial figure even when wearing a red-green robe. “The madman butchered King’s Landing population, okay? We do not have the full recounting of the battle, but it’s obvious he ordered a total bombardment against the largest urban centres of the capital world. I’m saying ten billion as a conservative number, by the way. There is a proper definition for what he is: *genocidal butcher*. You might feel differently. But House Tarly didn’t agree to support these atrocities when the call to arms came from Highgarden.”

“The Dornish began this war, and their atrocities-“ Garlan had not the time to finish this sentence.

“The Dornish struck military targets you were incredibly neglectful at protecting!” The black-eyed woman snarled. “And even if they didn’t, they killed less than a million overall. They didn’t raze planets. They didn’t create an ocean of blood, conducted hundreds of thousands of summary executions, and used forbidden sciences and other esoteric resources to conduct the greatest massacres possible!”

Somehow, Willas didn’t feel very reassured that the Lady Tarly didn’t know how ‘Aegon VI’ had been replaced.

“I understand your...reluctance to fight for Aegon VI.” Willas affirmed. “But we have not the choice.”

He tried to find the eyes of Samwell Tarly, but the Lord of Horn Hill was perfectly content eating and looking at his wife. Bastard.

“Why not?” Asha Tarly was a bitch. Everyone was aware of the reason House Tyrell couldn’t easily turn their backs on the cause of Aegon VI Targaryen. His sister was officially wed to him, and even if the last supporters of his cause dropped dead tomorrow, House Lannister and House Martell would refuse to leave them as Lord Paramount. “He is here, alone, broken, and his remaining supporters are worth nothing.”

“Many of his supporters still hold large strongholds in the River Sector!”

“For all the good it’s going to do to us...” the black-haired Lady answered sardonically. “We can’t supply them, and the moment the Starks come for their throats, they will surrender or they will die. Unless you mean the rumours of genocide coming from Atranta are going to help us?”

“This is-“

“But honestly, it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. This was a war fought for Reach interests. And right now, it is House Tarly’s opinion that the interests of the Reach have been slaughtered, ridiculed, humiliated, and torn apart for the pride of two imbeciles. You may wish to continue to fight for Aegon VI and Mace Tyrell’s legacy. We do not.”

Ordinarily, after hearing of their bannersmen speaking like this, guards would have been called, and various warnings about seditious moves would be said.

And Willas couldn’t do it anymore.

House Tarly was the only thing which prevented the entire collapse of the ‘Dornish front’ right now. If he arrested Lord Samwell and his wife, it would be a question of days before Horn Hill turned its cloak along with House Hunt. House Florent would follow. And ‘Queen Rhaenys’ and her fleets would pour into the gap in their defences. Hammerhal and Norcross would either fall or change their allegiance. Highgarden would be totally cut off from the Hightower-sworn Houses, and Lord Leighton would of course recognise everything was lost and pull back his fleets before signing a cease-fire with the Dornish.

Even if the Red Viper didn’t come in person to storm the gates of Highgarden, the war would be over for House Tyrell.

Willas bitterly – and silently – thanked his father, his grandmother, and all the persons who had made this hellish situation possible in the first place.

“A different King would see the interests of the Reach incredibly threatened,” House Tarly knew it as well as he did, of course. “I am not going to say Joffrey *Lannister* can’t be reasonable. He can, especially with Lord Tywin dead. But the death of the Old Lion will force him to make compromises with his main bannersmen and the most important mega-corporations of Lannisport and the Western Sector. He will want to support industrialisation on a grand scale. Planets like Horn Hill are not what they desire from the Reach’s defeat. The Lannisters and their vassals want worlds much like Westbrook is now: little orbital industry left, and a workforce mostly dedicated to exporting its food production’s surplus. House Lannister wants indeed the entire Reach under a single crown. But in this vision, all Lords will be demilitarised and told to buy their weapons at Casterly Rock or from one Western weapon-maker.”

“And Dorne?”

“Dorne wants to break the Reach,” Willas replied bluntly. “The different Hightower bannersmen and some of our frontline Hightower knights have already received overtures to promise them their own separate kingdom once we are defeated. Rhaenys Martell and her forces want to dismember the Reach until they can swallow it piece by piece. They don’t have the resources to conquer and administrate us, so they try to break us until we will be assimilated on their schedule.”

“This sounds very much like speculation,” at last Lord Tarly decided to intervene in the debate.

“Not really,” Garlan denied. “We received an offer from unofficial channels from Dorne less than thirty-hours ago. To keep it simple, they want *everything*.”

“Everything?” There was no need to be a great judge of people to know Asha Tarly didn’t believe him.

“They want to keep every stellar system they have south of the Mander Rift,” his brother explained.

“Which is rather reasonable,” the damn woman interrupted him again. “Because you know, you aren’t going to retake them anytime soon save by using the first waves of assault ships as target *sponges*.”

It was awful to admit this declaration was disgustingly accurate.

“They want Goldengrove.”

“Oh?” For the first time, the daughter of the traitor Balon was surprised. Not so much her husband, however.

“Yes, I suppose that with Lady Peake’s having the best claim, they would seize the chance.”

“Glad you agree,” Garlan added darkly. “North of the Mander Rift, they want the systems to be divided between themselves and the Stormlanders. South of Highgarden, House Hightower will be recognised as legitimate rulers of a new kingdom which will encompass Oldtown, Blackcrown, Orme, Three Towers, Arbor, Sunhouse, Uplands, Graves, Honeyholt, and Bandallon.”

The last move alone would be devastating, since most of the untouched industrial and manpower potential of the Reach was including these systems.

It was an extremely seductive move for House Hightower. It was a trap too. It was true that only Honeyholt had been raided in the initial phase of the war and thus seen its shipyards destroyed. But Willas knew this wasn’t where the Dornish daggers waited. Oldtown needed an enormous foreign market to export its manufactured goods. Its huge merchant fleet – which had suffered some losses but remained considerable – was only financially sound if they had at least the Reach to export their cargoes without customs and other ruinous taxes.

His grandfather Lord Leighton was aware of that, since House Hightower had not negotiated behind their backs. But how long it would stay that way remained an unpleasant question...

“I freely admit the cost of this breaking would be felt more badly at Highgarden than anywhere else.” If someone thought the Martell and their spears were going to let them stay in power, Willas had a lot of war bonds to sell them right now. “But no one in the Reach will be untouched. The first reports coming from the agents were able to sneak into Nightsong and the other captured systems make clear the Dornish are deliberately trying to change us. Be it religion, succession laws, food, industry, social hierarchy...let be no mistake, if we don’t reconquer these systems, in two decades, these systems won’t be inhabited with Reachers. They will be Dornish in every way which matters.”

It was costing them a lot of occupation forces, and there was violence. Yet the defeat of House Tyrell at the Harvest Graveyard had been so total that for all intent and purposes, all the ‘insurrections’ achieved was to kill a lot of men loyal to House Tyrell.

And in the meanwhile, House Martell recruited young women *of the Reach* to serve in the Dornish forces...where no doubt they would be suitably indoctrinated to be loyal to House Martell.

“I admit these terms are particularly...bad.” Samwell Tarly agreed. “And no, I don’t want to have Oberyn Martell as my liege. Nor do I want to see my culture disappear. But.”

“But?” Willas knew it was both a relief before more bad news came.

“But the fact remains, as it stands, the only battles the Reach fought against the Dornish fleet resulted in one-sided massacres. As bad as it is to negotiate with Rhaenys Targaryen or someone Dornish now, one more lost battle and our enemies will likely be able to impose the peace terms in this very palace. And I don’t think their offers will stay as they are once our resistance is crushed.”

“Obviously, no one can promise victory with complete certainty,” Garlan acknowledged with humility, “but we have modernised in a hurry some of our formerly mothballed ships, and introduced new starfighters and new tactics in order to counter the weapons of the Dornish Navy. The new command we were speaking of is New Barrel. We are reasonably sure the enemy is going to attack it before the end of this month, and we think the forces assigned to it will be sufficiently trained and receive enough new equipment to deny the system to the Dornish.”

It was a very big risk they were taking, and not just by naming Samwell Tarly at the head of its new...well, in tonnage, it was more a flotilla than a proper fleet, even if you counted the Tarly squadron which was supposed to add its strength to the committed warships.

There was a long technical discussion between his brother and the ‘big-boned’ Lord, and to his relief the Lord of Horn Hill appeared to be convinced by the gambit they were playing.

“This new strategy has merits.” The survivor of the insane war which had raged in the Iron Sector affirmed. “Of course, Horn Hill will need...reassurances to be comfortable about it.”

Yes, it was definitely Dowager Lady Melessa who had written their speech.

Sometimes Willas wondered how low had they fallen than they required to bribe their own bannersmen to continue this terrible war. Most often, he wondered how worse it could get before it got any better.

“What sort of reassurance do you need?”

“Oh nothing too onerous. We just would be incredibly appreciative if we had the assurance House Tarly will pay only for the war pensions of the men sworn to my authority.”

Willas desperately wished for any sign Samwell Tarly – or his wife for that matter – weren’t serious.

But they were, and he saw no sign of weakness in their eyes. Asha Tarly, in fact, seemed to relish in the blow she had just struck.

No doubt Melessa Tarly had informed her how ugly the pension issue promised to be for the next months, never mind the next years.

And if other systems demanded the same thing...Highgarden would have to pay these astronomical sums alone.

They were so screwed.

**‘King Aegon VI Targaryen’, 08.11.300AAC, Highgarden System**

If Jacaerys had ever entertained the idea being a responsible ‘King’ in a period of crisis was fun, the last days would have confirmed beyond doubt it wasn’t.

And if it was possible to give Westeros the true Aegon VI without losing his head in the next hour and allowing the Seven Sectors to fall in more madness than they were currently plunged into, the Heir to Driftmark would never have ‘claimed’ the throne under any circumstances.

Unfortunately, Aegon was madder than their most bitter political opponents had warned the Quadrant before everything went up in flames.

And this meant that for all sins, Jacaerys was forced to play the role with a face he utterly loathed.

If only it was the smallest of the repayments he had to pay for a long series of sins...

“How badly it is going to impact the economic situation?” He abandoned those dark thoughts, concentrating instead upon what could be done. “I am afraid I don’t know about the figures to realise the magnitude of how much the pensions are going to cost.”

“In practical terms,” Willas Tyrell shook his head, “the reality is that we won’t be able to pay anything like half of the pensions we owe in the long term. House Tarly refusing to pay is a problem, but the fact is after the Harvest Graveyard cost us eighteen million dead alone, the pensions for the families of our fallen soldiers and spacemen was always going to be something which would drag us into financial ruin. The only reason it’s not worse is...well, we don’t have to pay the families of the systems currently under Dornish occupation.”

Jacaerys grimaced.

“Are you telling me that if we manage somehow to turn the situation around and beat House Martell and House Lannister, our economic situation is going to worsen?”

“Yes, yes it’s exactly what my brother says.”

Jacaerys turned towards Margaery Tyrell...well, Margaery Targaryen, though it was at best a polite fiction these days. Whether he was the real Aegon or not – and he wasn’t – the exiled Lord of Driftmark was not going to try to share the same bed as ‘his Queen’. The icy glares the daughter of Mace Tyrell gave him were sufficiently cold to make clear trying to enforce his privileges of ‘husband’ would likely be the last thing he’d ever do in his life.

“How do we solve it, then?”

“By being more ruthless than our enemies.”

This was the answer he would have expected from a Lannister, not from a Tyrell.

“I can’t cut the budget of the hospitals nor anything which includes health. The agricultural power of all the planets we still have is more vital than ever. And the military budget always takes priority, clearly. Everything else is going to receive drastic cuts.”

“This will be in addition to the large expansion of the war bonds we have in mind.” His ‘wife’ told him. “And you will be pleased to know most of the Crown assets you left at Highgarden are going to be used as collateral for the new set of wartime measures.”

For a single second, Jacaerys wondered if there would be something left of a central authority next year. Civil wars had rarely been good for the legitimacy of House Targaryen to say the least, but even the Dance of Dragons had not resulted in such a quick collapse of the Crown.

“I will bow to your greater knowledge of economics and other non-military fields.” The former Admiral said. “But I must admit I’m incredibly...ill-at-ease that we are giving a defensive command to a Lord who has no reason to be loyal to you or me.”

“I share your fears to some extent.” Willas commented thoughtfully. “The problem is that between how many senior commanders your little disaster in the Crownlands and my own father cost us the number of reliable commanders is dangerous close to zero.”

Jacaerys couldn’t stop a grimace to stop appearing on his face.

“I realise we failed to-“

“Failure is too weak a word to describe the absolute propaganda fiasco you created,” Margaery hissed, managing to look like a rose...a rose with a lot of thorns as her fury increased. “My father proved he was a buffoon and shouldn’t have been allowed to command anything bigger than a scout cruiser, but at least he lost a conventional battle and had the good sense to surrender. He lost a war, but at least it was warrior against warrior, Admiral against Admiral. The scale of the defeat was unprecedented, but we didn’t bathe in the blood of innocents AND lost!”

“I am not Aegon.” A sentence he was forced to repeat incredibly often since he had revealed the ‘substitution’ to the Tyrell siblings.

“I know you’re not Aegon!” the ‘Targaryen Queen’ answered. “If you were, I would have invited you into my quarters before giving you the same treatment the Dornish gave my ancestors.”

“Sister.” The warning in Willas’ voice was clear.

“Fine.” And Margaery Targaryen nee Tyrell stormed out of the room.

For a good minute, none of the two men spoke.

“What a waste.”

“Indeed.” Jacaerys didn’t know if Willas spoke about the war, the ‘Royal Marriage’ issue, or some other disaster which had been revealed in the last months, but it was truly a waste. Between Aegon, his father, Mace Tyrell, and frankly thousands of highborn minds including one Jacaerys Targaryen, the kingdom had turned into something straight from the darkest nightmares.

“To return to the strategic situation, I think it’s a ‘damned if we do, damned if we don’t’,” the Regent of the Reach confided to him. “We have to hold the line Lyberr-Fire Ball-Bridges-New Barrel. If we don’t, Goldengrove is going to explode in our faces before I can do anything to stabilise it.”

“And there aren’t a lot of things at Westbrook which can deter the Dornish if they come that way.” The system was still trying to recover from the initial ‘Midnight raid’. And once Westbrook was gone, Highgarden would be threatened from another direction...meaning the last major fleet they possessed would have to retreat from Dustonburry...again.

“Yes. Trying to commit what we sent to New Barrel and the other potential targets is a greater risk we will admit officially, but if these ‘invincible Dornish starfighters’ and the other ships responsible for the Harvest Graveyard rout us again, the ambitions of our less-than-loyal bannersmen won’t matter anymore. We need a victory before this year’s end, or the war is lost.”

**Lady Asha Tarly, 08.11.300AAC, Highgarden System**

One could easily say her husband was a bit too submissive when it came to the women he loved, which meant his mother and herself.

The same couldn’t be voiced for the men he was tied by blood or something else. Axell Florent was learning it the hard way.

“Respectfully, I still think we should have pressed for more concessions,” the ex-Inspector-General of Harlaw said, adjusting his ridiculous green-gold uniform. Of course in her opinion, most of the uniforms of the Reach were ridiculous. If they were half as competent as their clothes were ornamented, Highgarden and its bannersmen would be the masters of the known galaxy.

Alas for them, they were rather far from this state of affairs.

“And respectfully, I disagree, Ser Axell.” There was no ‘grand-uncle’ recognition, the two respected each other, but there was little familial warmth when they weren’t in public. “As tempting as it is to let the Tyrells pay for our fuel expenditures, the only thing it is going to do is to accelerate their downfall.”

The Florent commander grunted before conceding the point.

“I know. I suppose...I suppose I am only human. After decades spent enduring their mockeries, I am glad that at last, the armoured boot is on the other side and trampling the Tyrell pride.”

“No one is arguing they don’t deserve it, Ser Axell,” Asha intervened. “Still, Garlan Tyrell thought that the available forces can protect New Barrel.”

“As long as there is an enormous Tarly commitment,” the old man derisively said. “We aren’t contributing in starfighters, but the four armoured cruisers and two battlecruisers will be yours. Half of the light cruisers and scout cruisers are too. Save the heavy cruisers, this small Task Force belongs to Horn Hill, not Highgarden.”

“Something my mother was very really happy about,” Sam grinned. “Many officers in the Highgarden council rooms are aware of the bargains, but House Fossoway of New Barrel isn’t. They will see House Tarly is defending their system from the bloodthirsty Dornish while the Tyrells can’t send a single important capital ship.”

Willas Tyrell of course didn’t have a lot of choices. Between the Lannisters and the Martells, the Regent had to block the most direct jump paths leading to Highgarden. And this involved large fixed defences and the last ships of the line.

“Let’s not be too enthusiastic,” Axell sighed after a few heartbeats. “I want really much to believe you two will win at New Barrel, but our agents are better than the Tyrells’, and they affirm the Dornish are going to launch an enormous offensive north of the Mander Rift. They won’t target the Bridges System, not when many forts have been deployed to all jump points, but they can and will target the Fire Ball System.”

And once they took Fire Ball, the door was opened to Goldengrove.

Goldengrove, seat of House Rowan. And their Lord had perished at King’s Landing because Aegon Targaryen was a murderous imbecile.

Before this war, House Rowan could be counted among the most loyal bannersmen of House Tyrell, if one excepted the Heiress of the Noble House.

Now? Asha had seen the reports from Lady Melessa’s network, and they made for ugly reading.

The only reason it hadn’t exploded in the flames of insurrection was because there were Tyrell ships and soldiers controlling the orbital infrastructure and weapons. That didn’t mean it could be sustained for long. There were millions of people walking in the streets every day to demand explanations, and since they weren’t receiving those they wanted, the popular pressure was not in support of House Tyrell, more in finding an end to the hostilities.

“If we lose Goldengrove, it will be impossible to strike back at the Lannisters.”

“Let’s be serious a few instants,” Asha shook her head. “We can’t really ‘strike back’ at the Lannisters. Hell, I’m really surprised Baelor Hightower hasn’t already convinced the Tyrells to step down and be replaced by Oldtown as Lord Paramounts. The last major fleet of the Reach is his to command.”

“Garlan and Willas Tyrell have a few capital ships,” Ser Axell Florent frowned. “It wouldn’t be enough to counter Hightower ambitions, but they would not go down without a fight. The resulting conflagration would allow the Martells to dictate their terms in the weeks after. Not that it is going to change anything in the end, of course.”

Asha chuckled.

“You don’t believe the waves of new construction are going to make a difference, Ser?” Asha knew the opinion of the Reacher, obviously.

“We all know there is no way House Tyrell will be able to find the crew for those new warships.” The dark-haired highborn answered. “They should already be scrapping all ships of the line and focusing on the battlecruisers. Unless ‘Queen Rhaenys’ returns millions of prisoners of war in the next months, the Tyrells are going to face an awful shortage of experienced spacemen and other military personnel. And they have other problems.”

“Fuel,” Asha began. “Paying their soldiers and their administration. Salvaging the merchant ships they still have.”

“Trying to adapt their trade balance when they used the pillage of the Storm Sector to fill their purses,” Sam added. “They can’t rely on royal loans and other forms of investment from the Crown Sector either.”

And that was just the evident economic blunders Mace Tyrell had left as his legacy.

“The Sector is rich, but the enemies of the Roses are plundering it like Mace Tyrell stole with the benediction of Rhaegar Targaryen.” Asha grimaced. “House Tyrell and its main allies won’t last six months. And that’s if the Martells or the Lannisters don’t manage to rout their last fleet.”

“If that happens, it is going to be ugly,” Sam whispered. “Not as ugly as Pyke maybe, but...”

“It will be in the very heart of the Reach,” Axell Florent finished. “And while I hate House Tyrell, I wish there was a way to prevent this...chaos. Unfortunately, it is entire possible there is no solution. This war began badly, and the military disasters made the internal situation considerably worse.”

“Victory or chaos...”

Asha thought ‘victory and chaos’ was more appropriate. But saying it would be far too depressing...

**Lord William Mooton, 08.11.300AAC, Maidenpool System**

“My Lord, we are under attack!”

“What?” William Mooton raised his eyes from the never-ending pile of data-stacks and bureaucratic work which was his due since he had taken the Lordship. “Where? Are the Darrys making their move at last?”

If so, they were extremely late. All of his so-called ‘experts’ he had inherited from his defunct brother after the Usurper’s Rebellion had insisted a Darry attack would happen in the first couple of weeks of a war at the latest.

Yet this attack had never materialised, and the more they spoke, the confidence he had in these so-knowledgeable minds was faltering.

Few people had predicted the complete disintegration of the Crown and the River Sectors, but his high-ranked advisors were delighting in repeating their failures over and over.

“No, my Lord it’s...it’s the Gulltown merchant we authorised in orbit. It’s...not a merchant ship.”

“Ridiculous! You have watched this hull for several days! It can’t be anything than what it did!”

“Yes, Lord. But-“

“What, but?”

“It is possible its purpose wasn’t to transport goods as a sign of friendship. The situation is confused in orbit, but it becomes evident this merchant ship was full of Golden Company’s elite troops.”

William Mooton felt like the ground was suddenly opening under his feet.

“Blackfyre,” the Lord of the Mooton System spat. Even given how erratic the communications had become in the last months, what had happened to Gulltown and several other systems had filtered through them.

Like everyone else, the River highborn had thought the ‘bastard threat’ was over.

Like everyone else, he was proven wrong.

“And the reason why my squadrons haven’t transformed this ship into debris and bloody pieces of golden armour is?”

“There...there appears to be some complications.” The officer clad in the red-white uniform of House swallowed heavily. “The enemy has managed somehow to upload a dangerous virus in our command control structure which...err...it disables most of our forts and defence platforms.”

William didn’t wait for further bad news and ran to the control room of his palace where he could command his starships and the men manning it. It took less than three minutes, but in this amount of time the situation had unravelled horribly.

The River Lord in fact arrived just in time to see the *King of the Salmons*, pride of the Maidenpool fleet, striking down its colours to...

“What in the name of the Warrior is happening? Our forces are surrendering to mere light cruisers!”

“My Lord! Our ships are totally compromised! A malignant program has somehow been uploaded in their fire control systems! All our captains report the Blackfyre ships as friendly units!”

“Then forget the electronics and return to manual mode!”

“Impossible, my Lord! The securities which should permit this are deactivated!”

William Mooton shook his head.

“No. No, that can’t be right. One wouldn’t be able to upload something so complicated in mere days. To do that, they would have to have access to the Western software we received from the Lannister generosity and the components we stockpiled from...unofficial Crown sources.”

House Mooton had hedged its bets before declaring for King Joffrey Targaryen, but before it had ensured it would get access to the best equipment from the two contenders. It had not been really difficult: the rich bounties of the two planets he ruled was desired in every fish market of importance nearby.

But it should have ensured their communications and systems were secure. No one should have the knowledge to adapt to a combination of Western and Crown technology.

Unless...

“Varys.” Suddenly the rumours spreading about the missing Master of Whisperers being present near Gulltown were not sounding so ludicrous. “Varys gave them the information they needed.”

As if the enemy had just waited for them to realise that, the communication console next to the tank-sized tactical display activated without anyone prompting, revealing the image of a young and beautiful silver-haired woman dressed in a black-silver armour which had to cost twice the one he had ordered for himself...and that he wasn’t wearing, since the attack had struck so unexpectedly.

“’Arch-Dominarch’ Rhaenyra Blackfyre, I suppose?”

“’Queen Rhaenyra’ will be sufficient,” the Valyrian-looking descendant of the Black Dragon smiled. “Since you know who I am, let’s skip the courtesies and the politeness. My forces have taken control of your chief orbital strongholds and neutralised your starships. Your military, as far as space forces are concerned, is essentially powerless to stop me. As tradition demands, I ask for your surrender.”

“The outcome is far from decided!” William retorted angrily. “You may have defeated my forces in a treacherous manner, but I assure you my army is ready to defend their homeworld to the last plasma shell!”

“I don’t doubt their determination,” the Blackfyre pretender told him in a tone that was mildly pleasing. “That’s why at the moment we’re speaking their headquarters are filled with sleeping gas.”

A series of orders in the next seconds confirmed this was no idle boast: more and more bunkers and high-secret installations were no longer answering.

“I am a loyal servant of King Joffrey!”

“And your loyalty does you credit, but your King is somewhere between Casterly Rock and Old Oak as we speak. He can’t do anything to help you, and nothing you have in your arsenal will be able to stop my forces. The only think you have to decide now is if you want to remain the Lord of the Mooton System for the next years. If you surrender quickly, I can be quite amenable to the idea. But if you decide to be stubborn, well...I’m sure you know how eager the Golden Company is for some planetary claims.”

William Mooton had been part of the royal court long enough to be sure this female pretender wasn’t an Aegon, a Joffrey, or a Viserys.

She was a pure-blooded Blackfyre in every way which mattered...and he couldn’t stop her.

His navy was vanquished before firing a single shot. The ships which had taken Gulltown were far above his head, meaning the orbital strikes would not be long in coming if he decided to resist. And his army was decapitated. Against the Darrys or some other River battalions, they could have challenged an invader’s landing...but it was the Golden Company, a band of exilic brutes which would lead the planetary assault.

“I...I surrender.” William Mooton closed his eyes. His honour had died in a few minutes. He had failed utterly his King and his people. Why did this black pretender had to come to Maidenpool of all places?

**Lord Raymund Darry, 10.11.300AAC, Darry System**

“Maidenpool has fallen, my Lord.”

“What?”

“The last ships which managed to escape Wode and Peasedale before the Blackfyre flotillas took control of the jump points are formal, my Lord. They took Maidenpool and most of its infrastructure completely intact.”

“How?” the man who was still technically Lord Paramount of the River Sector asked in disbelief. “That they were able to beat the few scout cruisers I left on our southern flank is perfectly doable with one or two heavy cruisers as flagship, but Maidenpool was defended by two ships of the line and four battlecruisers!”

This was the reason in the first place why he had been forced to leave House Mooton alone despite the fact these traitors declared for the pretender Joffrey. It had not been an easy decision to contemplate, because as much as House Mooton hadn’t the industrial heart of House Tully, Darry, or Blackwood, the Maidenpool System was hardly something unimportant for the Sector as a whole. Its population was superior to Darry with two billion and twenty million, its fisheries and other food-gathering resources were easily feeding three or four times that number if you had the gold dragons to pay for it, and diplomatically, House Mooton was an old House, one of the ancient ‘Petty kings’ in the Age of the First Men.

It had been bad enough to see a force which had stayed loyal in the dark days of the Usurper’s Rebellion abandon the loyalist cause, but the minor consolation was that they had not gone so far as to support a non-Targaryen King.

But now, they had fallen to the old enemy, the bastard threat which had made the realm bleed for decades, the Blackfyres.

“The communications were...in a bad state, but several captains alerts indicated their ships were unable to fire at the light cruisers launching boarding actions. And of course the entirety of their orbital grid and other defences went down in the first ten minutes for no reason at all.”

“A traitor among the Mooton high command?”

Years ago, it would have been extremely rare. But for this civil war, it seemed that no matter where one watched, new bands of oath-breakers rose to steal the shoes of their treacherous predecessors.

“This is a possibility we can’t exclude...but it must be a very high-ranked traitor, my Lord. I don’t think they must be more than five people besides Lord Mooton and his family who have the authority and the influence to do something like that.”

“Six months ago, I wouldn’t have believed it was possible.” Raymund confessed. “But the pretender Viserys captured the capital effortlessly, so evidently if it happened there, I don’t see why something similar can’t strike down the defences of Maidenpool.”

The Lord Paramount of the River and the Trident scowled at the thought of all these traitors grabbing the gold the King gave them and then turning their cloaks at the first opportunity.

“I suppose we will have to use our frigates and other intelligence-acquisition resources to ensure the same doesn’t happen to us.” Raymund Darry grunted. “Your opinion about the strategic consequences of this triple victory?”

“It won’t give the Blackfyre pretender important armies,” his chief of staff affirmed. “Wode and Peasedale have respectively sixty million and seventy-three million souls. Maidenpool is far better with two billion, but at least thirty percent is dedicated to its fisheries and agriculture. I’m afraid the decision to attack those three systems was to gain an enormous source of high-quality food. With these systems, the pretender ‘Arch-Dominarch’ will be able to feed Gulltown and the Vale at her own discretion. I would not be surprised, my Lord, if an informal agreement wasn’t signed before this operation between the Blackfyres diplomats and House Arryn.”

“House Arryn kept the Vale, the Gates of the Moon, and several other important exporters of food.” Raymund disagreed. “They don’t need that much the crimson salmons of Maidenpool as long as Old Anchor remains loyal.”

“True, my Lord. But the...short and disastrous attempt of the Lords loyal to Heir Robin Arryn to convince the Lords of the East our cause was just have created a lot of disruptions, and we don’t know how bad the refugee situation is for several systems. It isn’t as good as the pre-war levels to be sure. I don’t think anyone is going to complain if the merchants are able to resume their activities with Maidenpool.”

And in turn it would reinforce the claim of this Blackfyre pretender over the planets she had conquered. Damn her to the Seven Hells.

“The military situation is a bit more hazardous to estimate, but not only we’re encircled from the south-“

“The Blackfyre pretender has gained a lot of conventional warships she won’t need to build. I’m aware. Still, having a ship of the line and manning it are two very different things.”

“Yes, my Lord. But...she has Gulltown population behind her. And if she can keep the three systems she just annexed, she will be able to supply a rather large force. It won’t be enough to challenge the big fleets which remain in existence-“

“But she will represent a major threat, and she has now three potential invasion routes into the Crown Sector.”

A Sector which unfortunately, the Second Battle of King’s Landing was rumoured to have wiped out quantities of capital ships. It wouldn’t be enough to give House Maidenpool warships or any Noble House a decisive spear to conquer it, but a Blackfyre fleet could do enormous damage.

“Six months ago, we would have broken this female pretender in mere weeks, and that’s if she managed to conquer one system in the first place,” the Aegon-loyalist Lord said darkly.

“Yes, my Lord, but...the warships aren’t there anymore.”

“I know. Place our defence in high alert...and change our codes again. Then conduct a discreet inquiry among the Masterly Houses. The last thing we need is to be defeated like House Mooton just was.”

**Lord Varys Tivario, 11.11.300AAC, Maidenpool System**

For the life of him, Varys didn’t understand why House Mooton had chosen to ornate the crimson salmon on their banners rather than the argentine salmon. It was obvious the latter was the more delicious of the two, especially when eaten with a fine sauce of garlic, cream, and carefully prepared herbs!

Alas, saying it aloud would likely be received as an insult. The Westerosi Lords who were ruling Noble Houses were prickly that way, and Lord Mooton was not an exception.

Though the constipated expression of their ‘host’ had likely nothing to at all with salmon and everything about being on the receiving end of a sound thrashing.

“You seem to have something to say, my Lord,” his niece said between two bites in her salmon that a food-taster had verified beforehand.

“You are a vulture,” the River Lord hissed between his teeth, his undisguised anger reddening his face. “You profit from the greatest civil war seen in generations to conquer what was never yours to take.”

“An interesting point of view,” Rhaenyra commented lightly before using her fork and her knife to cut more parts of salmon. “But as far as carrion animals go, I prefer to be a dragon. They’re more efficient at preventing diseases...and they eat far more dead bodies.”

“I am not trying to exchange pleasantries!” William Mooton snarled, all politeness in abeyance.

“I fail to see what made you think I was joking...Lord Mooton.” The purple eyes stared coldly at the defeated ‘Admiral of Maidenpool’. “I am deadly serious. You say I am a vulture? So be it. But when one throws accusations like that, one must finish the logical reasoning. Vultures do not attack the healthy animals. Vultures prey on dead animals, and when they attack the living, it is the ill specimens, the near-death individuals, or the heavily wounded which are unable to follow the herd. If I am the vulture of Westeros, then it stands to reason the whole Seven Sectors are the corpse.”

The expression his niece gave her vanquished opponent was not amused.

“And honestly, I am a bit...disgusted how you stick to your beliefs of ‘legitimacy’ and ‘Targaryen righteousness’ when two of the senior claimants to the throne have just killed several billions of the Crown’s subjects. If I am a carrion animal, what must be said about the claimants who turned the living into corpses?”

“This wasn’t Joffrey’s fault,” Eleanor Mooton intervened for the first time, her plate still filled with the content it had been served with. “And we support King Joffrey Targaryen, the First of His Name. His crown has not been...bathed in blood by all these atrocities.”

“The Ironborn of Great Wyk would say otherwise if they were still alive to share their feelings.”

The brown-haired Heiress of the crimson salmon was quick to protest.

“That was Lord Tywin’s doing, not Joffrey!”

“And until the ruthless Lion’s death in the Battle of Highgarden, his actions and those of the King he supported were one and the same,” Rhaenyra commented while playing with her silver fork. “Every King and Queen has to take responsibility for the actions of his subordinates. I certainly do it for mine. Why would your lover be different?”

Eleanor Mooton froze, and in her red-white robe, she looked very much like a doe facing a hungry dragon.

“You know...I should have expected it with your...advisor being the Master of Whisperers.”

“To be honest, Lady Mooton,” Varys began with a respectful tone. “You were certainly more discreet pursuing your...affair with Prince Joffrey Targaryen than others members of your dynasty were going to the whorehouses or chasing after married women.”

The boy who had eventually been crowned Aegon VI Targaryen was so bad in that regard discretion and him equalled thirteen.

“But it wasn’t enough to hide from the multitude of eyes on the payroll of the dreaded Spider.”

Varys shrugged, not bothered at all by the nickname. The people in the streets had often far worse for him.

“It is my business to discover the secrets of the realm. And I can confess that in this endeavour, while you were staying in the shadows and remarkably discreet, Barbara Bracken was far more...flamboyant.”

The blue eyes of the young woman flashed in anger, but it was not as violent as it should have been if it was a revelation. She knew. Varys had not been so certain before coming here, but the eunuch supposed women had their ways knowing they were in competition with a rival when trying to jump in the bed of a Prince.

“I hope it is not your intention to use me to hurt His Grace’s feelings, because I won’t help you.”

“Lady Mooton,” Rhaenyra spoke again in a tone which betrayed for the first time her exasperation. “How would we use your affection with the claimant Joffrey Targaryen in the first place? Most of the River Sector is between us, and it’s increasingly difficult for courier ships to travel in this war zone. And honestly, since there is no betrothal contract to speak of between you and him, trying to pressure the Western cause using you is never going to work. I conquered Maidenpool, Wode, and Peasedale for the food resources they can provide and their strategic location along the Crab Rift, not because of your...horizontal activities with my distant cousin.”

Something flickered in the blue eyes of the Mooton woman, something more akin to...pity?

“You don’t understand anything about love, don’t you?”

Varys stayed silent, wondering what sort of answer his niece would give. If on many topics Rhaenyra was sharing everything, her amorous relationships had never been discussed very much.

“Love can wait. It isn’t going to help me rebuild the realm.”

“I see. Then what are your intentions towards our worlds and our military forces, your Grace?”

**Commander of Two Thousand Ulwyck Uller, 12.11.300AAC, New Barrel System**

One year ago, Ulwyck would never have dared leading an attack inside the cockpit of his new starfighter, even if it was a war game.

But one year ago, the Tyrells and their sycophants were still thought to be something dangerous.

Now there were just pathetic shadows of the old wars.

The Silent Murder-class starfighters of Dorne outclassed everything the Reach could field, and it was becoming so easy that capturing Highgarden, something which was thought to be the dream of a man addicted to serpent venom, was something gaining credence day after day.

Of course before taking the seat of those weak braggarts, they had to make sure the Stormlanders didn’t grab the northern Reach while the Dornish did the work of fighting the Reachers...what was left of their forces after the Harvest Graveyard anyway.

“Brother,” Ulwyck cursed, since hearing his brother’s voice meant his flag captain hadn’t been able to convince him he was aboard his starship. “I hope you have a good reason for what are you doing.”

“Brother,” Ulwyck said cheekily, something no one but Oberyn Martell would do with Lord Harmen Uller, Master of Hellholt. “I want to claim a few kills today, and if I am not leading the attack, my blades are going to remain bloodless today.”

“You are a Commander of Two Thousand, Ulwyck! You aren’t a Commander of Twenty!”

“Come on, brother,” he chuckled. “The long-range ion cannons are going to slaughter these obsolete forces we see ten million of kilometres away. And maybe ‘slaughter’ is too weak a word, I’ve seen pigs which fight better than the Tyrell’s bannersmen.”

“You knew all of that when we prepared the plan to capture the system and-“

“Sorry, interferences, arggh, interferences...” And Ulwyck cut the communication.

“You realise Lord Harmen is going to give you a memorable punishment, right?” the second of his squadron asked the very rhetorical question.

“He’s just jealous,” the knight of the Hellholt System sniffed disdainfully. “And he will forgive me since we’re about to claim one more system for House Uller!”

Nymeria Sand...no, Nymeria Arkadyr, had already been rewarded the Ashford System, and it was a great boon for Dorne, but today Ulwyck had no intention to let one of the Red Viper’s children earn the prize.

“Look at this. New Barrel is defenceless before us.”

Like many worlds which bowed and scrapped the boots of Mace Tyrell and his predecessors, New Barrel was a vision of white, blue, and green from afar. More water than the Reachers could drink, more cultivable fields than what half of Dorne could rely upon without relying on high-tech underground agriculture.

But after today, this was going to change, oh yes.

New Barrel, all of its industry, its one billion and a half of Reachers, the significant industry in the outer and inner system from asteroid mining...everything was going to have a new master.

“Yes, Ser. The merchant ships which are trying to flee are really stubborn.” His second remarked after an amused chuckle. “Should I send another warning shot? We are almost on top of them, and they’re still trying to accelerate with their snail engines.”

“Now, now, my dear Commander of a Hundred...that’s a gross insult against snakes and-“

The merchant ships blew up.

One instant, the starships were there, hundreds of thousands of tons built by some Reach shipyard to ferry food or manufactured goods to one of the Tyrell worlds, the next plasma and other types of ordnance were detonating in the void, generating something Ulwyck hadn’t seen since-

Since the Harvest Graveyard.

“Oh, no...” It was a fucking trap, and he like a Tyrell had jumped right in the middle of it. “Evasive action! Activate all countermeasures!”

“Ser Ulwyck?”

The sensors of the Silent Murder were at the cutting edge of Dornish technology, and Ulwyck’s starfighter was an improved version of the mass-produced ship-killer.

Five seconds were sufficient to see the four Reacher armoured cruisers and their escorts revealing themselves behind the ‘merchant ships’ which had just blew up.

Ulwyck Uller fired his missiles.

He never knew if they hit the target he selected from the dozens of energy signatures, for a storm of lasers and anti-starfighter missiles killed him along with three hundred other Dornish pilots.

**Lord Samwell Tarly, 12.11.300AAC, New Barrel System**

“It appears our Tyrell ‘masters’ aren’t the only ones who can be arrogant when they’re convinced of their own invincibility.” Asha told him as the last Dornish starfighter of an attack wave of five hundred died without achieving anything. Anything save their own destruction, of course.

“Let’s not get too overconfident ourselves, then,” he replied. “I would rather avoid being sent to a Dornish prisoner camp...the rumours are saying the average lunch is particularly awful.”

“Yes, yes...” his wife rolled her eyes, prowling like a Goddess of War their bridge. “But it is still a very good result. These ten fire ships weren’t cheap, but the spear of their starfighter has been decisively eliminated for no losses on our side.”

“And the way we used the same tactic they did at the Harvest Graveyard will hurt their pride.” In fact, it was likely it was going to do more than that; with five hundred and ten starfighters eliminated, the carriers of the Dornish space force had become extremely expensive and useless assets. “Do you think they’re going to retreat now?”

“No,” Asha smirked. “Their starfighters are gone, but their battle-line is intact. And the ship of the line they have? It’s the *Lord of Hell*.”

The young Lord of Horn Hill wasn’t a specialist of Dornish Houses like certain of his men were. But names like those didn’t demand a great culture of the Dornish highborn ranks.

“House Uller...” of course it had to be those bloody madmen. “Yes, they’re unlikely to retreat.”

And to be fair, the situation wasn’t that bad from the point of view of any attacker now that they ‘knew’ what were they dealing with: he had ‘only’ four armoured cruisers, two battlecruisers, three heavy cruisers, seven light cruisers, and twenty-one scout cruisers.

House Uller – he was going to assume these were the core of this Noble House’s warships – had one ship of the line, two battlecruisers, two heavy cruisers, eight light cruisers, sixteen scout cruisers, one light carrier, and twenty-six escort carriers.

No, from a strict tonnage and number of ships’ perspective, they still had the advantage, especially when those damned ion-armed battlecruisers were concerned. If he allowed them to enter optimal range, they wouldn’t last very long. So he wasn’t going to do that.

“The Dornish are accelerating towards the planet. And...wow, that was a rude transmission. I think I learned five new insults with that. Do you really think we killed someone important among the starfighter pilots?”

**Lord Harmen Uller, 12.11.300AAC, New Barrel System**

“We are going to make sure they die very, very slowly!”

“Yes, Hell Lord!”

They had killed his brother.

Ulwyck was a hot-headed idiot, but he was his hot-headed fool of a brother.

They were going to pay for that.

“Hell Lord, their starfighters are...circling at the edge of our maximal range. I don’t know what they’re going to do, but-“

“It doesn’t matter. We’re soon going to be in range of New Barrel. They are going to come at us, and we will demolish their fleet before punishing the Fossoways and whoever tried to trap us here. Or we will beat the forts first, and then turn our cannons against this fleet, which will leave them no choice but to die or return to Highgarden in failure!” Harmen snarled. “I really hope they do the former. They killed my brother, and I will avenge him. Nothing less than ten thousand lives of Reachers will be enough for-“

Once again, the tactical displays of his flagship were blinded by far-too-close explosions, and when the effect dissipated, the Lord of the Hellholt System gaped as one of his priceless battlecruisers was dead, and the other was losing debris at a rate which presaged nothing good for his men crewing the warship.

“What the Hell?”

“The starfighters! They used starfighters as replacement for their minelayers, Lord!”

No. No, they couldn’t have. It would have taken-

It would have taken the enemy anticipating his moves.

It would have taken him being so predictable a Reacher could tell what he did days before the attack was launched.

“We still can dictate the pace of the battle, Hell Lord.”

“Dictate with what?” The foremost weapons in his arsenal were the starfighters and the ion cannons of his battlecruisers. Both of which were clearly not in the best of shapes after the ambushes they sprang upon him. “We are faster than them. That’s all. Choose a new course which will allow us to avoid the planet and the enemy fleet.”

“Hell Lord?”

“Yes, we are running like Hell...” the black humour didn’t exactly receive any joyful expressions in return. “We have to save the *Hell Scorpion* and all the ships which were damaged by those mines. If we try to fight four armoured cruisers with one ship of the line, we will lose them.”

They would lose every other ship in their order of battle, including the carriers. The *Lord of Hell* had been refitted, but not with ion cannons. Harmen was sure it would kill two or three ships of the line belonging to House Tyrell, but the analysis of those armoured cruisers proved these weren’t Tyrell ships. The Dornish Lord didn’t know why they were here right now when they could have saved the Tyrell’s incompetent backsides in the last months, but their presence had not been taken into consideration before he left Cider Hall.

“I want to avenge my brother.” His fists tightened as his heart burned to turn his ship around and kill the bastards who stood between him and victory. “But we lack the forces to destroy them right now. We will return. I swear it. And we will bathe in Reacher blood that day.”

This skirmish would not save the lackeys of House Tyrell. Nothing would. But his brother...

Harmen glared at the tactical display as defeated tasted like ashes in his mouth.

**Lady Asha Tarly, 12.11.300AAC, New Barrel System**

Given the sheer number of insults coming from the Dornish warships, Asha was really surprised when the Uller commander decided he had enough.

“A pity,” the only woman to be present aboard the Reach flotilla said as the battle-line of the Hellholt ran like hell for the outer system where they would be able to translate in Deep Space. “Though it is rather logical given what we’ve done to their battlecruisers.”

“Indeed,” her husband took her right hand in his left. “At least it answers an important question I had. Those ion cannons are extremely impressive, but they haven’t been able to refit this ship of the line with it.”

“Yes...” Asha didn’t stop watching the holographic representation of the enemy warships. “But the problem with them running right now is that I’m unable to find out why. Is it because the ion cannons they mounted on lesser capital ships presented insurmountable challenges for the bigger hulls? Is it because they have decided upon a new close-quarter type of plasma or laser battery? Or is it something else entirely?”

“Those are very good questions,” Sam complimented her before frowning when she turned her head. “One we won’t need to ask ourselves, unfortunately, is if the Dornish ships are faster than ours. They are. And unless my calculations are wrong, they have a twenty percent advantage in acceleration for equivalent classes.”

“This is...bad.” Twenty percent was an ocean of difference when one or two percent could make all the difference between victory and death. Yet it was worse than that. The enemy had a heavily damaged battlecruiser, so they likely weren’t pushing their engines to the very limit of their capabilities. But above all, the Dornish had a twenty percent advantage of acceleration over the *Tarly* ships, which had been upgraded with new technology giving them notable advantages compared to the rest of the Reach warships. That meant the acceleration advantage was certainly closer to forty or fifty percent for the next battles which would see the Martell battlecruisers slaughter the Tyrell ships of the line. “Unless we manage to develop something to negate the fire of their battlecruisers, a conventional battle south of the Mander Rift is going to get ugly real fast.”

“Yes. They will be able to dictate the battle from the first shot to the last. But I have a few ideas to counter the ion cannons.” Sam sighed loudly. “I’m not sure what we can do to remove their acceleration advantage save fight like we did here or limit ourselves to jump point-only battles. The Dornish warships were already slightly faster than ours at the Trident, and to reach these new levels of acceleration, they must have invested colossal sums into their Research and Development labs.”

“I would say it would be risky for them given their small fleet,” Asha paused. “But given how many times they’ve been hitting the Tyrell where it hurts, their investments are in the process of being reimbursed and give them an enormous amount of profits. Could we do the same?”

“Where would we find the money?” her husband gave her a surprised expression. “I remember reading a few researchers’ reports before leaving about a promising engine and associated drives, and I allowed them funds...but it was for a prototype. We were very far from building something for a test-starship, ever mind a true warship.”

“A battlecruiser,” Asha thought before realising she had spoken aloud.

“What?”

“We need battlecruisers able to catch their battlecruisers. Better engines and new missiles or a sort of hybrid laser like the Lannisters developed in secret. You saw how easily their battlecruisers were damaged by what were really minor minefields. Against Western or Northern capital ships, I can guarantee it wouldn’t have caused that much damage.”

“You may be on to something. And there’s another point to support your arguments. There are a lot of battlecruiser hulls under construction in the Highgarden shipyards. If we refit them into capable platforms...”

“The Reach Navy may be ready far faster to counterattack than the ‘optimistic’ estimations we were given.” The Lady of Horn Hill finished.

“Of course,” her husband waved at the display, “it really assumes they didn’t built new ships of the lines with these terrifying ion cannons. Because I don’t know if the Reach can afford to build ships of the line *and* battlecruisers anymore.”

**Queen Rhaenys Targaryen, 15.11.300AAC, Cider Hall System**

“It had to happen one day or another, niece.”

For most of her friends, Rhaenys had to insist several times they didn’t spent hours on the courtesies of royalty. With her uncle, there never was that problem.

“I know,” the eldest child of the deceased Rapist King answered before sipping her wine. “I just wish it hadn’t happened right now. The timing is...inconvenient for my plans.”

“Really?” the man most of Westeros only called by his moniker or ‘Red Viper’ smiled genially. “I thought one of the reasons you decided to send the Ullers to New Barrel was to force the Tyrells to commit most of the reserves they didn’t deploy against you or the Lannisters.”

“Yes, but we wanted to commit them...and destroy them, uncle.” The Dornish-looking Queen abandoned her cup on the table and crossed her arms. “I certainly didn’t want to hand the Reach a victory they would use to rally around the billions of souls they rule over.”

Evidently, it wasn’t a massive defeat, not compared to the loss of systems like Cider Hall or Ashford for the Reach, but-

“I think you are a bit too pessimistic in your conclusions.” Oberyn smiled. “The Tyrells will keep New Barrel for the time being, but their victory was absolutely defensive in nature. Yes, it is inconvenient New Barrel hasn’t fallen, but Highgarden needs far more than that to prevent an economic or military collapse. And I will remind you that for all this single failure, House Dayne has taken the Fire Ball System and House Fowler has taken the Bushy System. It is not spectacular compared to some of our previous gains, but we’re continuing to cripple the ‘Red Dragon’ and its allies. As such, we will soon be in position to launch Cobra against Goldengrove and Scorpion against Ambrose. And if those are successful...”

“The gates of Highgarden will be opened to us, I know.” The young woman refused to smile for now. “The problem is that our logistics are beginning to lag badly behind our advances, and Operations Cobra and Scorpion are worsening the situation. Honestly uncle, I’m in the mind to cancel at least one of the two.”

“If it’s your decision, it’s your decision,” her uncle shrugged. “But I will remind you we need to keep the pressure on the Tyrells for long enough that the Hightowers and their most important vassals to break from their cause. Since it was Tarly ships who won at New Barrel, I think the critical threshold has not been reached.”

“It’s a bit annoying,” Rhaenys admitted freely. “Most of the navies who would have lost over thirty million spacemen and soldiers would have already surrendered.”

And it wasn’t just the military losses of House Tyrell and their bannersmen which were frightening. The loss of the Stormlands taxes alone would create a severe financial crisis, and Highgarden had lost that and far more in less than two months.

Yet somehow they were still fighting. The ‘Regent of the Reach’ must have received the brain his father didn’t have to stabilise such a desperate internal situation.

“I agree. But as long as they’re in the fight, they represent a threat we can’t exactly ignore. And when it comes down to it, New Barrel doesn’t give them any motive to hope. They didn’t deploy new weapons there, and save the battlecruisers, we didn’t lose anyone important.”

“Please keep this opinion far away from Lord Harmen’s ears,” the Queen who had been among the key strategists to engineer the Harvest Graveyard said tartly. “He’s been a real pain to deal with since his return yesterday. The death of Ulwyck has not made him a better man.”

“What did you expect? We are Dornish. We do not cope with the losses of our blood easily...as you well know, niece.”

“Yes...I know.” A good part why she personally hadn’t tried to sail to King’s Landing and murder her odious generator was that unless she learned to resurrect the dead, killing the Second Mad King was impossible. “I feel there’s one more question coming about Uller.”

“Well,” the viper-like smile was back in force, “Lord Harmen needs a new official Heir...don’t worry, I will let him grieve for a few more days before speaking about it.”

“Uncle,” Rhaenys did not paint a grievously wounded expression on her face, but she wasn’t far from it. “We discussed this subject hundreds of times. I am perfectly happy to legitimise my cousins along with other love children of the Dornish nobility, and give them Reach worlds while we’re at it. But Lord Harmen insists-“

“I have thought a long time about it. I’m ready to ask Ellaria’s hand in marriage.”

Rhaenys was so surprised she gaped for close to forty seconds...and her uncle delighted in it, demon of a Red Viper that he was.

“You...” The Queen of Dorne had to clear her throat three times. “You want to marry. You.”

“Me.”

“Me,” the smile was both madness and cleverness in one, a true Martell smile. “Are there laws which say I can’t marry the woman I love?”

“The end of the galaxy is at hand...” The young Queen moaned in despair.

**Admiral Garlan Tyrell, 15.11.300AAC, Highgarden System**

When the news of Fawnton had arrived, Garlan had vomited several times and even several days after, he suffered from insomnia.

Then there had been the Harvest Graveyard. The battle where his father and House Tyrell had lost millions of men and all thoughts of winning this war. Yes, he could admit it, even if their services of information continued to proclaim ultimate triumph would be theirs in the end.

But it wasn’t the climax of the atrocities, just the beginning. Saltcliffe. Great Wyk. The entire bloody Iron Sector was a grave, fortunately one where the dead at last stopped rising to kill the living.

No wonder that the survivors of Tarly, Florent, and many others refused to speak more than the basics of what they had fought there.

Thankfully, at least Victarion Greyjoy was dead and the rebel Ironborn ships were wiped out.

But this left him with a big problem.

What did you do when the monsters were your own allies?

King’s Landing was gone. They must be survivors, but they couldn’t be so much. And thus Garlan had his hands covered in the blood of as many as seventeen billion people. His grandmother and his siblings tried to put the entirety of the blame on Viserys Targaryen, but for the moment, it wasn’t a thriving success.

It was unsurprising. No matter how gullible, there was a limit to the stupidity of the average smallfolk. Viserys Targaryen had conquered the capital of Westeros without effort. Why would he suddenly turn his guns against the starscrapers and the great residential quarters of the Crown Sector?

But at least, the young Admiral of the Reach had hoped that the carnage would end with King’s Landing. That after this butchery, the civilian side would cease to be a target.

Now there was Ivy Hall. A new episode of cataclysm, and this time one couldn’t blame it on the demons; no, it was Reach warheads which had detonated into the planet’s atmosphere, killing over three hundred million inhabitants. Oh, officially there were no casualty estimations, but given the sheer number of atomic explosions, Garlan had no doubt most of the local population was dead or wishing to be.

“I want all the brilliant masterminds behind this...this *genocide* dead.” He told this chief of staff. “I certainly didn’t give them the orders. House Tyrell didn’t give these insane orders, and I am sick of seeing inhabited planets reduced to radiated hellholes, especially when it’s our own allies or ourselves who are doing this nuclear butchery! I want it to stop!”

“Of course, Admiral,” Bryan Fossoway replied. “We can certainly do that...but I have to warn you catching the culprits is going to be difficult. Our control of the systems east of Appleton Harvest is...really threadbare, and the imbeciles involved in the Ivy Hall disaster have deserted rather than face the justice their crimes deserve. And given how this war zone is increasingly crowded with Baratheon warships...”

The rest of his sentence wasn’t uttered, but Garlan could complete it by himself. They didn’t have the hulls to contest the Stormlanders’ superiority, never mind hunting these genocidal renegades.

“Enough with that.” He ordered. “You have read the report of Lord Samwell Tarly and his wife. Your opinion, please.”

“I think they have developed a lot of excellent points inside.” Garlan raised an eyebrow, and Bryan chuckled. “Obviously I think the...I think Asha Tarly could sing a little less the praises of her husband, but honestly given how...sonorous we were in trumpeting our victory here against the Lannisters, I don’t think we can complain about it. Their points on the importance of the Dornish battlecruisers are incredibly accurate, though.”

“Ah,” Garlan nodded. “Continue.”

“There’s a lot of guesswork, mainly because the Uller ship of the line refused to engage once the battlecruisers were destroyed or crippled. But now that we have a deeper analysis of the battle-data, we can confirm that whatever they armed the *Lord of Hell* with, it isn’t ion weaponry or something having a lot of range. Our specialists think it is an ultra-short laser or plasma weaponry. It would explain why the rest of the Dornish heavy warships wait so often near our jump points.”

“It would make sense,” Garlan grimaced. “The battlecruisers are for their war of movement, the ships of the line for the slow grinding butchery when we must come at them.”

“Of course the problem is we ignore how many ships of the line were built from this class.” Bryan was kind enough not to mention that the Reach services didn’t know how many ships of the line and battlecruisers the Dornish Navy had in its order of battle. “If it’s the entirety of it, we have ‘only’ to care about the battlecruisers for normal battles. The ships of the line will be difficult to handle in jump points, but we can try to isolate them and cut their logistical support from behind once we advance again.”

“But first we need to handle the battlecruisers. Tarly has proposals, you said.”

“Yes. The cheapest is simply a sort of big drone launched from our carriers, the unmanned vehicles being equipped with some sort of ion shielding.”

“How is it supposed to work in the first place?” This wasn’t a critic, Garlan was genuinely curious.

“To say the truth, they will be metal shields the time our battle-line arrives in range of the enemy.”

“Weaknesses?”

“They must be escorted. The new types of Dornish starfighters aren’t going to wait patiently after they see their favourite doctrine fail.”

And the Reach starfighters were completely obsolete against what House Martell deployed on the various battlefields. For five hundred Dornish pilots killed at New Barrel, the Reach had lost over four thousand at Fire Ball and Bushy.

“The other hypotheses are solid, but I have to check with our ship engineers before I tell you if the modernisation of the battlecruisers is something we are able to do or not.”

“As much as the idea hurts my pride...wouldn’t it be simpler to build everything at Horn Hill?”

It was an unpleasant idea, but it was better to give House Tarly some important contracts than to outright lose the war.

“No, Admiral. I asked, and it appears House Tarly doesn’t have that many docks to build battlecruiser-sized hulls. The lack of support for more than a decade forced them to be resourceful in certain areas, and their engineering specialists are good, but the space for new construction is incredibly limited. They ordered new hulls before the war began, and those will be ready next year. But both official liaisons and spies confirm they can’t build more than two additional battlecruisers right now. And even if they could, how will they man them without recalling some of their forces they let us ‘borrow’? They were forced to activate a lot of fortresses to cover their industry in the asteroid belts when Hutcheson Hills fell.”

“All right.” It wasn’t all right, but it was all he could say for politeness’ sake. “And the analysts’ suggestions we try to delay the next Dornish offensive by...unconventional methods?”

Garlan disliked hypocrisy, but even he had limits, and contemplating a campaign of assassination was really, really making him feel like one of the worst hypocrites in the Quadrant.

“Some of them are for, some of them are against, Admiral.” Bryan gave him an unimpressed expression. “Frankly Admiral? I don’t think it is going to do much good. Most of the Dornish warships are extremely mobile and our penetration of their military command structure is close to nonexistent. The only enemy figures of importance we can find easily are from House Peake.”

“And if they suddenly drop dead, the Red Viper will take over their world and proclaim they are Dornish martyrs.”

“Yes, Admiral.” Bryan posed new documents on his desk. “I won’t deny the urge to...dispose of Calla Peake is extremely tempting. Lady Olenna’s resources have confirmed the wife of Lord Peake has met the Red Viper recently.”

“And likely shared everything he wanted to know about our weaknesses...not that a man like Oberyn Martell needed a mountain of information after the Harvest Graveyard.” How much information the Dornish recovery teams had recovered from his father’s flagship was of those ‘interesting’ issues he never acknowledged in public.

Garlan sighed.

“We should never have wedded the Rowan Heiress to the Lord of Starpike.”

“With due respect, Admiral, if she was still the Rowan Heiress right now, Goldengrove would have invited the Lannister fleet and the northern Marches would be defenceless between the lion’s claws.”

“I was more thinking about marrying her to a loyal Lord which would have prevented her betrayal.” The young commander of the Reach space forces released an exhausted sound. “Except when I see how stupidly many of our ‘extremely reliable commanders’ have fared, I don’t think exploring what could have been really matters. It is done. We can’t go back in time.”

“Yes, Admiral. But Goldengrove is now close to be encircled since the Dornish have captured Fire Ball...and as I’m sure you will remember, that system produces over fifty percent of the fuel the ships and the industry House Rowan is consuming on a yearly basis.”

Why couldn’t have his sister befriended the Rowan Heiress instead of the useless magpies she was always surrounded by?

**Lady Sansa Tully, 16.11.300AAC, Riverrun System**

If Sansa had know how many problems waited on the Lordly desk of Riverrun when the Northern forces and their allies took control of Riverrun, she would have hesitated for far longer than she did before accepting the Ladyship.

Unfortunately, the daughter of Lady Catelyn Stark nee Tully had not known, and by the time she realised the size of the mess she had taken charge of, it was far too late to run back to Winterfell.

“Was my uncle functionally incapable of doing something right?” the red-haired woman complained as a new pile of...complications...were handed to her.

“I think,” the Riverlander man in front her that she had chosen to be one of her many councillors noted, “that Lord Edmure’s willingness to cancel Ser Brynden’s laws was motivated by the fact he suspected, rightly or wrongly, House’s Stark influence behind them.”

“Yes. And we see the results. Before he assumed power, Riverrun was one of the River systems with the strongest economic recovery, maybe the strongest if one doesn’t count the ones who received mountains of riches from the Rapist. After...it took only a few years so that he made a large mess. But it doesn’t solve the problem at hand. The prices the insurance companies are demanding for the merchant ships are getting out of control, and the mechanisms to reassure the markets have been demolished.”

“The...increase remains limited compared to those of other systems we are at war with, my Lady.”

“That’s only because most of the southern River Sector is experiencing an economic apocalypse, with pirate-deserters raiding the outer systems, local factions plundering the pockets of the average merchant companies, and limitless corruption among other things.” Sansa reminded all of her councillors. “The insurance prices in the systems we control have increased by ten percent in the last month, and judging by all the figures you pointed to me, it’s an accelerating trend, not a decrease we must look forwards to.”

“These three ships which were lost at Hag’s Mire frightened a lot of people, my Lady. The Mallister Navy for sure destroyed the outlaws after the fact, but the bastards managed to cripple the hulls before they were killed. And to be honest...I don’t see a solution. If your office orders the insurance companies to block their prices until the end of the year without any compensation, a lot of people are going to be very unhappy.”

“You are right...if we are doing it without any compensation.” The Lady many had taken to nickname ‘Kingslayer’ said thoughtfully. “We have plenty of new scout cruisers which are about to enter service in the next months. And many officers who will serve aboard them are young and untested.”

Mainly because between the fiasco at Wayfarer’s Rest and the purges of Edmure’s sycophants, Sansa and her Northern helpers had been forced to conduct a purge of the Tully Navy. Assuredly the purge had been more than deserved, but it left her with an inexperienced naval force in the middle of the greatest civil war in living memory.

“I propose we establish a mandatory system of convoys for all loyal merchants who wish to enjoy the protection of House Tully again.”

“It would require the full cooperation of House Mallister and House Stark, my Lady. Between their new ships and the hulls they’ve captured between here and the Twins, they have a far larger fleet available for those duties. In fact, this move would be an extension of what they’re doing in the systems under martial rule. Yes, I think it’s a good idea. It would...reassert the pre-280’s stance of House Tully where protection of River trade is concerned.”

And it likely would contribute to restore some of the ex-Paramount House’s prestige, was left unsaid.

Sansa wasn’t enthusiastic at the idea of claiming a Lady Paramount title at the end of this war. Hells, she didn’t know if there were going to be Lords or Lady Paramount when the carnage finally ceased. But right now, there was no denying most of the influence wielded by House Tully among the Northern coalition concentrated on her person and her blood ties with Winterfell.

The Battle of Wayfarer’s Rest had proved Edmure Tully had no strategy besides grovelling before his Targaryen masters, and that his skills to defend Tully interests were in complete contradiction with his boasts.

“I am going to discuss it with Admiral Seaworth as soon as he arrives from Shawney. It should be a question of days, since the defenders have finally acknowledged they have lost and the Siege is over.”

And House Shawney was going to pay a heavy price for having resisted for as long as they did. It had forced the Northern ships to expend quantities of ammunition like anti-mine ordnance which would have been better used elsewhere. It had forced many missile freighters to make a rotation to Moat Cailin to replenish the fleet’s reserves. And they had wasted a considerable amount of time for a system which was frankly not really important, even if it had a workforce of over six hundred million Riverlanders.

“Aside from the removal of House Shawney from its ancestral seat...have seizing of merchant ships been discussed?

Sansa and most of the councillors chuckled at the ‘innocent’ question.

“Do not fall into the trap of mischievousness, Councillor.” The new Tully Lady ‘reprimanded’ the guilty party. “It’s not their fault of their merchants that their Lord has the military vision of a blind fool.”

“No, but it’s their fault for supporting Lord Shawney as soon as they could play their games setting Seagard and Darry against each other,” someone muttered.

Sansa feigned to have been struck deaf when the comment was spoken. She had been well aware the River Sector was a space region with a lot of rivalries; one glance at the tormented history of her mother’s family was enough to know that!

But even she had been surprised that in the years previous to her assassination of Rhaegar, the allegiances to one King or another had been decided a lot on not supporting the claimant of the hated neighbour rather on the merits of ‘King Joffrey’, ‘King Viserys’, or ‘King Aegon’.

“Now that we have agreed upon this point, what is left on the order of the day?”

“Hem...I think the last point is about...err...”

“Yes?” When there was something her advisors believed she would not appreciate listening to, it was generally very bad news.

“Several young women have come forwards claiming they are pregnant from your uncle’s...passionate activities. How do you wish to handle their claims?”

“How many?” Sansa asked, already dreading the answer.

“Oh, a dozen...so far.”

The eldest daughter of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn Stark grimaced.

What was her uncle thinking? Oh right, he didn’t.

Seriously, being a Lady was no fun at all. She hoped for Joanna that her war was far more interesting than her own duties...

**Lieutenant Joanna Snow, 16.11.300AAC, Kneeling’s King System**

The ‘conquest’ of Kneeling’s King, Joanna was finding out, was *fun*. The more that she thought about it, the more she wondered why she had tried to protest when the Admiral told her to make a ‘detour’ to this system before going to Riverrun. Ah, right, she thought it would prevent her from seeing Lord Shawney crawling in front of the enemy he despised. The River Lord’s loathing wasn’t because Davos Seaworth served Winterfell, but because he was born in Flea bottom and had a past of smuggler.

Personally, Joanna thought Lord Shawney had a wrong sense of priorities. His fixed defences had endured a long time the pounding of the Northern ships of the line and armoured cruisers along with everything else, but the reality was that at the end, the outcome was never in doubt. House Stark had lost time conquering the system. House Shawney, for its complete unwillingness to lay down arms before said weapons were utterly broken, was going to lose everything, down to their title of Lord, their treasury, and their liberty. Maybe their life too, if they persisted in insulting their Northern counterparts wherever their mouth opened to speak.

Joanna would be lying if she said she would cry when they were sent to the Wall – for the men – or for a maximum security prison – for the women and the children. Viserys Targaryen was undoubtedly not as bad as his rapist of a brother, but he was a Targaryen born and raised at King’s Landing with Aerys II the Pyromaniac whispering in his ears for most of his childhood. No one survived sane from *that*.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant...but...is it a temple?”

The Northern officer laughed at the Ensign’s question.

“In a certain manner. It’s a temple to the arrogance, narcissism, cruelty and tyranny of the Targaryen Dynasty.”

Though since they were in an assault shuttle flying over it, Joanna admitted the point of the younger boy was rather accurate. The size and the basic pattern made it look like a temple.

Except it wasn’t one.

“Err...what is it, then?” Her subordinate asked once their transport had landed and the Northern party was free to ‘admire’ what was certainly a monstrosity of Targaryen architecture. “We never were showed a holo-picture of it when we were at school.”

“No, it’s a rather monument, and my father didn’t want the knowledge of it to spread too much. It was better not to give everyone more reasons to loathe the Rapist. Officially, Devan, this is the *Monument of the Dragon striking down the Usurper*.”

It was an ugly architectural construction for the ugliest of political causes. Joanna had known it existed for a long time, but by the Old Gods, the multitude of dragons sculpted was horrible, and this wasn’t because her family didn’t like much House Targaryen. The sculptors had been so pressed for time their ‘artistic realisations’ appeared more as worm-snakes which had somehow been added wings at the last minute.

“But...but the battle we...the battle where Lord Baratheon was killed was at the Trident!” protested the youngest of the Seaworth family to serve militarily the North.

“He was.” Joanna smirked. “Did you think the Targaryens cared about that when they decided to build it here?”

Devan looked at her with eyes which didn’t understand, and the young woman clicked her tongue while caressing Phantom where he liked it best, the ears, the belly, and many other ‘soft spots’.

“Yes, the Battle of the Trident was where we lost the Rebellion the last time.” The daughter of Eddard Stark explained. “But the system was devastated by the firepower both sides unleashed at each other. Worse for the Rapist, Trident – the planet, not the world – was a massive graveyard for the ‘loyal’ armies, and above it they had all the dead ships of the line my father crippled in the first minutes of the battle. It took them over a decade to make sure most of the corpses and the hulks were removed. So from the enemy’s point of view, Trident couldn’t be the place where they could proclaim their victory. They built a monument for Randyll Tarly there, I think, but it wasn’t there they made the celebrations and built the ‘marvels’ their fools of the Department of Propaganda loved to broadcast. A lot of them were ordered and built at King’s Landing.”

Most of them must be ashes and rubble by now, if the rumours coming from the Viserys-held Crown Sector could be trusted. In fact, if half of the rumours were true, House Targaryen was definitely finished. Their sheer superiority in manpower, the billions upon billions of souls they had ruled with lies and unbridled arrogance, the wealth stolen from hundreds of planets...it was all gone.

“The others they didn’t have the place or the motivation to build in their backyard, however...they built them here.”

The result was this...insult to every soldier and soul who had raised his arms against House Targaryen during the Great Rebellion.

It began with long rows of statues of dragons devouring wolves, falcons, and of course stags. At the centre of a gigantic plaza, a golden statue was attracting all the attention, one representing the Rapist himself killing Robert Baratheon.

Joanna wondered if House Tarly had been aware of this statue’s existence and how ‘magnanimous’ their draconic leaders had proved when it came to present their version.

The plaza was just the first layer of the artistic abominations, of course. Besides were more statues, and after that came the ‘temple’.

“It is larger than the great sept of White Harbor City.” Devan muttered.

“And it likely cost twenty times the price House Manderly ever invested in it.” And while the Manderlys weren’t exempt of flaws, they really poured a lot of money when they built spectacular buildings, be they religious or not.

The problem was the complete absence of symmetry, the Northern woman mused. It was clear the architects had tried the temple-monument to be symmetrical, but if what she looked at was any judge, several architects had tried to work on the site at the same time, and the result was...awful.

“The final result looks like a joke. I would almost bet they were trying to emplace as many Valyrian-type columns in a single building. Then they added mosaics where they could. They built the three domes after that.”

These domes, needless to say, weren’t majestic at all. All were of different sizes, and between the absence of symmetry or proportions between the structures, it felt like someone drunk had tried to do something...before throwing gold paint at the project in the hope it would look better.

It didn’t.

In fact, Joanna was surprised the project was not marred by several royal executions. The ‘Trident Triumph’ monument was obviously something terrible from all viewpoints. The Rapist mustn’t have had the time to visit it personally, or heads would have rolled...unless it was his plans which were the main source of headache for the builders?

“And what are we going to do with it?”

“Oh, we’re going to demolish it, of course.” Joanna smiled wolfishly, and Phantom approved...loudly. “There’s so much gold in this horrid thing that can be used to better things. In fact, all precious metals are going to be used for the war effort.”

A real conflict was always expensive, and this one was so costly as to make the Great Rebellion a minor taxation issue. The massive monuments of King’s Landing – because between Aerys and his rapist of a son, this was far from the only ruinous expanse they had built in this system – had many riches which could be used to fund a non-insignificant percentage of the war effort.

“The inhabitants of Kneeling’s King...aren’t going to like that.” Devan said.

“No, I imagine they won’t. But you know, Ensign, I think I don’t care about their opinion.”

The population of Kneeling’s King had long enjoyed the fruits of their world being transformed into a tourist planet where the praises of the Targaryen Dynasty were sung from dawn to dusk.

It was a world where there had been no Stark supporters or any faction willing to ally with them. Most of the administrators too biased and unacceptable for pro-Targaryen Lords had been given jobs here...and they had all ran with what little fortune they could transport long before the Northern squadrons seized the system.

“If they want to follow the dragons, they will share the same fate as this *monstrosity* of Targaryen architecture. And it is a monstrosity which is going to *burn* when we will have removed everything which can be useful from it. Winter is coming, and the supporters of the Red Dragon can fall in line...or die.”

**Corporal Jon Cassidy, 17.11.300AAC, Atranta System**

“I hate patrolling near the camps.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Jon replied, trying to not sound too angry. After a couple of seconds, the veteran Corporal decided he may as well make fun of his subordinate. “It is just...what, the one thousandth time in ten days you have said it?”

Franklyn Forrest’s face darkened considerably after his remark, but maybe it was the evening coming early?

“I’m just repeating what a lot of people are-“

“You aren’t paid for repeating everything someone says after a drink...or a score of them and some dragon sticks.”

“I haven’t had any dragon sticks lately!”

“Could have fooled me,” before this year, no one had called them ‘dragon sticks’, of course. The name had just gained popularity after the latest bout of craziness their ‘incredible rulers’ had plunged them into. “Wasn’t it two nights ago you tried to seduce that brunette? You even said you were a General, no less!”

“Laugh all you want, but I was so close...”

“You made her laugh a lot, all right,” the Corporal acknowledged. “Kissing her? No, I don’t think so.”

“You’re just jealous,” the lower-ranked soldier of the Atranta Army muttered in his beard.

“No, I’m realistic. If you had pretended you were a Captain or something near that, you may have had a chance to be taken seriously. General? I’m surprised she listened to you for that long.”

All the while they were continuing their patrols and Jon Cassidy deliberately increased the distance between him and the outer defences of what was officially one of the many ‘re-education camps’ of Atranta.

He was paid to serve, not to go near the bunkers and the metal wire which made up the outer layer of the camp’s defences...and high walls with enormous laser guns were mounted on turrets behind that.

Sometimes, the Corporal wished it was the ‘elite units’ manning those positions which made their own patrols. The Warrior Above knew there were plenty of riots and other incidents to deal with, it wasn’t like all the men of the regiments couldn’t be used everywhere.

The camps were heavily fortified since the latest...unpleasantness, and whatever direction he glanced at, he didn’t see a way any insurrection movement could storm down these walls. Not without a lot of artillery guns, tanks, and modern equipment civilians weren’t supposed to have.

“I still don’t like it, Corporal. First it was ‘traitors’ and ‘defeatists’, now they imprison refugees and they call them ‘rebel elements’...”

“Franklyn, I know criticising one’s superiors is the River soldier’s sacred right, but please stop. No, no one like what they’re doing to those...foreigners. But you also know what they did to the last regiment which disobeyed their orders.”

“Yeah, orbital strikes, aerial blasts, a real massacre. And the secret police arrested the survivors and they disappeared.”

“Glad you remember. And they listen to every communication and audio records to track ‘defeatist opponents’. So please, if you want to be arrested, continue to complain. But don’t do it in my presence. I want to keep my job and live long enough to enjoy my retirement.”

“No one will live long enough to retire if that guy spoke-“

“Father Above, please don’t tell me you believe everything this raving madman of a ‘prophet’ shouted before being arrested? There’s no way the war has gotten so bad.”

“Are you sure?”

“They are highborn fighting,” the Corporal smiled. “Have you seen them? Soon enough they will be bored of fighting and will want sex, wine, and luxury cars to impress everyone, all things they won’t find on a battlefield. They will talk again of peace, pretend to be the best of friends, and everything will be swept under the carpet...including the re-education camps.”

“I don’t know. I think it is different this time...”

“Of course it is different. We’re fighting for King Aegon, not King Rhaegar.” Jon Cassidy sniffed. “And the son don’t give bonus pay every morning, oh no.”

**King Viserys Targaryen, 18.11.300AAC, Duskendale System**

“I am not saying it doesn’t take a lot of talent to exploit these weaknesses, but in my opinion my King, the confirmed presence of the former Master of Whisperers at the Blackfyre pretender’s side is one of these advantages any monarch would sell half of his personal fortune for.”

Viserys tried not to show his consternation...given the expressions of the members of his Council present, his best attempt to present a brave face was not exactly impressive.

“There can’t be any doubt?”

“It’s possible the men of the Golden Company and their mistress could try to trick us,” Ser Varon Darkwood conceded. “After all, putting a bald man in ceremonial robes looking vaguely like Lord Varys doesn’t exactly require much in term of resources. On the other hand, the Blackfyre woman knew far too much about the defences of the Vale and now we have the confirmation this knowledge applies to Maidenpool and other River systems too. Like the old saying does, sometimes the simpler explanation is the good one. I fear this applies here. The reason this ‘Rhaenyra Blackfyre’ knows so much about us is because the Spider told her everything he knew about the Seven Sectors.”

This was a major disaster. Well, another major disaster.

“Can we estimate what Varys is able to give her?”

“I think my King,” his chief spymaster scowled, “it’s far better to list everything we believe the eunuch has not compromised. It is going to take little time. Except some top-secret projects we have at Dragonstone, I am confident nearly everything we had before the war erupted was known to the Master of Whisperers.”

“You’re not serious!” Perwyn Rosby blurted out.

“Yes, I am serious,” Varon replied levelly. “Do you have any idea how long the Spider spread his web in the Crown Sector and elsewhere? And now we have to seriously think about the darkest possibility of all: that he was always loyal to the Blackfyre cause, not the Targaryen.”

“Let’s not be too hasty,” Viserys made a silent gesture to calm the tempers. “I agree it’s the worst possibility, but it doesn’t fit with Varys’ behaviour those last years. Since the Usurper’s Rebellion, whatever might be said about him, the eunuch truly did his best to prevent the realm from falling apart. The information he gave about Balon Greyjoy’s rebelliousness and many other conspiracies were exact; it’s not his fault Rhaegar and the rest of the Council refused to listen to him. And in the years after that, he warned us several times about the problems which blew in our face this year. I am not going to say I am pleased by his recent betrayal, but in private I can be honest and say the only reason the reign of my brother lasted so long is named Varys.”

“As you say, your Grace,” the Master of Information gave a minor bow before sighing. “But it doesn’t change how bad the situation is right now. The Blackfyre forces have taken position on our northern flank, and we can’t expect House Darry or Whent to dislodge them from Maidenpool.”

Viserys slowly nodded. The window of opportunity where the forces of House Mooton had been neutralised and their stellar system vulnerable had not lasted long. Blackfyre mobile forces had poured there within twenty-four hours of the one-sided defeat, and in less than two days, Maidenpool as a whole was far more fortified than it had been before. Expelling the Golden Company and the tens of thousands of Essossi sellswords paid by the Blackfyre pretender would not be easy.

“I know our logistics are stretched to the limit, but couldn’t we make a limited counter-attack and take Wode and Peasedale?” The young Lord of Rosby asked. “If we deny the Blackfyre two out of three of their bases they have in the River Sector-“

“Then they will simply go attack elsewhere, more probably planets which fall under my authority,” Viserys interrupted. “It’s a good idea, Lord Perwyn, but it’s not going to work. For this strategy to be viable, I would have to deploy ships of the line and conquer Maidenpool. It is the reason Varys likely whispered it to his new mistress in the first place.”

“And it gives her two billion of new subjects, with a system completely untouched by war.” Varon said darkly. “Not to mention a possible opening to negotiate with the pretender Joffrey. There always were rumours the Mooton Heiress could be betrothed to the Prince.”

“I thought the Bracken Heiress was far likelier.”

“I thought it too, my King, but clearly something besides Lannister money convinced those two Houses to side with him despite the West not being in position to support them.”

Why did another claimant decided to invite herself in this civil war? It wasn’t like there weren’t enough treacherous nobles and multi-sided battles already.

“If the Blackfyres attack via Mallery Hall, we won’t be able to hold without massive reinforcements.”

“And why pray tell will we find them? The only *de facto* Lord Paramount who still speaks to me is Lord Stannis Baratheon, and I won’t insult your intelligence by saying he is an ally...”

**Lord Stannis Baratheon, 18.11.300AAC, Bitterbridge System**

“I fear, Warmaster, that the reports which told us Tumbleton’s defences were completely obsolete must have been...mistaken.”

Ser Guyard Morrigen’s sentence was immediately challenged.

“Ridiculous! House Footly poured most of their treasury into new cruisers! They don’t have anything but these antique fortresses dating from before the First Blackfyre Rebellion!”

“Maybe they are antique,” Guyard hotly retorted, “but the fixed defences work extremely well when it comes to carve apart our scout cruisers. And the two jump points are close enough from each other that the Footly commanders who escaped the Graveyard can support their counterparts if they aren’t under attack.”

“But once we take control of the other side’s jump points, the system’s fall is only a question of hours!”

“No one is saying otherwise, Lord Fell,” Stannis decided to intervene before the ‘debate’ became more acrimonious than it already was. “In a war of movement, House Footly does not have enough warships to last more than a couple of hours before surrendering, at best. The problem is the kind of losses we will take to overwhelm the forces they have at their jump points. We have avoided bleeding like the Reach and so many of our enemies did. It would be best to continue avoiding it, and frontal assaults like the one you propose have all the chances of turning into a bloodbath.”

“Yes, Warmaster.” The Lord of Felwood obediently answered, before adding the problematic word. “But...”

“What Lord Fell is trying to say,” Ser Brus Buckler said in a hurry, “is that no matter which direction our offensives take now, Warmaster, we are going to face the unpleasant prospect of frontal attacks if we want to go after the Reachers who haven’t abandoned House Tyrell. Inchfield, the Ring, and New Barrel are all boasting significant defences against raids, and we don’t have the Deep Space-assets it would take to frighten them into abandoning their positions without a fight.”

The knight of Bronzegate raised his eyebrows.

“Not unless we want to increase of our cooperation with the Dornish further, Warmaster.” Ser Guyard Morrigen affirmed in a tone that was neutral as possible.

“I would advise avoiding it,” Ser Donnel Swann, Heir to Stonehelm, was visibly unpleased by the mere mention of Sunspear in this conversation. “Sooner or later, the starfighters of Dorne will finish the destruction of the few squadrons Highgarden is able to field after their humiliation. And when they have the heart of the Reach in their grasp, who do you think they will fight?”

“The Lannisters?” Ser Guyard proposed and given Ser Donnel’s angry eyes, it wasn’t the answer he wanted. “Unlike us, the Lions have made it clear they want to have someone of their blood ruling Westeros. And once the Tyrells are as powerless as the Gardeners, do you really think they are going to stay idle instead of trying as much as the Northern Marches of the Reach as they can? Old Oak and Red Lake are already theirs, it will be a child’s game for them to seize Coldmoat, Holyhall...or to advance towards Lyberr and Hastwyck. In that case, Casterly Rock fleets would have a frontier with House Martell *and* ourselves.”

“This is wild speculation,” the eldest son of Lord Gulian retorted. “The Dornish and the Westerners have little reason to be angry at each other. They don’t have fought for the Marches like we did!”

“Times change. Before the last two decades, the Vale was famous for being a bastion of Targaryen loyalists. Would you say House Arryn stayed true to the Mad Kings?”

“House Arryn was honourable, and it was this honour the Mad King and his rapist of a son declared war to!” Ser Donnel began to breathe far faster and his face to be more determined. “The Dornish haven’t changed at all, they just decided our enemies were also their enemies. Mark my words, the vipers will try to sink their fangs while our back is turned!”

“Your opinion is noted, Ser Donnel,” Stannis interrupted the exchange before the rashness of the participants made a knight do something regrettable. “If the Dornish ambitions remain something we will need to be wary about, the Tyrells remain our enemies...I’m sure I do not need to repeat the main offences they committed against us in the last decades.”

He was well aware that unless one of his children married a Prince or a Princess of House Martell, a dagger in the dark was always a possibility. But for now, the Martells were doing exactly what he wanted them to do: humiliating the Reach fleets and burning the legacy of Mace Tyrell into the largest inferno ever lit under the backsides of the ‘Wardens of the South’.

“Our old enmity with House Martell and their bannersmen is not forgotten, but the Tyrell must not be able to take advantage of it. The Reach must fall for what they’ve done to billions of Stormlanders.”

Stannis had not forgotten the humiliations Mace Tyrell had piled upon him once Storm’s End surrendered. The Fat Rose had left him in a position of power. The Lord of Storm’s End wouldn’t do the same mistake with his enemy’s children.

“And in time, House Targaryen will follow House Tyrell into extinction.”

**Lord Tyrion Lannister, 20.11.300AAC, Casterly Rock System**

“I knew Maidenpool would fall sooner or later, but I didn’t think it would be the Black Dragon which would finally capture it.”

The sentiment might have been a bit impolitic if it was a public meeting, but given that there were only a couple of servants and of course Ser Addam and Lord Serrett to hear his words, Tyrion wasn’t worried too much about his point of view being the talk of Casterly Rock within the next hours.

“No one expected the Black Dragon.” The Marbrand knight smirked. “It might sound like a bad tale of a bard, really. Who would have expected the descendants of the Great Bastard to have survived the War of the Ninepenny Kings?”

Tyrion drank one cup of wine before speaking what he felt was a point neglected by too many Western knights.

“I can’t be sure of it, but I have serious doubts this...’Rhaenyra Blackfyre’, as she calls herself, is a descendant of the first Blackfyres which plagued the realm for so long.”

“We don’t for sure Maelys and his cousin Daemon Blackfyre left no descendants.” Lord Adrian Serrett disagreed after a moment of hesitation.

“If his cousin Daemon had son or daughters, Maelys would have slaughtered them,” the dwarf son of the defunct Lord Tywin Lannister said thoughtfully. “And if Maelys had descendants, I’m sure the Golden Company would have eagerly crowned them as soon as they came of age. After the large defeat they suffered in the Ninepenny Wars, the survivors would have searched for something, anything to bolster their ranks and gather new strength for another war against us.”

You could say a lot of things about the Golden Company, but no one would deny they were persistent bastards.

“If it had been ten or fifteen years after the Monstrous’ death, I would have believed this pretender is a true Blackfyre. But it has been nearly forty years since Maelys was killed by Ser Barristan Selmy. And my Lord Father did send a lot of spies across the Narrow Sea, as I am sure every Paramount House did, to verify the ‘House Which Bore the Sword’ was extinct.”

The future Lord of Casterly Rock breathed out.

“This woman isn’t a Blackfyre. I think she’s a really convincing silver-haired, violet-eyed orphan our treacherous Master of Whisperers found in the whorehouses of Lys or elsewhere. They trained her for years in the art of war and politics, and now that we’re all busy fighting each other, she was introduced to the Golden Company for an invasion.” Tyrion gave the two far taller men a nasty smile. “Proving it, of course, will be another matter altogether.”

“And there’s the problem a lot of smallfolk and nobles probably won’t care she’s a usurper, even if we could demonstrate it without a suspicion of doubt.” Addam added with a disabused expression. “After the carnage done at Fawnton, Harvest Hall, King’s Landing, the Twins, Great Wyk and more uncountable fleets and squadrons destroyed, the population is getting quite sick of House Targaryen’s ‘legitimacy’. We are in a far better situation here than most, but even there the catastrophe of the Iron Sector and the Battle of Highgarden have decreased the general enthusiasm for the war. If this ‘Rhaenyra Targaryen’ is genuinely able to crush a lot of military opposition and restore peace in the system she conquers...”

Then one person named Blackfyre may very well reign upon the throne of Westeros when they had all finished slaughtering each other.

“I don’t know if she will be able to vanquish a lot of opposition, but I think her list of victories is likely to grow a longer for the days to come.” Tyrion commented. “Viserys Targaryen lost many warships and armies against the Reach-Crown alliance of his dear nephew. I don’t know if he has much to save his ‘kingdom’ of the Crown Sector if he has to endure a serious assault.”

“Most of the capital warships the Blackfyre Admirals have deployed in the Vale are Deep Space warships,” the Lord of Silverhill shook his head.

“And if there was a great fleet to counter them, I would be far less pessimistic for the ‘pretender Viserys’. Given the current rapport of force though, Viserys’ remaining assets must be Deep Space assets too, while the Golden Company and their allies have seized the Maidenpool fleet. It wasn’t a huge naval fleet, but it had a couple of ships of the line and powerful escorts.”

“And with it,” Addam said quietly, “one of our last allies fell.”

“Yes,” Tyrion agreed, “I intend to increase the number of non-Western Houses we can rely upon immediately after my official ascension, obviously. We began this war with only Frey, Mooton, and Bracken to support us, and two out of the three are now gone. This must change. We can’t support King Joffrey Targaryen if most of the realm refuses to negotiate or is outright waging war against us.”

“It isn’t going to be easy.” Lord Adrian Serrett warned him. “Many Lords and Knights of importance will remember Lord Tywin and his...unique diplomatic approach.”

In other words, his Lord Father had taught everyone it was better if they feared him. Wonderful.

“Oh believe me, my Lord, I know nothing is going to be easy given the circumstances of my ascension to the Lordship.”

If Jaime had been here, it would likely there would have been a civil war raging as they spoke, not the uneasy endorsement of his claim.

“But tomorrow at this very hour, I will be Lord of Casterly Rock. And once this long ceremony will be over, I hope my talents will be able to prevent more mistakes on the order of those which led to our forces’ defeat at the Battle of Highgarden.”

**Author’s note**: The tragedy of the Seven Sectors will continue in chapter two of the new Arc, which is tentatively titled: *The* *Fires of Chaos*. The war in the Reach Sector will continue of course, but more importance will be given to the North and other fronts which have not been mentioned in this chapter.

Let Westeros Burn!

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

TV Tropes Page: / pmwiki/ / Fanfic/ LetTheGalaxyBurn

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

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