**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 5**

**A Clash of Warlords**

*It was a beautiful dream three centuries ago.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Master of Coin made a curt nod in return.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ardrian Celtigar bared his teeth in a parody of smile.

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

“And in reality?”

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

Guncer Sunglass intervened to help his superior.

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

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

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

Viserys shrugged before nodding.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you sure?”

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

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

His three senior military subordinates grimaced with an impressive coordination.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No.”

“I gave you an order, Jacaerys!”

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

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

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

Jacaerys shook his head in refusal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This plan is complex, Rhae.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You are concerned, Ari.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rhaenys shook her head negatively.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“True, but to this degree...”

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

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

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

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

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

“It will be Operation Graveyard.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It did, uncle.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eight days. It was an eternity in space warfare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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“*We stand at the Gates of Hell. The days are waning. We all feel it. The winter of our era is coming*.” Words attributed to Lord Eddard Stark, 300AAC.

**Lord Eddard Stark, 22.09.300AAC, Castle Black System**

The Eye of Woe had never been a pleasant sight at the best of times, but today watching it was not for the faint of heart. It was not a violet-blue mirror. It was not a tranquil sea. It was a maelstrom of dark, baleful energy distorting reality. The colours of this unnatural phenomenon now varied every hour, but the sick red and the malefic blue were regular occurrences.

At times, it was like the wound was bleeding into reality. Frequently, there were concerns the entire surface of the maelstrom was going to freeze into an ocean of obscurity and frost. Some of the most pessimistic men in the ranks of the Night’s Watch believed this was one of the methods the Enemy used to intimidate them. More religious souls vocally spoke in public this anomaly was the sign of the Gods’ unhappiness where humanity was concerned and that all the sinners were soon going to receive their final judgement.

One thing was sure, however. Trying to cross the Eye of Woe today was a non-disguised suicide attempt. Northern-built warships were tough, and several Braavosi engineers had fixed in a hurry some of their shields prototypes to them, but after the second total destruction of a scout cruiser, they had stopped sending scouts into the Eye.

Information was important, yes, but killing hundreds or thousands men before the real battle started was not the kind of trade he wanted to be remembered for. And it would be in vain, everyone in the upper ranks knew it. While not every Lord, General or Admiral had studied advanced physics, the swirls and the storms raging inside the maelstrom were obviously ship-killers and far more destructive than a thousand batteries.

“We are going to need to rely on the Voyager-drones of the Braavosi for advanced scouting,” Eddard murmured. It was not something he looked very much forwards to. Braavosi technology was good, but it was not without its flaws, especially the high costs in energy and maintenance. And it was also hellishly expensive.

“Their coverage is going to be incomplete,” Roose Bolton commented coldly and with as much emotion as he had ordered a cup of tea. “They lost between forty and fifty percent of their waves since this...Woe storm began.”

“It will give not us much warning when the damned ice monsters attack,” Jon ‘Greatjon’ Umber thundered with his usual booming voice. In his colossal armour, the Lord of Last Hearth looked like one of the giants of old ready to take the field. It was amusing to see that the Umbers and their descendants looked far more than the colossi of legends than the last giants in the wildling fleet. Those giants were generally peaceful creatures, the majority of their clan-like structures consisting in hunters-gatherers, with the odd ivory-crafter, smith-engineer and priest providing a relative cadre of civilisation. Experts had not yet shared their conclusions, but they were comments in the corridors the giants had once been an advanced star-faring race brought low by the Great Enemy.

“If we are lucky, we will have something like twenty minutes before the onslaught starts,” Lord Rickard Karstark affirmed. “And since I suppose we are competent commanders and relying on luck is for the Freys and the Targaryens, it will be more likely between five and seven minutes.”

No protestation came from his bannersmen, but there were winces and grim expressions everywhere. Waiting for a battle to begin when you saw the enemy on your tactical display was one thing; it was quite another to wait for days, especially in a place which was rivalling Harrenhal in ‘cursed surroundings’. But welcoming sight or not, this long wait was going to exhaust mentally and physically his Northern regulars and the black brothers of the Night’s Watch.

“It is going to be an assault the likes we have never seen,” Galbart Glover, Master of Deepwood Motte, whispered before speaking louder for the entire assembly. “We must assume the message Young Waymar Royce sent to the monster-in-chief waiting on the other side of the veil has been received and acknowledged. They know we have hurt them. They know we want to hurt them. They know we are prepared to welcome them. I don’t think we can afford to think they are going to arrive one by one like a band of baying sheep and let our ships of the line slaughter them.”

“It is,” Eddard replied. “On the other hand, Flotilla 805 had few of the surprises we kept in reserve installed on their ships. Unless we want to give more supernatural abilities to these abominations, there is a high probability we were able to prevent the Enemy from knowing about some of their cutting-edge weapons before the first fleet engagement.”

“We mustn’t forget the same can be true for the Enemy,” Roose Bolton warned.

“True,” nobody was looking at the Eye of the Woe anymore, but its malevolent presence was still felt in the hall of Castle Black. “Incidentally, Ser Waymar Royce will receive the Black Cross for his valiant defence in the Craster’s Fort System.”

It was the second highest-ranked award of the Night’s Watch, and it required a recommendation of the Lord Commander, an heroic deed on the level of the Age of Heroes, and a majority vote among the entire Night’s Watch’s effectives to be given.

 It had not been awarded in anyone’s living memory before today. The Wall maesters were searching in their records, but there was a high likelihood no one in the last millennium had been rewarded with a Black Cross. Then again, it was not every day an entire flotilla won posthumously the Ward of the Wall – third highest decoration of the black brothers.

Waymar Royce had deserved it. By his sacrifice, billions of humans had been saved and the long retreat had ended in this galaxy, not in the asteroid belts of Craster’s Fort. By their acts, the black brothers had made the Others bleed. Hope was a fickle thing, but Flotilla 805 had inflicted a first reverse to the juggernaut of death coming for Westeros and humanity.

In overall strength, it was probably close to a skirmish, but it had improved morale by leaps and bounds on every garrison fortress and armoured cruisers.

“We will continue to fortify the planets and multiply our counter-measures to the menagerie of horrors of the Enemy,” the Lord of Winterfell added as his bannersmen nodded in approval. “Each day the Enemy doesn’t attack is one we will use to give him more destruction and torment when the undead troops charge through the Eye.”

And now came the difficult part.

“We now must speak of a far more divisive issue. The wildlings – or if we use the name they call themselves, the Free Folk...and of course the identity of their King...Mance Rayder.”

By the way Lord Jon Umber growled, it was so going to be a fascinating debate...

**King Mance Rayder, 22.09.300AAC, Castle Black System**

The parade grounds of Castle Black were immense. Words like ‘gigantic-huge’, ‘planetary-grounds’, ‘good for your godly ego’ and ‘monstrous’ were regularly employed when a black brother spoke about them.

But the reality was that for all their size and the sort of black concrete which had forged them, the greatest parade ground on the fortifications of the Wall was too often empty. The Night’s Watch, starved of funds and manpower for centuries, was before his desertion unable to muster a tenth of the brothers it would have taken to give a holo-picture that wasn’t ridiculous and pathetic. They had better things to do, anyway.

As he left the shuttle which had brought him from orbit, Mance saw this judgement was no longer true. Or maybe it wasn’t. The columns waiting in complete silence were after all not clad in midnight battle-armours, but the bland and cold grey of the Northern forces.

This was not something Mance could say he had seen with his own eyes before. Yes, he had been to Winterfell once before leaving his black cloak behind. Yes, he had seen from time to time several barracks sworn to Winterfell. But even recounting his oldest memories as a child, he had never seen a great army like the one which was deployed there.

There were tanks of all sizes, the smallest on par with the common material recycled by the clans and the biggest able to trounce an entire infantry division without slowing down. There were thousands, no tens of thousands of cannons. The anti-air batteries and the siege demolishers were given the place of honour, but there were hundreds of specialised batteries most gun-lovers would sell their very souls to own. They were flyers, bombers and hundreds of aerial vehicles. There was an entire arsenal mustered on a single parade ground. Mance knew in his bones that if such a force came to invade one world the Free Folk once called, the question was how many hours the world would take to surrender. His people, his folk, were brave. But it was like with the White Walkers: technological superiority at some point was indistinguishable from sorcery, and courage could not be a proper substitute forever.

The infantry made this an excellent point. According to the few numbers he had been able to compile, thirty-five percent of the Free Folk warriors had access to a battle-armour, and in too many cases it was more like three cousins shared one than any kind of individual ownership. To complicate the matters, most of said battle-armours were Mark I or Mark II, old, war-torn, maintained with glue, prayers and sheer blind dumb luck. The long lines of grey polished metal were the complete polite of this.

It was impossible to say who was an officer or a simple trooper, he acknowledged as he marched in the frisk air. The sole differences his eyes could discern were the sigils of the Houses above their hearts. There were moose, giant, flayed man, merman, trident, sword, spear and fists...half of these names he wouldn’t be able to remember...but it wasn’t necessary. The simple fact these soldiers were here and not tranquilly waiting in their homes or waging a war elsewhere could only be ordered by a single Lord. And the banners flying in the wind all proclaimed the same message. Thousands of direwolves were running on white fields. Despite the assurance of strength and defiance the animal represented, Mance was on the edge of shivering.

It was a call, a deep one. It was a promise and a litany so old none who marched under this cold grey sky remembered who had uttered it in a last howl.

Winter is coming.

Bleak, cold and harsh words truly, but the words had survived ten Ages and were remembered in the spirit they were supposed to be again. Winter was coming again, and humanity was going once more to fight for the right to live.

The former ranger felt he walked hours before he and his escort arrived at the great gates of the citadel. For the first time, the missing weight of the weapons he had carried so often on him were felt. Because if on his left were still an uncountable number of Northerners standing to attention, the right was now occupied by dirty-black armoured figures. There had to be several thousand black brothers...and most of them didn’t wear helmets, which meant he didn’t have to imagine the angry and loathing expressions; he was seeing them very well on his own.

It didn’t get any better as he and his five-strong Northerner escort climbed the stairs leading to the first hall. The first black brothers he faced had this light in their eyes which identified them as fresh meat, no matter their age. Old and young, these were the rapists and the murderers, the scum of the Seven Sectors, brought to Castle Black when the choice was between the executioner and the black. Step after step, these outlaw faces were replaced by grim Northern expressions and the visages of far more experienced veterans. Here and there, he recognised a familiar face, and it was progressively worse as they arrived in one of the mess halls transformed for the occasion in an audience room.

In less time than it took for Tormund to empty two ale cups, the crowd disappeared, leaving him alone with two men he had already met. Jeor Mormont needed no introduction. The Old Bear wore no rank insignia, but no man alive had ever managed to imitate his bear-like wrath. And for all the years since his last appearance at Castle Black, the Lord Commander had not changed at all.

The other, though...if Mance had not heard the whispers and met him once, he would not have looked at the man twice. Dark hairs and grey eyes with a rather emotionless face, a powerful battle-armour almost devoid of decoration if not the howling direwolf on the chest: the Lord of Winterfell could almost have disguised himself as one of his lesser captains.

On the other hand, no ‘lesser captain’ would have ever been authorised to wield the gigantic sword currently waiting on his back. And then there were the eyes. They were...cold. Cold and waiting. It was like fixing a large predator, one which was wondering if you were worth the effort to slay and devour. Yes, the House’s words of House Stark were appropriate.

“Mance Rayder,” the Master of the Northern armies and fleets said in a voice colder than the average blizzard. “Former black brother. Former ranger. Former lieutenant commander of the scout cruiser *Black Cloak*. Former watcher. Former Wall guardian. King-Beyond-the-Wall. Murderer. Oath-Breaker.”

This was not like meeting one of these Southron gaolers who could be bought with one or two copper coins. There was not the shadow of this flaw here. Here was a General who had upheld his oaths to his men...and who evidently expected the same in return. Something Mance had refused to do. For some reason, the King-Beyond-the-Wall was sure his tale of a cloak and love would not be received well by the Lord of Winterfell.

“There are men inside this very fortress who argued you should be executed the moment you set a foot on this planet. The oaths of the Night’s Watch do not suffer any exception.” The lips of the Stark Lord twitched slightly. “Yet it can’t be denied your actions and your rule saved the next best thing to an entire civilisation and three billion men, women and children from the claws and the weapons of the Enemy. For this reason, the Wall Generals decided, with great reluctance, to...delay the execution your oath-breaking deserves.”

“Thank you, Lord Stark.”

“Don’t be too prompt to thank me,” and for the first time there was a drop of humour in this merciless voice. “I still have need of your services.”

A growl echoed against the bare black walls and to the Stark’s side, something huge and furry emerged into the light. Four paws, fangs twice bigger than those of a shadowcat, wolf-like eyes which rarely blinked and a body able to run and endure the worst winters...what in the name of the Children’s ashes was a direwolf doing there?

“I am not without a heart, contrary to what my enemies say,” Eddard Stark proclaimed. “Free Folk, as your people choose to call yourselves, have rarely been the North’s friends, but our feuds are unimportant compared to what is coming from the other side of the Eye of Woe. In this war, humanity is for better or for worse a single pack, and if we let a fraction of the greater whole be annihilated, then in time the Great Enemy will crush us all. Winter has come for all of us. The Others don’t want – or don’t care – make the difference between fighters and non-fighters.

But there are three billion souls inside your starships and I have not the resources to give them all a new home. Not when the Northern Sector is already pouring most of its treasury into the war industry for the greatest conflict of this millennium.”

As the Lord Commander showed no inclination to speak, Mace cleared his throat.

“I understand your position, Lord Stark. On the other hand, as a former black brother who visited many planets on this side of the Wall, I know your Sector isn’t the only one of the realm. Westeros has nine established Sectors, and while I heard relations are not good south of Moat Cailin, maybe the Riverlanders or the Westerners...”

“Mance,” Jeor Mormont interrupted him. “There is a terrible civil war in the South.”

“You’re not serious, Lord Commander,” but the expression of the Old Bear didn’t change. “Damn it, there must have been signs! On hundreds of our worlds, there were dead rising moments after holding their last breaths! Monsters not seen in a hundred generations haunting our nights! Ships exploding or disappearing in the void without reason! They can’t...they can’t satisfy their petty feuds like that!”

The Lord of Winterfell and the Lord Commander exchanged a dark look as the direwolf watched in a crouched position.

“There have been signs, indeed, but I’m afraid the blood of the First Men and the legacy of the Long Night are forgotten now in the South.” Eddard Stark caressed with his right hand the enormous head of the furry beast. “Accords and oaths were made with the Vale...but they have their own problems to deal with at the moment, and they won’t arrive in time for the first clashes.”

“You need men.”

“We need men,” corrected grimly the dark-haired Westerosi, “lest the night swallows us all for the rest of eternity.”

The gigantic sword Ice came out of its scabbard and took its place before Eddard Stark. At this moment, grey armour, black throne and the antique Valyrian blade, the Lord of Winterfell looked like a warchief of the traditional clans...a warlord of the Age of Heroes.

“I am not cruel but the Wall needs defenders and prayers alone will not stop the abominations. Three billion Free Folk came to us demanding our protection, and the North will not shirk its duty...but I demand a tithe. One warrior for every thirty souls willing to stand into the light. One hundred million souls; I do not care if they are men or women. It does not matter if they have only obsolete knives and their bare hands, I will provide weapons and armours as fast as my forges will create them. But I need these troops. And I will have them.”

“A Pact of Ice and Blood,” Mance murmured before he realised he wasn’t speaking to himself before meeting the implacable grey eyes. “And you want me to lead my people on the ramparts.”

“The Free Folk need a commander they can trust to speak for them and command them in battle,” Jeor spoke with something like grudging respect. “And though the oaths can’t be broken...any man who will stand against the monsters will be forgiven by the Gods.”

Mance Rayder, former black brother, lowered his head in acceptance, knowing how much this concession had cost the Lord Commander.

“If you protect my people, Lord Stark, my sword is yours. Give our children a new future...and the warriors of the Free Folk will stand with you against the wights and the White Walkers.”

Had it been done before? Had King Joramun uttered the same words to King Brandon Stark, pleading for the lives of the Free Folk to the King of the North? Perhaps, though it didn’t matter. Eddard Stark had blunted but accurately explained the outcome. It was life or undead slavery, and any man worth the name wouldn’t choose the latter.

“So be it. Now let the commanders return. We have little time to make the exodus preparations. The Enemy will not wait long before launching its assault.”

**Ygritte of the Crimson Squadron, 22.09.300AAC, Castle Black System**

“You want me to do what?”

It was not the kind of tone a squadron-leader should take when speaking with a senior clan-spear advising regularly the King-Beyond-the-Wall, but at the moment Ygritte couldn’t bring herself to care.

“I want you to muster all your surviving pilots and bring them on the transport *White Celerity*,” Val repeated patiently. “Many forces of the Free Folk are going to be dispersed across the Northern Sector per our new...benefactors’ instructions. Your squadron is included in this redeployment, you leave for the Bear Island System in ten hours.”

“Spear...you can’t do this! We were at the front of every offensive until now! You can’t send us away when the great battle is days away!”

“Squadron-leader...” Val grimaced before calling her name. “Ygritte, listen, this isn’t a punishment. You and your squadron have done a lot of good out there, but the crows have no surplus fighters and the Northerners are experiencing difficulties bringing the hundreds we need in addition to everything else.”

“We can fight with our machines! We did it for months against the White Walkers!”

“And what is the operational status of your engines, hmm?”

Ygritte bit her lip. The status operational was ‘awful’ and they both knew it. The Free Folk had light standards of maintenance, but with the monsters never stopping their raids and their pursuit, and the tech-warriors needed for the Arks and the Barges, Crimson Squadron had like many starfighter groups been forced to adapt and make a series of cannibalisations and choices that should never have been tolerated ten years ago.

“This is not a punishment, Ygritte. In fact, it’s the exact opposite. You and your squadron will be among the first to be reequipped and trained with Northern starfighters.”

“But we will miss the big battle.”

“You will miss the first battle,” Val rolled her stunning blue eyes. “Whether the crows and their allies manage to hold the Wall, no one rightly believes this is going to be the end of the war. The Enemy is at the gates, Ygritte. The massacres, the annihilation, the continents frozen, the stars growing cold...all of that was just the beginning of the end.”

“Fine...it’s just...it feels like I’m a coward, tens of thousands Free Folk are going to man the fortifications while we stay safe behind the lines...”

“You are not the only one feeling that way,” the woman many nicknamed ‘the wildling princess’ said in a conversational tone. “Don’t you think I want to go southwards myself? But orders are orders and the survival of the Free Folk goes above everything else. I will go to White Harbor dealing with temporary settlements and logistics; you will go to Bear Island and learn to pilot other people’s starfighters. Understood?”

“Yes...” in the end, even Free Folk had to follow orders, especially if they made sense.

“Good, now think about all the bears you will be able to watch on their home planets...”

Both women chuckled before going their own way. Both had no doubt their next meeting would be in far less pleasant circumstances.

**Lord Lucias Vypren, 23.09.300AAC, Haigh’s Fort System**

Lucias and his father’s had experienced tense relationships in the old man’s last years of life. His genitor was drinking too much, gambling far too many golden dragons away and sinking years of income as if money grew on trees. And to solve the problems, the chief culprit had found nothing better than to marry him to Lythene Frey. Aside from the lack of attractiveness of his wife, this in effect had made House Vypren, a House famed for its eight centuries of proud lineage, effectively a vassal of House Frey for all intent and purposes.

Two centuries ago, it would not have been so bad. Frey women in that era had not degenerated to a state of weasel-faced parasites. Frey men of the Conciliator’s reign had honour, chivalrous conduct and weapon prowess. This had been before Lord Walder Frey came around, of course.

So yes, his father had chained him with a wife he couldn’t bed without shivers and a pact Lucias couldn’t break if he wanted to remain solvable. And because things couldn’t get worse, the Usurper’s Rebellion had seen the Northern barbarians rampage in the theatre and pillage at will the resources and the treasury of House Vypren. Lucias thankfully had managed to retreat in time with his family and his portable possessions, but his home system’s infrastructure had been thrashed or confiscated, and he had no choice but to demand new loans – and to House Lannister, of all people. In return of miraculous interest rates on his repayments, the messengers of Casterly Rock had demanded he placed himself under Lord Emmon’s authority if war came to Westeros.

It had seemed a good bargain at the time, when peace was a fact of life and no credible enemy in sight to threaten the safety of his lands. It was now considerably less so as the drums of war sounded and their ‘Grand Admiral’ was by his own words confirming he was a monumental imbecile.

Father Above, why did it have to be a Frey? There had to be other high-ranked blue-blooded commanders the West could send here to take command...

In theory, the Sixth Fleet of the River Sector – of which he and his flagship the *Jumping Toad* were part of – was the most powerful muster in this theatre. It had six ships of the line, three armoured cruisers, nine battlecruisers, one fleet carrier, eighteen heavy cruisers and something like six thousand starfighters. And in the transports coming behind the wall of battle, there were over fifteen million troops. This was the union of House Frey, Charlton, Vypren, Erenford and Paege. On a tactical display, it was an impressive projection of firepower. The small problem when it met reality was the weakness in the leadership structure. For a reason which had everything to do with nepotism and nothing with competence, many sons, brothers, cousins of the Lord of the Twins were flag captains of Admirals.

Lucias had thought the Starks had done a good job of exterminating the spawns of Lord Walder, but they had missed a lot of them...and two decades of peace had not decreased their numbers.

Too many Freys and now they were in charge of the general strategy of Sixth Fleet in the name of His Majesty Joffrey Targaryen, First of the Name. A wise idea would have been to crush the Mallisters while they still had numerical superiority, but Lord Emmon Frey, in his great wisdom, had decreed the greatest enemy was going to come from Northgate. The Starks and their perfidious barbarians had to be defeated in the cradle before they grew strong enough to ravage the River Sector.

Lucias wondered what sort of drug Emmon smoke every morning.

The River Sector was burning; no one less powerful than a God would be able to change that. The Fourth Fleet had sworn its allegiance to the former Crown Prince Aegon and retreated towards Willow Wood. The Seventh Fleet of Harroway was at Crossroads and now following Aegon’s uncle Viserys. House Bracken had declared for King Joffrey. House Blackwood had expelled traders and overseers from its system. Uprisings and more or less coordinated insurrections happened everywhere and cities were fought over as the realm was torn asunder.

And yet Emmon Frey had decided to concentrate his forces here.

‘Here’ was the Haigh’s Fort System. The first barrier of resistance against any Northern invasion, built by House Targaryen before the Greyjoy Rebellion, to prevent a lightning offensive of the wolves into the River Sector.

At the time, Lucias acknowledged it must have been impressive – not to mention ruinous. After all, ten full minefields, each a million strong, one hundred and eighty forts, over five thousand missile and laser platforms and over three thousand starfighters was not a small and unimportant military investment, not when it was obvious House Haigh hadn’t a third of the funds to maintain them on the long term.

Alas for the taxpayers, the Northerners had never come in all these years, and the defences’ necessary overhauls had been delayed and delayed year after year as the potential enemies of the Iron Throne were re-thought and determined to be closer to the Crown Sector.

Personally, Lucias wasn’t a believer in the rumours that Northern assassins had slaughtered the King. First, it didn’t come from any official source. Secondly, it was awfully convenient for the new ‘King Viserys’ if foreign elements of Winterfell or disgruntled elements of the Usurper’s Rebellion had done the deed, no? What a terrible and tragic coincidence the Prince of Summerhall just happened to visit the capital and launch his coup the very day his brother died! No, this was just a wonderful coincidence! Really, after the fiasco of King Aerys and Princess Elia Martell, the Lord of House Vypren was surprised some propaganda agents thought the public was going to swallow this web of nonsense...

“Contact Lord Charlton, I want to adjust our redeployment,” the black-haired highborn ordered his chief of staff. “I want to know his timetable for moving in the Terrick System. We may not be able to catch Fourth Fleet, but there’s no need to let more systems than we have to fall in the hands of those following their Crown Prince.”

“Lord Charlton is in a conference with his captains, my Lord.”

“Formidable,” the Vice Admiral in his blue-grey uniform blinked before dismissing the new wave of disappointment. Conference, paperwork and little arrangements, the River Fleet under House Frey was spending too much time bickering and talking, and not enough preparing for a fight. “In this case, prepare a surprise game for our men for this afternoon, I will...”

The tactical display flashed a brilliant shade of red and alarms began to scream.

“The minefields, Lord! The minefields are under attack!”

For two seconds Lord Lucias Vypren froze. No, it had to be mistake. But the explosions continued, so huge even hundreds of thousands kilometres away, his naked eyes could see something was happening.

“The minefields are under attack, Lord!”

“So it is seems,” he answered at last. “It appears our intelligence services’ estimates of the Northerners’ reactions were a bit erroneous.” Lucias didn’t add ‘as usual’ but he was sure everybody on the bridge heard it.

“Change course and form around the *Jumping Toad* in formation Shark-Four. We must close on the jump point before the Northerners blast the fixed defences away.”

As he spoke the words, the Vice-Admiral knew it was certainly too late. They were over two million kilometres away and the space around the jump point from Northgate was already an inferno. Moreover most of Sixth Fleet was dispersed and the channels of communication were suffering as thousands of officers tried all to speak at the same time and give contradictory command.

The warships of Lord Emmon Frey, Grand Admiral of Sixth Fleet, had far less distance to cover, but they were reacting more slowly. It certainly had to do something with the fact their engines were cold. The North had really taken the weasel with his pants down...

“Admiral, warships transiting from the jump point. It looks like a batch of Northern armoured cruisers...missile launch! Missile launch!”

Lucias opened his mouth to tell his tactical officer not to utter absurdities before closing it as thousands of incredibly fast lights illuminated space. They were too far away to matter...but the fortresses weren’t and apparently a third of Sixth Fleet wasn’t either.

“Decrease our speed.” Lucias flatly commanded.

“Admiral?”

“Decrease our speed and stand by missile defence,” the Vice-Admiral barked. “The ‘ridiculous rumours’ the Northerners were purchasing new missiles from Braavos was not a hallucination. If they have fired these missiles, they have the range to engage each and every one of our ships and we have no means to fire back...”

The next twenty seconds were a nightmare and more than one operator vomited in a bag as over fifty fortresses and thousands of fellow soldiers were wiped out from the face of the universe. And it didn’t get any better. The real wave of destruction had been focused on the starships. There were so many of them no proper count was going to be made...not with the acceleration levels these new missiles had.

Three minutes and six seconds later, the destruction torrent struck Sixth Fleet. The defences of the Frey warships were surprised, caught out cold, most of their systems weren’t ready but they managed to stop nineteen percent of the ship-killers. Eighty-one percent got through.

And once again, this was the Usurper’s Rebellion again and Lucias knew that no matter the name of the commander in the enemy fleet, the spirit of the dreaded Silent Wolf was staring at them across the void.

The *Glorious Revenge*, Admiral Cleos Frey’s flagship, was the first to go. A Western Gift-class triangular ship, its explosion was like a new star birthed in the Haigh’s Fort System. In its death the ship of the line took five scout cruisers and transformed the armoured cruiser *Ser Aenys Frey* Rear-Admiral Merrett Frey in a blazing wreck. The *Red Argent* of Lord Halmon Paege and the *Indomitable Twins* of Lothar Frey died in a chorus of explosions. The battlecruisers *Paege Gift* of Jammos Frey and the *Silver Twin* of Rear-Admiral Whalen Frey shattered. Four heavy cruisers, five light cruisers and ten scout cruisers disintegrated. The carriers had not yet a single fighter strike when the missiles got through the hangars and began to play a fatal litany of annihilation and slaughter.

And just like that, the first wave was over...and as alarms and reports after reports of untold carnage began to arrive, the fleet flagship blew up. Like its namesake, the *Lord Walder Frey* had not been built in the end to resist Northern fury. Lord Emmon Frey died with his flagship and the *Lord Tytos Lannister* of Ser Rhaegar Frey broke in half as it received the brunt of the agony of the ship of the line.

And as the seconds passed and new vectors were calculated to stay out of the demonic range of the Northern warships, it became clear this single, terrible salvo had been too much. The *Yellow Heron* of Lord Hoster Erenford was a charnel house and the Rear-Admiral himself had held his last breath.

One salvo, it was all it had taken. One salvo, and they were down four ships of the line out of an initial complement of six. That left only two...and the Northern battle-line emerged from the inferno of the destroyed minefields like demons of the Seven Hells, their harsh and bulky shaped revealed hundreds after hundreds of cannons and murder batteries.

“Sensors are reading eight ships of the line, unknown class, thirty-two armoured cruisers and over thirty battlecruisers...”

This was it, then. Lucias knew that even hidden behind the greatest of the fortifications, Sixth Fleet would never have been able to stand against this thunderstorm. Not against Northern warships. Not against Northern Admirals.

“Pull us back.”

“Admiral?”

“Pull us back,” Lord Vypren commanded. “We must return to the Twins with all haste and pray a defence around the jump point and modern defences will somewhat be more effective than here.”

“But my Lord, our forces on the planet...we can’t abandon them there!”

“We can and we will,” he affirmed, trying not to wince as the battlecruiser *Green Rift* of Alesander Frey and the armoured cruiser *Ser Stevron Frey* of Vice-Admiral Lyonel Frey succumbed under the hellishly-accurate execution salvoes of the Starks. “Understand me, if we don’t flee right now, nobody is going to live to fight another day. This fleet,” he pointed his finger at the tactical display, “is the hammer Winterfell sent South to ensure any war would be short, bloody and end with plenty of Riverlanders dead. Our armies will do what they can...but the surviving warships take first priority. If we have no fleet personnel, our men will be doomed anyway. Now pull back! We must retreat before it is too late!”

**Senior Captain Ser Damon Paege, 23.09.300AAC, Haigh’s Fort System**

In Westerosi history, one-sided battles were in general presented as case of one opponent being too smart, too treacherous or the defeated being too stupid to understand he was facing overwhelming force.

Damon wondered what the maesters and their underlings were going to think about the battle fought today. An entire fleet swept aside in two hours. Years of building and re-building, years of costly armament programs, years of fastidious deals and playing the Game of Thrones...for that.

It was complete and total disaster. The Battle of the Haigh’s Fort, the effective destruction of Sixth Fleet and its auxiliary forces, was not going to be good for any of the Houses having sworn to follow King Joffrey Targaryen and the Lannisters into rebellion.

Few River capital warships had managed to flee in time. Mercilessly, the Northern fleet had crushed all opposition in space. Vice-Admiral Tion Frey had tried to charge ahead in a desperate ramming attempt but his armoured cruiser the *Ser Ryman Frey* had been blasted into orbital debris well before plasma range. His own command, the battlecruiser *Purple Rift*, had exploded while he was away commanding the planetary defences, killing his nephew Hoster.

Good riddance.

In fact, if the damned bastards hadn’t killed his father, Damon would have thought the day was a neat improvement. Jammos and Whalen dead, the collar Lord Walder Frey had imposed them was no more.

But his father and his older brother had died aboard the *Red Argent*, and he was now Lord Paege of Fairmarket...for all the good it was going to do. There was no hope of rescue, stranded on Haigh’s Landing.

Some of the Charlton and Vypren warships had escaped, but too few to make any difference. The Northern fleet was far too powerful...and Damon alas was sure Lord Charlton and Lord Vypren were soon going to entertain changing sides now that the Freys had stopped being in charge. Yeah, using these two Houses as the rear-guard had massively backfired, no?

Damon had no idea about the extent of the losses, but they had to be absolutely massive. All the orbital fortresses throughout the system were gone. Overall, they had lost for sure four ships of the line, three armoured cruisers, six battlecruisers, eleven heavy cruisers, twenty-eight cruisers, thirty-five scout cruisers, nine frigates, one fleet carrier, six light carriers, eleven escort carriers and seven thousand-plus starfighters.

And with them, most of the west-northern Riverlands nobility had fallen.

Sixth Fleet was finished, though nobody in the Twins armies wished to admit it.

It was not the prototype energy shields imported from Myr which were going to change the situation. Oh, these devices attenuated the effects of orbital bombardment and made it too costly unless the enemy was willing to torch the planet.

But the enemy had control of the air, far too advanced weapons and obviously had spent years training before using them on the battlefield...

“Here they come,” a Colonel whispered...

For an instant, Damon Paege believed asteroids were thrown against the planet, but no these were ‘just’ the fires of shuttles, flyers and bombers entering the atmosphere at maximum speed.

They were so many....and after a second of reflexion, Damon decided that the Freys and the architects of this disaster could go hang themselves and dance in the Seven Hells. The battle was lost, and all the oaths and debt repayment promises weren’t going to do him any good if he was dead.

“Order our batteries to stop their barrage and contact the Northerners in orbit.”

The new Lord of Fairmarket swallowed heavily.

“Tell them we want to surrender.”

**Lord Raymun Darry, 23.09.300AAC, Darry System**

If Raymun had known what was awaiting him seventeen years later, he would have refused the title of Lord Paramount before one minute had passed, and damn the loss of prestige and royal support it would have entailed.

But he wasn’t a seer or had any mysterious stranger boasting divination skills in his employ then. Well, he still hadn’t one in his service now. And judging by the conflicts raging everywhere, such an individual would be worth his weight in platinum, tungsten and molybdenum.

Yes, like a good and loyal Lord, he had accepted to become the Lord Paramount of the River Sector and replace the treacherous Hoster Tully. It could have been the start of a prosperous and peaceful era with House Darry at the helm.

Raymun wanted to believe he had tried. Oh, he had tried for endless days, threatening, pleading, cajoling, and flattering his new bannersmen.

Ultimately, it had been in pure loss. The River Sector, if one didn’t count the disaster at Wayfarer’s Rest, had to the best of his knowledge not been invaded by the neighbouring Sectors.

And yet it was burning in the fires of rebellion. The men once loyal to King Rhaegar and now following his son, the legitimate King Aegon VI, were outnumbered and had to watch as millions raised once more the banners of rebellion.

The treason of Viserys Targaryen would have been bad in itself. The Dragonstone Admiral had convinced somehow Seventh Fleet to turn its cloak, and with Crossroads in his hands divided the loyalist cause in two sub-groups. Five systems had gone to the Green Dragon, as they called the new Master of King’s Landing, and as a result First Fleet had to stay on the defensive. House Darry could not launch any serious offensive as the situation was borderline chaotic and the Crown Sector remained like a huge blade pointed on his spine.

The problem was that Viserys Targaryen wasn’t alone. Many Lords had ruled their systems before the Usurper’s Rebellion, and their loyalties had never been to House Darry. You hadn’t to be a genius to know their names. Mallister. Blackwood. Smallwood. Grell. Once again, an united Sector behind his House would have stood firm, they were real threats, but ones which could be handled in a few months if given enough preparations.

But these preparations hadn’t happened. Sometimes, Raymun wondered what the Crownlanders had seen when they watched the social and cultural disintegration of the River Sector. From the moment the Peace of Maidenpool had been signed, there had been no unified navy or army. There was no common uniform, no common strategy and...well, nothing was done as part of the greater whole.

In these trying times, Raymun Darry could not even pretend he had been surprised when he had seen many Lords rally Joffrey Targaryen. The Old Lion had poured plenty of money in hundreds of purses, so why not take a shot at an unpopular administration they had never wanted?

Now in the manual books was the moment he should make some bombastic speeches and launch his fleets across the Sector to kill all the traitors. Problem: he had two small fleets, the First and the Fourth...and even those two couldn’t unite without a major battle.

And day after day, their cause was losing planets.

“The situation is catastrophic, Willis.” Raymun told the knight waiting next to him. “I’m almost tempted to withdraw all my forces from the various war zones and order a general retreat to Darry.”

“I don’t think King Aegon would be very happy to hear that, my Lord.”

“I agree completely,” the Lord Paramount breathed slowly to remind himself his loyalty vows. “But without reinforcements, our chances of victory are slim.”

“As long as the Tully rebels block the Lannister on the western frontier, the two forces are essentially neutralised, my Lord.”

“Yes. And what do we do about the Brackens? According to our last merchant ships to come back, Lord Jonos had exploited the destruction of Second Fleet and conquered the Goodbrook System.”

“We can counter-attack...”

“With what?” He asked incredulously. “The moment I send a ship of the line away from Darry or Harrenhal, Viserys’ supporters can mount an assault on our forces...we are already stretched thin as it is.”

Raymun shook his head.

“Assuming I could send a squadron powerful enough to make Jonos withdraw, all this Bracken bastard had to do is to wait. I will never be able to storm Stone Hedge with the forces I have on hand. No, Goodbrook is gone, and we will certainly lose Perwyn once he commits himself. At least Atranta is fortified enough to last a few months...”

“My Lord, if we abandon Perwyn, we lose Castlewood and the Stoney Sept...”

“For all the good they are giving us,” he answered sardonically. The two systems were in what could be lightly described as ‘an advanced state of insurrection’ and were eating men like there was no tomorrow. “But you are right, we should defend it...but the naval squadron at Chambers is already severely under-strength and busy fighting sellsword raids. And if there’s a secondary system we can’t afford to lose, it’s Chambers.”

All communications not done by raven-drones were using this path to send their reports southwards. If Chambers fell, they would be cut off from the Reach and the galactic south of the River Sector.

“The longer their defiance is allowed to continue, my Lord...”

“I know, I know! But the ships and the troops we have are barely enough to stand against all the other factions...for now.”

He regretted immediately the lapse but what was done was done.

“My Lord?”

“The special frigates and cruisers which were supposed to keep an eye on the Northern fleet were supposed to report yesterday. Due to the dangerous nature of their task, we could not inform them of the hostilities’ commencement.”

“The core of the Northern fleet was reported to be in the vicinity of the Wall, Lord Darry.”

“Yes,” Raymun replied calmly. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

**Admiral Baelor Hightower, 24.09.300AAC, Old Oak System**

“This is not a game I like to play,” the Heir of Oldtown admitted as he watched the images of the Lannister fleet pulverising the defences of the Old Oak System. “I hate politics.”

“May I know what prompted such a confidence, Admiral?” demanded Lord Branston Cuy, General and senior army commander of the Third Reach Fleet.

Baelor made an exaggerated smirk.

“It’s more an introduction to a problem I really have no solution for, General.”

“I think I understand,” the Lord of the Sunhouse System answered.

“I’m sure you do.” Baelor spoke as he watched the tactical display, examining any detail which might give him a chance to defeat the Western forces. He didn’t find one.

Thanks to the pulse cannons he had sponsored the development of a decade ago, no enemy could stay unnoticed from his sensors in a radius of five million kilometres. So unless he grew arrogant, cocky and rushed into the melee, his fleet could avoid the lethal ambushes.

That was the good news.

The bad points were far longer to list, but in a few short sentences, it appeared Lord Tywin Lannister had decided the Reach was an enemy to be broken.

Two super-battleships, including one they had never ever known the existence of before today. Sixty ships of the line. One hundred and twenty battlecruisers. One hundred and forty-eight heavy cruisers. Six fleet carriers. Hundreds and hundreds of escorts, auxiliaries and over three entire fleet logistical convoys.

Mace Tyrell was evidently not the only Lord who could think big, he mused.

“I wonder how many are still waiting in the wings?” Baelor wondered aloud.

“Admiral?”

“We didn’t think Tywin could have more than sixty-eight, sixty-nine ships of the line in service.” He pointed at the sinister red flashes lighting the void like thousands of hellish furnaces. “But obviously, the Old Lion managed to blind our spies and our numbers must be considered totally flawed.”

“It’s entirely possible he’s committing everything to this trap.”

Baelor was forced to snort.

“Tywin Lannister is many things, General. Cruel, ruthless and humourless are in general strongly associated with him. But nobody has ever accused him of being stupid. For all his pride in the defences of the Rock, the Lion would never have left his home fortress undefended. And we heard rumours about an attack on Wayfarer’s Rest.” He shook his head at the absurdity of the situation. “No, he would not put all his warships in a war zone. We must assume there are plenty of capital ships, at least battlecruisers and armoured cruisers, with heavy cruisers in support, to defend his major planets.”

“The loss of this fleet would still be a huge blow.” Branston commented.

“I agree,” Baelor shrugged, “unfortunately, it isn’t like we have the forces on hand to defeat it.”

Not counting the super-battleships on the other side – which had to be considered worth two or three ships of the line each – Third Fleet was outnumbered by more than two-to-one. His twenty-eight ships of the line would not last long against sixty brand-new Western counterparts. Especially as he couldn’t rely on the fortifications of Old Oak to give him support.

“Highgarden is not going to be pleased us if we turn back now,” Branston said with considerable understatement colouring his voice.

“No, but I don’t think our superiors would like very much our fleet shattered and the gates to Highgarden wide open for the Lannisters too.” Baelor shrugged again before asking one of his butlers to bring him a cup of wine. Red and strong, the wine. “The numbers don’t lie, General. We have arrived too late to change anything to the battle and all we can do now is to ensure the losses of the next days will be minimal. This means avoiding a conventional battle...for now.”

“Lady Arwyn refuses to evacuate, I will remind you.”

Baelor found himself unable to give his famous smile at that piece of news and scowled.

“She intends to force our hand, isn’t she?”

“To be fair, until one hour ago, she didn’t know there was a second fleet as strong as the first waiting behind the asteroid belt...”

“And what is her excuse for her total lack of preparations and the disastrous low number of evacuations?” Baelor sipped the red twice but the sight of the golden cup failed to improve his mood. “I am not throwing accusations because she’s a woman, by the Crone! She is the Lady of a Noble House, and she was given the disposition of our forces. The moment she knew there were thirty ships of the line attacking her system, if she had the brains the Seven give to a goose, she should have assumed there was a real danger and evacuated the mobile shipyards, the ore and fuel tankers, the supply ships, the divisions not needed to garrison the planet...and herself.”

Baelor made a loud sigh that was more theatrical than needed.

“Tell Lady Arwyn Oakheart to evacuate now with everything she can. You can add it is my last ultimatum, if you want. I intend to withdraw in less than forty minutes to Dustonburry, and I will do it with or without her.”

“She is not going to like this.”

“No,” Baelor completely agreed with the judgment of Lord Branston. “And she is absolutely going to hate when I will order a missile launch to prevent her shipyards from falling into enemy’s hands.”

**King Joffrey Targaryen, 24.09.300AAC, Old Oak System**

“Well, that was just...disappointing,” Lancel Lannister said as the last warships of the Reach fleet jumped out of the Old Oak System, leaving the Lannister fleet in an uncontested position.

Joffrey just chuckled.

“You have a way with words, Lancel.”

“Thank you, your Grace.”

Still, Lancel was right. The crews had awaited eagerly this battle. At least the fleet under the command of his grandfather had been busy destroying the defences of Old Oak for a few days. The second part of the fleet, by contrast, had done the next best thing to wait arms crossed and doing nothing. As one might imagine, it was frustrating and disappointment.

And now the trap carefully prepared and implemented was gone, because the Reach Admirals of all people had imagined and built a long-range detection pulsar device. It didn’t look they had equipped it on all their ships, but one or two looked like they were enough to ruin the day of any fleet waiting to ambush the newcomers.

By itself, it was enough to ruin the entire plan. But whoever in command of this fleet was also smart. The second he had seen this fleet, the Reach naval commander had known the system was lost and had begun a bombardment on the critical military infrastructure the Lannister forces had tried to avoid damaging.

“At least we captured a sizeable percentage of Old Oak’s nobility.” Lancel voiced in an apologetic tone. “It’s not much, I know...”

Joffrey made his lips twitch in contempt.

“I suppose it’s something...however, I think they would have probably done more damage if we sent them on a shuttle directly to Highgarden.” Obviously the Reach Admiral had done the smart thing before withdrawing, but Joffrey didn’t believe the highborn of this planet were going to share his opinion. Their home’s defence was pathetic in the extreme, and their contingency plans never practised before today. And then there was the little fact they had refused to evacuate thanks to their damned pride.

Whoever had these nobles and commanders on his side had a dead weight to lift before even thinking about fighting the enemy.

“Old Oak is ours, your Grace.”

“Yes, but I’m afraid breaking through Dustonburry will not be that easy.” Joffrey watched the numbers before shaking his head. “An advantage of two-to-one is nice, but if the defenders are smart and know how to use the fixed defences awaiting us in the next system, this isn’t going to be a leisure stroll...” Still, it was the first Reach System to fall to an enemy force since the Greyjoy Rebellion, and unlike the Ironborn this was no mere raid and Old Oak was not one of the Shields.

“I wonder how Highgarden is going to react to this...”

**Ser Willas Tyrell, 25.09.300AAC, Highgarden System**

“I suppose it could have been worse.”

It was a sad thing when he couldn’t say his sister was defeatist.

“Yes,” Willas replied after a long silence and three more slates of requisitions completed. “It could have been. Baelor is not a peerless tactician, but he knows the importance of studying a battlefield. A more aggressive Admiral might have tried to rush in and hammer the Lannister fleet while they were busy dealing with Old Oak defences.”

Needless to say, such a course would have proven disastrous. The squadrons which had bombarded relentlessly the Oakheart forts had been well-supplied and by all reliable reports, Tywin Lannister himself had been commanding it. Now, Willas wasn’t one of these knights who believed the Gods bowed to the Lord of Casterly Rock and everything he touched transformed into gold or platinum. But there was no denying the Old Lion was a ruthless Admiral and so far in his lengthy career, he had not personally known defeat on the battlefield.

The Reynes and the Tarbecks would have confirmed this, if any were alive today.

“I suppose we will have no choice, then,” Margaery said. She was as beautiful as ever in her long blue dress...and it hadn’t escaped him or most of her handmaidens she had stopped wearing any clothes in black and red colours since the departure of the Crown forces. “Father must turn back. We need the Grand Fleet back at Highgarden.”

“Yes,” there was no other course, really. Not with the overwhelming majority of the Lannister forces a mere two jumps away from Highgarden. “I sent the first couriers ships over thirty hours ago. Hopefully, father will be able to disengage rapidly and leave a cover force at Ashford.”

“Will he arrive in time if the Lannisters try to storm Dustonburry?”

There were two possible answers to this question and one ignored most common military realities.

“No,” he admitted before amending his judgement. “Not if the Lion really want to pay the blood price to conquer the system. He has the numerical advantage and for the moment, his supply lines aren’t that difficult to handle. The Westerners have their Crakehall bases and depots next door, when it comes down to it.”

“This is...not good.”

Willas made a thin smile.

“No, it’s not. On the other hand, Baelor knows which system is critical to the war effort. We can afford to lose Dustonburry; we certainly can’t afford to let the greatest Lannister fleet of the last fifty years break through our outer defences and ravage this system.” If it happened, they might as well sign the surrender treaty here and there. After the destruction of the new generation of warships in the Dornish sneak attacks, Highgarden facilities accounted for a huge percentage of the construction, maintenance, reparation and armament duties of the Reach Sector. If this infrastructure was lost, there would be only Oldtown and a few secondary sites like Horn Hill and the Arbor to fill the gaps...and it was not enough, not with so little warning and the Lannisters at the gates. “And before you say it no, we can’t recall the other fleets. Lord Redwyne is needed to protect Oldtown and the Arbor, and the other Admirals are too far away.”

“You may have to recall them in the end,” Margaery told him in her ‘deadly serious’ tone. Burning the Stormlanders rebels or taking the ruins of King’s Landing isn’t going to be terribly useful if we besieged here by the Lions.”

“Sister...I have not that authority.” Oh, he wished he had it. “It is the prerogative of father, and there are also political concerns at stake.” House Tyrell had poured a lot of influence and propaganda on every level of the Reach society to justify the alliance – financial, military and by union – with House Targaryen. The Game of Thrones was an exercise in pragmatism, but Willas feared the internal aftershocks of what could happen if they broke the accords between the rose and the dragon right now.

“If father wins a quick and decisive victory over the Dornish and manages to return swiftly enough to take the Lannisters in the rear, we will have broken our two closest enemies.”

*If*.

It was truly a wonderful and terrible word.

Father Above, this war had not begun one month ago, and yet they were already on the defensive.

“I think I will make a detour to the White Sept tonight. A heartfelt prayer to the Warrior can’t do any wrong in these trying times...”

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“*Your arrogance truly knows no limits, Tyrell. Did you think I wouldn’t cheat because I was already winning*?” Words attributed to Queen Rhaenys Targaryen, 300AAC.

**Ser Garlan Tyrell, 25.09.300AAC, Harvest Hall System**

The first defences of Harvest Hall did not resist thirty seconds before being blasted out of existence. Oh, the Dornish had not stood idle and opened the gates for the Reach fleet, far from it. Half a million mines surrounded the jump point, supported by sixty forts, twenty of which were from a new class he had never seen before. There had also been sixty missile platforms, one thousand starfighters, and forty big plasma cannons specialised in the evisceration of cruisers and the like.

Despite these defences, the outcome was never in doubt. By the time the ships of the line of the Fourth Squadron entered the affair, all the forts were pulverised. The minefield was half-way removed and the Dornish resistance was in its dying throes.

“So far, so good,” his flag captain murmured. At twenty-four, Bryan Fossoway was surprisingly low in the ranks given the influence his name could give him, but he had confided in Garlan a couple of times his desire was to be a Captain and lead his own warship into the fires of war, not spend his hours questioning the global strategy of the Reach or waiting behind a desk. “We have control of the jump point, Admiral. No sign of the enemy fleet for the time being.”

“Spread our screen of scout cruisers and frigates, Captain,” Garlan said after five seconds of observation and no unknown warships emerging from the void. “The Dornish are far too fond of ambushes and daggers in the dark to my taste. The faster we know what they have in mind, the less we will bleed countering their plans.”

“I will relay the orders.”

Garlan nodded in recognition before contemplating the images of the Harvest Hall System. That the Dornish fleet had avoided a close-ranged battle around the jump point didn’t surprise him much, to be honest. At less than a hundred thousand kilometres, whoever had the greatest number of ships of the line and sub-capital ships had the advantage, and the Grand Fleet had come with sixteen full squadrons of them, two super-battleships, and was supported by over two hundred battlecruisers. The Dornish fleet, on the other hand, had less than twenty-two ships of the line in its order of battle – assuming the intelligence services had done correctly their job, this time.

“Where are you hiding?” The second son of Mace Tyrell asked for himself.

The Harvest Hall System had three planets worth mentioning. The first was of course Harvest Hall – note the originality of the name – where the majority of the Stormlander population was living. By latest estimates, around four hundred and fifty million people lived there.

Harvest Hall was not a pleasurable word to live in. The gravity was on the high end of the spectrum for a planet where non-genetically modified humans could survive. It was extremely mountainous too – some of the peaks were fourteen thousand metres high - and unlike planets of the Western Sector, totally lacked the kind of precious ores the Westerosi industrial sector was interested in exploiting.

It was the most hospitable planet of the system.

The second blue orb, Blue Stack, was technically an ocean world...an ocean world with an atmosphere of poison and various aquatic life-forms ready to swallow anything surviving the entry in atmosphere.

The third planet, Stern Guard, was somehow inhabitable, if one liked super-storms and the cold. It had a population of around forty million and some large defences to protect its exposed position...or at least it had defences before the Dornish blasted everything in hundreds of thousands debris.

“We have our orders from the Royal Rose, Admiral. The battle-line will advance and recapture Harvest Hall before moving towards the Nightsong System. The formation to execute is Lorea-4, the scout cruisers will adopt the Butterfly-2 protection model.”

Garlan frowned.

“Something wrong, Admiral?”

“No, not exactly...it’s just it is going to slow down the pace of our advance. Any sign of the enemy fleet?”

“No Admiral, no sign of the Dornish. We have a few scout cruisers here and there, blasting encrypted communications into the void, but we don’t know where their capital ships have gone.” Bryan cleared his throat before continuing. “Is it possible the enemy retreated at Nightsong?”

“No,” Garlan replied. “They’re here. Continue scanning the entirety of the system and warn me as soon as you find something.”

But the alerts never shrieked to bring the fateful news. The long lines of capital ships advanced in the system, preceded by hundreds of escorts and flanked on all sides by impressive forces. It had been four hours they had arrived in-system, and so far the lack of hostilities was making him uneasy. The Dornish star shield was extremely reduced despite the treacherous sneak attacks which had killed millions twenty-three days ago.

And then, when they were half an hour away from Harvest Hall –the planet, not the system – the so-long awaited words were heard.

“We have them, Admiral! They were hiding behind the planet! Preliminary estimation: ten ship of the lines, thirty battlecruisers, fifty carriers!”

Garlan smiled at the discovery before frowning again in incredulity. What was the enemy commander thinking? Insane or no, the Dornish commanders surely weren’t delusional enough to believe ten ships of the line were going to be more than an appetizer for one hundred and twelve ships of the line.

“Missile launch! Missile launch!”

And this was the moment Garlan froze in shock as the right part of his tactical display began to bleed in hostile signatures.

“It’s...what is shooting at us? The Dornish fleet is in front of us, not on our flanks!”

“Stern Guard! The fire is coming from Stern Guard, Admiral!”

Garlan took four seconds to consider the words...before swearing loudly.

“Orbital debris, eh?”

“They must have thrashed the infrastructure to hide their tracks, Admiral,” Bryan had arrived at the same conclusion. “They emplaced their damned attack platforms in this mess, and they waited patiently for us to come in range.”

And like imbeciles, the Grand Reach of the Fleet had jumped in the trap. They were at two hundred and fifty thousand kilometres, well into the range of Dornish missiles, and they would have to endure the storm. It was going to hurt. There were over one hundred thousand missiles in this wave, and with the effect of surprise, the counter-measures were going to be less efficient than assumed.

“The *Royal Rose* demands all starfighters destroy these platforms before they have the time to send a second volley!” the tactical officer of the *Flower Ascension* barked.

“Release them. Tell the light cruisers to protect our rear. Stand by missile defence.”

“Laser-point defence active. Anti-missiles prepared and ready per Archer battle-plan.”

“Fire!”

The Grand Fleet screamed in fury, trying to parry the blow it had not seen coming. Tens of thousands of anti-missiles, lasers and electronic counter-measures burst into the void and for a second he wanted to believe nothing was going to pass this barrage of laser and explosions.

Alas, it wasn’t the case. Future analysis would show they had approximately stopped forty-six percent of the incoming projectiles...which meant fifty-four had gotten through. It would have been insufficient to cripple a considerable number of ships of the line. But the enemy wasn’t targeting them.

In ten seconds, the hurricane of destruction ravaged the ranks of the Reach heavy cruisers.

“Give me the numbers,” Garlan swallowed with difficulty.

“We lost...seventy-three heavy cruisers, thirty-one light cruisers and forty-eight scout cruisers, Admiral. Two of our battlecruisers are slightly damaged but they are able to...oh by the Seven!”

*They suckered us again*, was the first thought to come into his mind. The starfighters had launched a gigantic wave to annihilate the missile platforms. They had expected some anti-starfighter ordnance thrown into the void. They had expected a second volley.

Instead the space around Stern Guard was engulfed in the familiar flare of gigantic plasma bombs.

“They...they...” Bryan wasn’t finding the words, his mouth open in astonishment.

“They had plasma self-destruct strapped to their platforms, that way they would take our starfighters with them,” suddenly he was extremely glad Loras had been ordered to return to the Royal Rose instead of leading the starfighter charge. “And we did exactly they wanted.”

They had not caught everyone, of course. But the attack had involved six thousand out of the nine thousand in this fleet, and at a glance, nearly four thousand were wiped out by this series of explosions.

There was no time to return to adjust the formation before the enemy struck again.

“Dornish starfighters! Dornish starfighters attacking our rear-guard at the jump point!”

The nimble engines arrived like the blades of dead and millions of kilometres behind them, the fourteen Reach battlecruisers they had left to cover their arrival point were utterly massacred in three minutes.

“Admiral, Your Lord Father is ordering us to resume the advance...”

Garlan gazed at the tactical display and suddenly understood the magnitude of the trap they had jumped into.

“Turn us around.”

“Admiral?”

“Contact the flagship and all the squadron commanders! Tell them to turn them around before it’s too late!”

“But my Lord there’s nothing...”

“Do it, or we’re all dead!”

Slowly, far too slowly, the *Flower Ascension* and its six squadron-consorts began to turn around. Here and there, dozens of lone ships also broke formation to follow his move. Given that this behaviour was worthy of a court-martial and an execution if the verdict was guilty, Garlan thought it was rather humbling they trusted him...though these commanders may also believe that with the current supreme commander, they were going to end all dead.

His flagship had not yet finished its complete rotation that the entire vanguard of the Grand Fleet disappeared into an ocean of explosion and flames.

“Blessed Warrior, these are...”

“These are nova bombs.” Garlan shivered as he finished the sentence. “I suppose they had another...another ‘hulk’ on our path, with ammunition stores full of these things.”

“We just lost thirty-five ships of the line, seventy battlecruisers and the Father only knows how many escorts, Admiral...” Bryan Fossoway grimaced. “The orders coming from the flagship are...less than coherent...”

Garlan wanted to scream, shout on the frequencies and tell his father to pass command to him...but he had a feeling it was useless. Besides he was the tenth Admiral in the hierarchy of the fleet, not the second or the third.

“Our priority is to save the maximum of squadrons,” his determined voice silenced all objections and whispers across the bridge. “It is obvious the Dornish have turned this system into a black hole for this fleet. They have brought all their nasty surprises, and if we give them the time to bleed us, we are going to entire this fleet. We must return to the Ashford jump point, break through the flotilla which has just slaughtered our rear-guard and escape.”

“There is going to be hell to pay for our cowardice...” a Lieutenant mumbled. Garlan fixed him with a glare and when the man had the temerity to spit on the ground, he took his laser pistol and blew the man’s head. “Anybody else wants to question my orders? Anybody? No? Good. Push our engines to the maximum and inform all the other captains I am ordering a retreat to Ashford on my own authority.”

The tactical display flashed in black and enemy icons a second time and most officers stopped barking orders as an impossible wave of more than one million missiles was launched from a second layer of missile platforms around Stern Guard. And on the Grand Fleet’s left flank, tens of thousands starfighters were materialising, their vector making clear they were going to play the role of carrion birds for whatever survived the holocaust.

“Get us out of here!” Garlan shouted as two Tyrell men-at-arms removed the corpse from the bridge and the Dornish fleet in turn began a long-range bombardment.

**Queen Rhaenys Targaryen, 25.09.300AAC, Harvest Hall System**

“It looks like ten ships of the line are going to escape undamaged our trap,” Ynys Yronwood informed her. “My force will do their best to bleed them while they are in our engagement zone, but I’m afraid they have retreated a bit too quickly after our first attacks. We haven’t had the time to replace the minefields.”

“I see.” Rhaenys bit deeply into a pulpous orange, savouring the fruit’s taste. “Don’t endanger your command. The Reachers are no longer in a position to overwhelm us with numbers and we have accomplished all our objectives today.”

The communication was done after the usual salutes were done and Rhaenys returned to her observation of the explosions tens of thousands kilometres away where the ‘Grand Reach Fleet’ was dying.

“You made a graveyard of this system,” Jaime murmured to his ear.

“It’s a Tyrell graveyard,” Rhaenys smiled before kissing him deeply. “I will watch their funerals...”

The embrace of her lover and bodyguard did not last long, as they returned to the agony of the ‘Grand Reach Fleet’.

Mace Tyrell and his behemoth-sized fleet had manoeuvred as she had intended them too, and endured no less than five massive missile salvoes launched by the thousands of platforms she had prepared. Three traps with the vicious super-plasma ‘Nova’ bombs had torn apart their squadrons and five starfighter attacks had savaged their formations. All the while her battlecruisers continued their long-range ion cannon’s bombardment, murdering the capital warships one by one.

The result was as Jaime had affirmed a graveyard. On thousands of kilometres, wrecks were breaking apart, and ships were disappearing in brilliant flashes as their reactors failed or their ammunition stores blew up. Smaller ships were trying to save the crew of their larger counterparts, too often dying as a battlecruiser or a heavy cruiser became a mini-star.

The Reach fleet was finished.

Not counting the ten ships of the line fleeing for their lives, escorted by something like twenty battlecruisers and over seventy-eighty cruisers and escorts, her enemies had something like fifteen ships of the line still in a condition to fight...if one wanted to be generous.

By all the scouts’ reports, all warships were devastated to varying degrees. The super-heated plasma traps were binary things: you died or you survived intact, but the missile salvoes had crippled hundreds and the new classes of starfighters had wounded the voluminous armada of the Reach.

“I think we have had enough carnage for a day,” Rhaenys declared. It was not a lie; in a single battle she had eliminated in all likelihood more warships than in any battle of the Usurper’s Rebellion, including the infamous Battle of the Trident. By now, whether a few Tyrells escaped was inconsequential: with over eighty ships of the line destroyed and the Midnight raids, the Reach Sector was more vulnerable than it had ever been. Optimistically, there was going to be an internal collapse as highborn and smallfolk realised House Tyrell had fed them lies for the last two decades, and emptied their purses, all for a massive glorious defeat against an enemy they outnumbered more than ten-to-one. Pessimistically, the Reach would rally...but with no fleet to defend their possessions, her forces were going to be granted the time to conquer enough planets and fortify for the unavoidable counter-attack.

“Contact the *Royal Rose* super-battleship and demand politely their surrender,” the young Queen told Tyene. While it had been a bit difficult to arrange, her orders had been respected: the Reach flagship had not been targeted during this battle. Taking prisoner the Lord of Highgarden was more interesting in several aspects than killing him, and not just for the ransom paid for his eventual liberation.

But as her battlecruisers stopped temporarily their execution ion shots, the silence stretched for a long time and finally Tyene came back with the Fowler Twins.

“They refuse to surrender, my Queen.”

Rhaenys watched the tactical display with disbelief. No, even a Targaryen couldn’t be that arrogant, so bloated in his ego. The Tyrell forces, the debris of the ‘Grand Fleet’ were surrounded. She had their warships dead to rights and by now the enemy Admirals couldn’t even fire back at the ships approaching to kill them.

“They refuse to surrender.” She repeated slowly to be sure her ears hadn’t failed her. “Have you pointed out to them there are thousands upon thousands escape pods, emergency shuttles and damaged warships full of Reach sailors in this system? The more they resist, the less time I will have for salvage operations.”

“I did,” Jeyne Fowler said with a curt bow. “But I think...I think Lord Tyrell knows that whatever happens now, his legacy will be the one of a total failure. He is not in his right mind...”

“He wants to get a martyr death,” Jennelyn Fowler commented with a disapproving sneer. It was well-deserved: after killing a massive number of his subjects, the Lord of Highgarden was ready to sacrifice more lives in a futile effort to redeem his ‘honour’ and his ‘reputation’. Clearly, the moron had not understood that the moment you lost a hundred ships of the line in a single battle, you were going to be ridiculed for the next ten generations.

“Well, he isn’t going to get one.” Rhaenys purred. “Resume the ion bombardment and prepare our starfighters for a new attack wave. Don’t touch the super-battleship, kill the rest...and prepare a boarding party for the *Royal Rose*.”

“You want the Fat Rose prisoner at that point?”

“Not really, no,” Rhaenys admitted. “But either he will swallow his pistol and save us the trouble of killing him, or we will have a great prisoner of war. One way or another, Mace Tyrell won’t become a martyr to unite the Reach...just an idiotic commander who lost the greatest fleet the Reach ever assembled in an afternoon.”

“It will be done, my Queen.”

When the Dornish fleet opened fire again, the enemy disciplined simply disintegrated. Scout cruisers realised they were in death ground and tried at last to flee. Battlecruisers’ captains ordered suicidal charges towards the Dornish battle-line as they lost air, water and vital components. Warship per warship, this was not a fleet anymore but a myriad of individuals each trying to save his skin.

The Reach fleet was physically and mentally dead.

Operation Graveyard was a complete triumph.

**Lady Calla Peake, 26.09.300AAC, Starpike System**

Four hours passed after the Dornish envoy was escorted away from the audience room before she could return to her quarters, momentarily dismiss her servants and check there were no spying machines listening to each and every word she spoke.

However, when she was convinced she was well and truly alone, Calla burst into laughter.

For several minutes, she laughed. She could not help it. Even after the initial explosion had left her lungs, she continued chuckling and giggling. Several times, she had to use several tissues to remove the tears of joy on her cheeks.

“You weren’t forced to break my predictions that way, oh Lord Tyrell...” and she laughed again.

Finally, after allowing herself ten more minutes of hilarity, the Lady of Starpike once more exerted her self-control. As amusing as this disaster was, there were massive political repercussions coming and she had to keep a cold head if she wanted to advise her husband correctly.

Taking the top-secret data-slate, the Goldengrove-born noble began to study the list of warships the commanders of Queen Rhaenys Targaryen claimed to have destroyed.

It was impressive, and given how the messenger had accepted non-armed observers to go to Harvest Hall in order to see the massive debris field the Grand Fleet had become...well, they certainly weren’t lying.

Seven Hells, if even half of what they were claiming was true, the Reach and House Tyrell had suffered the greatest military catastrophe since the Field of Fire. The ‘Harvest Graveyard’ might even surpass the one-sided victory of Aegon and his sisters. At least the ghosts of the Gardeners could blame dragons for their crushing defeat...

Mace Tyrell had, somehow, managed to imitate them by his arrogance and his incompetence.

One super-battleship lost. One super-battleship captured.

One hundred and two ships of the line utterly destroyed.

One hundred ninety-seven battlecruisers, two hundred and ninety-five heavy cruisers, one hundred and ninety-two light cruisers, seven hundred and twenty-four scout cruisers had paid the terminal price for their Lord Paramount’s inability to grasp military affairs.

By contrast, the seven fleet carriers, the sixty-six light carriers, the one hundred and eighty-three escort carriers lost weren’t adding that much for the butcher list.

The three thousand and five hundred-plus auxiliary and supply ships, however...

Compared to this slaughter, the cataclysm Stannis Baratheon had given Lord Jon Connington was a gentle tap. Oh, not in terms of overall casualties, no Fawnton was still leading on that front with more than seven hundred million dead.

But the Reach must have lost more than eighteen million men in this...this disaster, and nearly all of them had belonged to the Starfighter Wings, the Navy, the Army or the secondary organisations coexisting in the Reach war machine. Billions of tons of starships and hundreds of thousands experienced sailors had been killed.

Even if the Reach had the money – and Calla was confident they hadn’t – it would take more than a decade to rebuild such a fleet.

The Reach might recover from these losses, in the end. It had a lot of systems, an old cultural identity, and it had profited nicely from the exploitation of the Storm and River Sectors this last decade.

But nothing, nothing on this galaxy, could save House Tyrell now from massive reprisals.

Perhaps if Mace Tyrell had died valiantly against the perfidious Dornish, something could have been arranged, but Queen Rhaenys had made clear she had the Lord of Highgarden as a prisoner of war, as well as several of his relatives, including his youngest son Loras.

In the mean time, the list of highborn dead was incredibly long and after a day, it was likely the Dornish did not know half of it. But Lord Andrew Shermer, Lord Steffon Varner, Lord Francis Vyrwel, Lord Bertram Oldflowers, Lord Alyn Hutcheson, Ser Gaston Leygood, Ser Theodore Tyrell, Ser Mark Mullendore and Ser Bastian Oldflowers were already confirmed to have shed their mortal envelopes.

The Tyrells had nothing to salvage from the defeat. Nothing.

The survivors of the Grand Fleet were fleeing towards back to Highgarden at full speed. Maybe it was the correct strategic decision, but in return it meant that Ashford had just capitulated ten hours ago.

“I hope, my dear Margaery, that you will remember my words when everything collapses around you...”

Calla smiled and bared her teeth.

“I told you so.”

**Ser Raynald Westerling, 26.09.300AAC, Great Wyk System**

Serving in the Great Wyk System Defence Force wasn’t an honour.

It had never been, and it would never be.

When your space commanding officer was Ser Amory Lorch, the infamous ‘Crazy Manticore’, the volunteers weren’t legion.

When the monster above him on the food chain was the Beast, the volunteers were non-existent. Even dubious sellsword companies with awful and shadiest reputations weren’t willing to take the job after a while.

It wasn’t difficult to understand. Sellswords were waging war for the money it brought them. And when cannons fired and the earth shook under a million armoured boots, there weren’t a thousand ways to fill your purse. Not when you were the average soldier. Either you looted the enemy’s towns and bastions, or your employer paid you twice more than he paid his regulars.

Neither were particularly viable options on Great Wyk. The planet had been so ravaged by now there was nothing left to loot. And the payments from Casterly Rock were ending in the possession of Lorch and Clegane’s lieutenants.

Raynald hated this generalised corruption and the complete mess these assassins, rapists and monsters had made of this planet.

The Beast and the Crazy Manticore had been supposed to garrison and administer a system of the Iron Sector; what they had done instead was to transform it into a realm of nightmares and evil.

Raynald hated them, and he hated even more the fact he couldn’t do anything to change the current status quo. But his House – of which he was supposed to be the Heir, by the way – was drowning in an ocean of debts, and his participation in the less-than-legal patrols of Great Wyk the last year had largely improved the financial situation of House Westerling. Fifteen percent of the sums they were supposed to reimburse had been paid, and so his heavy cruiser the *First Herald* was continuing his patrols around this damned planet.

He had refused from the start to participate in whatever ‘demonstrations’ and ‘parties’ Lorch and his damned souls imagined every month and was staying as far away as it was humanly possible from these murderers and beast in human skin.

It was not like he was taking a big risk. Lorch had attracted most of the depraved scum of the Western Sector and beyond, leaving him the regulars and those who remembered their oaths. For all intent and purposes, the warships he associated with were independent and doing what they wanted, generally patrolling and trying to resupply themselves in the other systems, like Blacktyde.

Maybe the new convoy which was supposed to arrive in three days would at last kill the monsters, but Raynald was not going to waste his prayers on this tiny hope. Tywin Lannister knew perfectly well what his Beast was doing; the Lion just preferred closing his eyes and do nothing as long as the victims were Ironborn.

“Ser, there’s an anomaly in Quadrant 5-C.”

The voice of his third-in-command stopped the morose thoughts in their tracks.

“Quadrant 5-C is forty million kilometres away. Are you sure it’s not our sensor array malfunctioning...again?”

The *First Herald* was not a young ship at all. It was a Jaguar-class heavy cruiser, commissioned in 270AAC, long before anyone had a clue the Usurper’s Rebellion and the Greyjoy Rebellion were going to be fought.

“No, Ser! I mean, I am reasonably sure this isn’t the fault of our sensors this time. It’s a sort of weird anomaly...and it’s spreading...”

Raynald would love to say he walked to the tactical display and watched the information seriously, but the machine had stopped working six months ago and Blacktyde had never managed to find the spare parts for this antique device.

As a result, he was forced to leave his seat, descend the stairs and cross half of his bridge before looking at his subordinate’s screen.

“Here, Ser. Do you see it?”

“I see it...it looks like something...oily...spreading...”

Whatever it was, it was at the edge of the System and coming in the planet’s direction.

“Is it possible our enemies have a new device to perturb our sensors?” Since they were at war, the possibility existed that the Reach units at Harlaw or Pyke had new gadgets to test on their unsupported flotilla.

“No, there is nothing metallic in this zone...wait a minute, organic signatures?”

Raynald narrowed in consternation. The sensors had to be completely out of their league...the only organic beings travelling across the stars were dragons, and obviously those were instinct.

“Organic signatures! Hundreds of organic signatures! They are rushing towards the Scout Cruiser *Emerald Sabre*!”

If until now it had been a pool of oil, the sensors were now sending them the representation of an ocean of darkness. The light from the stars was clouded, and more and more the anomaly was silencing the satellites and the abandoned outposts built at the end of the Rebellion.

The First Herald and the five scout cruisers it patrolled with were too far away to intervene.

They could do nothing but watch.

Watch as the Emerald Sabre tried to flee, pushed its engines and every part of its old hull to a one hundred and twenty percent acceleration, at the risk of breaking in half under the strain it inflicted on the durasteel.

It was for nothing. Tendrils blacker than the soul of the Beast stopped the scout cruiser before a gigantic maw became the last thing the Western spacemen ever saw.

“What in the Seven Hells is that?”

“A kraken,” Raynald murmured in disbelief. “It’s one of the krakens of the Ironborn myths and legends...”

**Author’s note**: Oh look, one more group of abominations is about to invade Westeros...I’m afraid the future for the Iron Sector and Great Wyk in particular isn’t going to be bright.

As you can surmise, the overall strategic situation has considerably changed. The Reach armada which towered like a titan over all the other navies has been wiped out in its first trial by fire, and now the road is wide opened for everyone to invade.

Of course there are going to be a lot of battles ahead in other locations. Rhaenyra is fighting in the Vale, Stannis is not going to stay idle, there’s the chaos in the River Sector, and of course Aegon is going after King’s Landing.

The War of the Ten Warlords will continue next chapter, in *Death to the False King* (temporary title).

Don't hesitate to review and comment! Continue to read!

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

TV Tropes Page: / pmwiki/ / Fanfic/ LetTheGalaxyBurn

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

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