**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 6**

**Death to the False King**

*Several battle-cries are old. ‘Death to the False King’ is one of them.*

*In 296AAC, several maesters closely affiliated to the Targaryen regime presented in the Red Keep their huge illustrated book Loyalty to the Iron Throne to the then Prince Viserys Targaryen. Under the praises and the revisionist writing, the authors affirmed the infamous war cry originated from the First Blackfyre Rebellion and was shouted spontaneously by Crown soldiers charging the rebels of Daemon Blackfyre at the Battle of Redgrass Field.*

*Like many things written in this book, it was a monumental lie.*

*The original battle-cry had been shouted the first time by the Faith Militant when Maegor the Cruel burned the first Great Sept of King’s Landing. Yes, ‘Death to the False King’ was originally one of the most virulent anti-Targaryen rally calls. And one might argue it was one which caused plenty of trouble to the rider of the Black Dread. A dragonlord has one of the most dangerous weapons known to Mankind able to unleash dragonfire on its enemies, but he needs some people underneath him to rule. If no one toils the fields anymore, if the planets burn, if the armies go into rebellion as their pay fail to come into their pockets, even the Black Dread can’t and won’t save you into the end.*

*Maegor learned a bit too late this painful lesson and lost his crown.*

*Jaehaerys I succeeded him and this should have been the end of it. Aenys had been weak and indecisive. Maegor had been cruel and ignorant. Between them, the two brothers, the very blood of the Conqueror, had showed every trait making a king unfit for the Iron Throne.*

*With Jaehaerys the Conciliator, the Targaryen had the portrait of a monarch, who while not perfect, could listen to his subjects and make reasonable decisions concerning the realm. The era of madness and rebellion was going to pass away from memories.*

*Then Viserys I ascended to the Throne and the seeds of the Dance were sown across the realm. Rhaenyra and her half-brother Aegon plunged the Seven Sectors into one of the greatest wars – civil or external – Westeros and Essos had ever seen. And once again the calls were shouted by smallfolk and highborn alike.*

*Death to the False King.*

*Death to the False Queen.*

*Perhaps it would have stopped there. If the Targaryen had been able to remember the perils of the past, they certainly would have.*

*But they didn’t. Aegon the Unworthy poisoned forever the waters of peace when he legitimised all his bastards on his death bed, and the result was civil war and brother against brother once again. The Blackfyre Rebellions would set the realm aflame, and that no side could unleash dragons anymore was a meagre consolation. Both sides would claim unavoidably their sovereign was the legitimate one, and of course the other was the ‘False King’, the false-born and treacherous candidate having no rights to sit on the Iron Throne.*

*The Blackfyres never managed to conquer Westeros and for a time from Winterfell to Sunspear the billions of Westerosi felt a long era of peace would last centuries.*

*But the problem was still there. The madness continued to lurk in the hearts of the Targaryens, and under Aerys II it finally exploded.*

*The calls were different for this rebellion, though. The coalition of the North, Vale, Storm and River demanded death for all adult Targaryens. The Iron Throne replied by giving the nickname of Usurper to Robert Baratheon.*

*And for a few years the Targaryens seemed vindicated. They found in Balon Greyjoy a new ‘False King’ to crush militarily and thereby prove their moral and physical superiority.*

*But nothing can last forever. The military, while outwardly impressive, was a Behemoth with feet of clay. The Lords were vicious predators prompt to turn on each other for favours, money or warships. The economy was bleeding gold and steel while the pockets of the lower classes were emptied. The merchant classes had to endure more and more taxes.*

*And the King was a madman.*

*The time was right for a new candidate to step in. It was time for a silver-haired Prince to rebel against the madness of the Lord of the Seven Sectors. It was time to repair the errors of the last two decades, and once more raise the torch of justice and prosperity.*

*Death to the False King Rhaegar Targaryen, and may his successor heal the wounds of Westeros.*

*It was an enticing dream.*

*It never happened.*

*This was no longer a game where there were two factions. In his rash prophetic-obsessed actions, Rhaegar Targaryen had done worse than Aegon the Unworthy: he had given many of his great bannersmen claimants to the Iron Throne. Lannister, Martell, Hightower and Stark had all blood-ties to the Targaryen dynasty now...and a few million good reasons to raise their flags in rebellion.*

*And in these troubled times, where was the legitimacy? Having or not the Conqueror’s Blood in your veins was not what it mattered. It was the number of Lords, armies and fleets willing to follow you into the inferno of the War of the Ten Warlords.*

*From the Harvest Graveyard to the radioactive ruins of Fawnton, from the banners of the Black Dragon at Gulltown to the nightmares of the Iron Sector, the war cry came, irresistible and dark.*

*Death to the False Kings. Death to the Targaryens. Death to the Mad Dragons.*

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

**Davos Seaworth, 26.09.300AAC, The Twins System**

“Lord Mallister, welcome to the Twins,” Davos politely began after a formal military salute.

“Thank you, Admiral Seaworth,” replied the Lord of Seagard. “It is a moment that we have awaited for a long time.”

And for plenty of legitimate reasons, Davos was sure, as the thousands of Northerners and Riverlanders walked in a disciplined formation across the tourist bays of the orbital station *Walder the Great*.

The view was spectacular, especially after all these months spent watching recording and low-resolution holographic images of Westerosi star systems. Northern warships had excellent reasons to forbid any reinforced glass alloy and burying their command bridges deep inside a durasteel hull, but it didn’t change the fact you were often missing the beauty of the universe.

Today this was not the case. Below their feet, Bridge’s Edge was an orb of white, blue and green shining under the sun of Twin A.

More than seventeen years after the battle won by Lord Bolton, the Northern navy was now once again undisputed master of the Twins System.

“I understand the losses have been minimal so far,” Lord Jason Mallister commented, his austere face giving him a resemblance with one of those sea eagles his House was enjoying training.

“They have been under our most optimistic previsions,” the former smuggler agreed. “The Sixth Fleet of the River Sector – which as we all know was mostly the Freys and their bannersmen – tried to fight us but we caught them while they were still in complete redeployment. Their fleet was divided into three formations and their land regiments had no time to build adequate bunkers or anything like that. They lost four ships of the line, three armoured cruisers and six battlecruisers in the affair, and after five hours of battle, the Haigh’s Fort Garrison understood there was nothing they could do to inconvenience us.”

And if he was going to be honest, even Davos and his senior commanders had been astonished by the magnitude of their victory. Yes, they had known the new missiles and the years-long training, the new doctrines, the long-range shattering impact of the new armoured cruisers and all the new toys were supposed to give them an edge over the River Navy and all their enemies in the South.

They had still been staring with their mouths wide open at the sheer massacre the Battle of the Haigh’s Fort had been. Some of his officers had even manifested a sort of guilt...his flag lieutenant had compared it at sending newborn chicks against the direwolves.

“It was not a complete success, of course,” Davos commented for the assistance more than for Lord Jason Mallister. “Lord Charlton and Lord Vypren’s ships of the line were far enough to avoid entering our missile range and they had the mental...flexibility in them to get out of the system with their fleet’s remnant before we forced them to surrender. Still, overall the main goal was achieved: we took the Haigh’s Fort...and the Night’s Watch had plenty of new recruits.”

Hundreds of grins and satisfied smiles appeared on the visage of the Stark and Mallister spacemen. Davos, with the authorisation of his liege and their allies, had been vocal months before this war started the women and the men under their command had to know the real war fought by the rest of the Northern military was the one which mattered. Yes, crushing the supporters of whatever dragon the local River Lords supported was not to be neglected, but the Great Enemy was massing its forces against the Wall, it was not sitting at King’s Landing.

As such the eleven million men who had decided swearing the rest of their life to the black was preferable to the fate the Northern cannons had in fate for them were a very welcome addition. And they would soon be joined by several millions more from the Twins, Erenford, Charlton and Vypren Systems.

“Lord Charlton died in this very system, I’m told,” the River Lord said as new windows gave them the view of the assembled fleet around the former Frey planet.

“Yes, his Pride of Charlton and the most damaged units of his Sixth Fleet mounted a jump point system to slow us down while the rest of their intact units withdrew to Vypren.”

And unfortunately from his point of view, it had worked. Jason Mallister had had to reduce to debris the Erenford defences while Davos and Twelfth Fleet won at the Haigh’s Fort. As a consequence, by the time the Northern and River squadrons had operated their junction, the surviving Charlton-Vypren coalition had been too far away to hunt down.

“Charlton will not prove too difficult to breach, but Vypren will certainly be another story,” the Master of Seagard declared.

“This is why you sent one ship of the line and two armoured cruisers to Fairmarket, my Lord.”

“True and I suppose I’m a bit greedy right now,” the smile was almost apologetic. Almost. “That said, whether Vypren sees reason before we are able to dictate him our terms with our batteries pointed at his chief citadel or not, the real challenge will begin at Shawney and Wayn’s Fort.”

“Indeed,” these two Lords, by most recent reports, had declared for King Viserys Targaryen, expelled the foreign merchants and executed most of the agents they had been able to discover. Consequently, neither Davos nor any of their allies had a good idea what they were doing, but there was not a high chance he was going to enjoy their preparations if they were given the time to fortify properly their home systems. “And we need to defeat them if we want to secure the stars west of the Green Rift.”

This was not a strategy Davos completely agreed with, he would have preferred beginning east and link with the Vale, but political considerations and the need to take Riverrun and block the Lannisters before they had the time to spread into the River Sector had taken priority above else.

“What about House Frey as a whole? Are they going to cause us further problems Admiral?” asked the chief of staff of Lord Mallister.

“I would be tempted to say no, Captain,” Davos replied levelly. “On the other hand, I’m sure Lord Stark thought the same thing when he killed the treacherous Lord Walder and dozens of Freys seventeen years ago. They have taken terrible losses and I’ve already confirmations we exterminated eight secondary branches, but the Freys are breeding faster than rabbits.”

How Lord Walder had possibly thought it was going to be a good idea to have so many family when the succession issues appeared on the horizon, he had not the slightest clue, but it made them a pain to find them all and make sure they were no longer a problem.

“We killed Lord Emmon, his sons and his grandsons in the previous battle at the Haigh’s Fort. We also removed Alesander, Merrett, Lothar, Jammos, Whalen, Hoster, six Walder and two Rhaegar Frey from the rolls of nobility. That accounts for Emmon’s line and we got more sons and grandsons of his brothers here. We also captured Genna Frey born Lannister, Tywin’s only sister and on this planet there are a few more daughters and wives which will be sent to Silent Sister’s septs.”

“The weasels married in the Goodbrook, Vypren, and Paege Houses in our Sector,” Lord Jason Mallister gave his own tally when Davos had finished giving his list of Frey casualties. “Those will be dealt in time if they can’t be trusted. We got Maester Petyr one year ago and Kyra Frey recently.”

It had to account for most of the Frey family, Davos hoped. There were some of Lord Walder’s youngest children at Rosby but from the best reports they had, the trio had taken the Rosby name and had never caused the North any problems. Geremy and Raymund Frey were serving in the Night’s Watch. Some daughters who were visiting Darry had claims but they could be ignored for the short-term.

“That leaves this insolent Most Devout Luceon.”

“We have his name on our black list,” Davos promised.

“Good...who do you have in mind as a military governor for the Twins System while we continue the war?”

“Lord Stark suggested sending a message we are not pleased with Lord Lannister’s policy in this theatre...” Davos passed his hand in his beard. “Our new interim ruler of the Twins will be Domeric Bolton, Heir to the Dreadfort.”

**Ser Garlan Tyrell, 27.09.300AAC, Cider Hall System**

There were a lot of circumstances when a dutiful son had to step in his father’s shoes and take command of a fleet. Garlan wasn’t able to remember who in recent history had to face a disastrous situation like the one he was facing right now. Maybe it was the despair many Ironborn had experienced after their fleet was defeated at the Arbor. The pirates had been forced to retreat to the Pyke and prepare for a last stand they knew they couldn’t win. Or maybe they had been too stupid to acknowledge how outnumbered they were going to be. Balon Greyjoy and his senior commanders had hardly been famous for their rational actions.

Of course, insulting the ‘Iron King’ right now was leaving a taste in his mouth which had never been there before this month. Because as much as the scion of House Tyrell wanted to shout the Ironborn were idiots – and yes, the pirates were morons and void-addicted imbeciles – his father had plunged the Reach Navy, House Tyrell and the entirety of House Tyrell in the greatest disaster ever suffered by a single military force.

Before the Battle of Harvest Hall – or as everyone aboard his ships had taken to name it, the Harvest Graveyard – the greatest military defeat ever suffered by the Reach Navy had been the Field of Fire.

But while the Gardeners had been annihilated in this bloodbath, there were alas two points to remember above everything else.

First, the opposition on that red day had three dragons, and one was the Black Dread.

And second, the Reach Navy had committed something like forty ships of the line, thirty fleet carriers and seventy battlecruisers. They had been supported by twenty Western ships of the line too...and each and every one of these capital ships had suffered cataclysmic damage or surrendered to the Conqueror.

By his best estimates – and they were just estimates at this hour, the very size of them made them properly impossible to number – the one-sided humiliation Lord Mace Tyrell and House Tyrell had experienced made the Field of Fire look like a mild punishment.

And yes, he was aware the Dornish had taken losses. The totality of the defences guarding the Ashford jump point had perished, and three battlecruisers, seven heavy cruisers, twenty-five light cruisers and fifty-plus scout cruisers, auxiliaries and Q-Ships of House Martell had been completely destroyed and he was sure they had crippled more warships in the process.

Unfortunately, this kind of loss was nothing for Sunspear and the Lords and Ladies sworn to Queen Rhaenys Targaryen.

 The Dornish possessed certainly what was the weakest navy of the Seven Sectors – assuming the Ironborn were not counted as a true naval power – but three battlecruisers, Seven Hells, even ten battlecruisers were something they could take and recover from. Their losses in starfighters, especially these demonic furtive snake-like new models, were at less than two thousand and this was one of the major advantages Dorne enjoyed over all its real and potential enemies.

The point was, Dorne could and would probably endure four or five casualty lists like this one before suing for peace – and that was probably optimistic because their ships of the line were all active and in pristine conditions.

The Reach...the Reach Navy had just metaphorically received the equivalent of three tank shells in the head, the heart and the legs before the Dornish opponent plunged their heads into a plasma reactor.

It was possible Garlan was too pessimistic. But his duty now demanded he was humble and as pessimistic as he could be.

No navy had lost one hundred ships of the line in a war before...or if someone had, it had been over decades of war and it was a mix of ambushes, attrition, demobilisation, captured units and betrayals. No one had lost one hundred ships of the line in a single battle...but House Tyrell had. Oh they had, and it was just the beginning of the disaster.

Bad enough that the assault on Harvest Hall had been disintegrated and the survivors were forced to run with their tails between their legs.

Bad enough they had lost the battle against an enemy they in all likelihood outnumbered ten-to-one or more in tonnage and heavy squadrons. Bad enough their fleet supply train had served as practise targets and half of the starfighter elite of Highgarden had met its end in what should have been a mere formality, a battle they couldn’t possibly lose.

But it had not stopped there. The Yronwood and Uller warships had jumped on their heels in the Ashford System and he had been forced to use his ships of the line like a massive shield to soak the long-range bombardment of the Dornish starfighters and heavy cruisers. That he had still ten ships of the line at the moment was more due to the solidity of a ship of the line than any tactical miracle from his desperate orders.

Each and every capital ship heavier than a battlecruiser was going to take weeks of repair minimum.

And he had lost the Ashford System.

Militarily, the Harvest Graveyard had cost them fifteen million dead but it had been lost in a Storm Sector so the infrastructure crippled or wiped out was not something he had to deal with.

Ashford, on the other hand, that the Dornish battlecruisers had neutralised like its defences were made of butter, was a Reach star system...and its population was two billion and eight hundred million officially. It was not a first-class system, but it was definitely a second-class one...and he had been forced to abandon in record time.

He had abandoned it because the pathetic remnants of his fleet could not oppose the Dornish fleet. Not anymore. Not after they, like the magnificent imbeciles Rhaenys Targaryen and the Red Viper had believed they were, had swallowed the bait and presented their throats for the butchers.

Ashford was lost, and the litany of disaster was just beginning. Because assuming they managed to muster enough strength to mount a counter-attack the Dornish forces were not going to transform into burning wrecks, there was the question how they convinced the population of Ashford to rise in rebellion.

Lord Quentin Ashford had died in the first missile strike of the Harvest Graveyard. So had his three sons, and a lot of his cousins and potential heirs. The last male heirs had been aboard the key orbital defences...the same Ynys Yronwood and her fellow Dornish had been busy exploding right and left.

For all intent and purposes, there was no House Ashford anymore.

Rhaenys Targaryen had not announced to the wide galaxy yet who she was going to name in replacement, but it was a matter of days...the occasion was simply too good. Too many Ashford nobles had been killed, and while the smallfolk and merchant population should have revolted at the very mention of being conquered by the Dornish, the sheer shock of the defeat and his quick retreat must have broken every certainty the inhabitants of Ashford had.

It was no longer possible to predict what was going to happen. It wasn’t.

“Bryan, tell me you have good news,” he grumbled as his chief of staff entered his personal quarters.

“The only good news I have, Admiral, is that Lord Ambrose and Fourth Fleet have received their confirmation of your brother’s orders and are on their way to Highgarden, reinforcing us with the older units when they come into this system.”

“You’re right, this is good news,” Garlan affirmed before giving a glance at the star map and grimacing. “Father Above, we are speaking about abandoning everything from Ashford to Tumbleton to Rhaenys Targaryen and Stannis Baratheon...”

“The defences at Grassy Vale could use some improvements, but Bitterbridge is well-defended,” Bryan Fossoway looked like an officer who tried to convince himself of his speech, Garlan reflected.

“Two months ago, I would have agreed with you. Now with the new weapons the Dornish have fielded and the ruthlessness showed by Stannis Baratheon let’s not pretend our defences are going to cause them more than a short delay.”

“We could station one of his squadrons at Longtable,” his subordinate proposed.

“No, absolutely not,” Garlan sent one of the data-slates his desk was buried under crashing against the left wall. It didn’t bring him a lot of satisfaction and it didn’t ease his rising frustration. “Today our strategic choices are simple. Either we accept we may lose everything east or the line Starpike-Cider Hall, or we accept we are going to lose Highgarden to Tywin Lannister.”

The first would be a political, military, strategic and...fine, it would be a complete disaster.

The second would be, without doubt, the end of House Tyrell. As it stood now, Garlan was not sure if House Tyrell was going to be in control of the Reach, nominally or effectively, by the end of this year, and that it could have been worse was not a relief.

One thing however was sure. If they lost Highgarden, they lost all the ships of the line still in construction, their seat of power and more or less nearly every reason their bannersmen had to follow them on the battlefield.

“Admiral...we can stop the Lannisters at Dustonburry. Can’t we?”

“No we can’t.” The admission was really easy to utter after seeing all the points he and the near-totality of the Reach Lords had failed to think about. “Baelor Hightower has Third Fleet, but even assuming Willas gives him all the Highgarden reserves, that leaves him with thirty-five ships of the line...Tywin Lannister has sixty with him and two super-battleships we have no available counter for.”

“There is Ninth Fleet...”

Garlan laughed, but he put no joy or positive feelings in the sound.

“Assuming Lord Redwyne chose to leave the Arbor defenceless...something I found unlikely since his two sons were with the Grand Fleet we just lost...his ten ships of the line are Deep Space units. Near the gravity well of a planet, they will be terribly slow to manoeuvre. The Seven know Tywin Lannister is not Robert Baratheon, but he’s not stupid. We send Ninth Fleet against a conventional fleet in a space environment favouring conventional fleets, we might as well send them against the Dornish at Ashford and ask them for a second Graveyard.”

And that was if the men aboard these warships didn’t mutiny or decided if the heads of House Tyrell looked superb when offered on a platinum platter to Tywin Lannister.

“There is simply no choice,” the second son of Mace Tyrell said in an exhausted voice. “We must stop Tywin Lannister before he destroys the infrastructure of Highgarden and achieve the conquest of our core systems. If we want a chance to stop him, we need Fourth Fleet and Lord Ambrose. His twenty-one ships of the line are not the Grand Fleet, but they can make all the difference between victory and defeat.”

The Lannister fleet which had captured Old Oak would still have a slight numerical and firepower superiority, but maybe Baelor Hightower could stop the Westerners. Still, it would be fifty-six Reach heavy capital ships against sixty-two Westerners. Victory was not impossible. Then again the recent disaster had proven nothing was truly impossible...

“The debris of the Grand Fleet we were able to save can’t stop the Lannisters. Mathis Rowan and Seventh Fleet may not receive their recall orders before tomorrow. It’s Fourth Fleet or nothing.”

“I...I agree, Admiral, but many Noble Houses are not going to be happy.”

“Bryan, we are about to be effectively bankrupt in a few days.” Garlan designated with a gesture of his left hand the mountain of data-slates. “I am not an accountant or a financial expert, but I regularly debate with my eldest brother to know it’s going to be awful.”

Garlan sighed at the dubitative look of his subordinate.

“We lost millions of men in a single day, Bryan. Millions. The system of pensions for the families who lost a son, a father, a brother or a relative is going to explode. We won’t have to pay what we promised in the Ashford System I suppose...but that will still leave millions of pensions to be paid. All at once, and our war pension system had already met significant problems during the Greyjoy Rebellion. I fear the pension funds we kept in our coffers are going to be emptied in one day...and then we are going to have to tap into our personal funds to compensate the difference. If we do not pay...the consequences do not bear thinking about.”

A Gardener King of old had tried declaring the pensions null and void over four hundred years ago. His cousins had never managed to recover more than one ear and a few teeth when his own guards and the bloodthirsty crowd had finished explaining him their displeasure.

“I...I didn’t realise it was going to be that bad, Admiral.”

Garlan watched the small golden statue his sister had offered him on his eighteenth name day when he formally joined the Reach Navy and tried to formulate an answer which was not depressing, pessimistic or counter-productive.

“It is possible I am too pessimistic,” Garlan acknowledged. “But we lost many Lords. Plenty of Noble Houses have lost their patriarch, and I have no idea what it’s going to do where our war strategy is related.”

The knight of Highgarden swallowed heavily.

“I have no idea if my father and my brother are alive,” more than once Garlan felt the temptation to run to the sept of his flagship and pray for their survival. Assuming his father and Loras were alive however, they would be prisoners of the Dornish, and this was not an enticing fate. The last Lords of Highgarden to wage war against Dorne had not died gloriously. And yes, he had remembered the bed of scorpions ten times since this morning. “And too many good soldiers, cousins and friends died with the Grand Fleet. Anyway, we are currently finished as an offensive force. Assuming we have time to properly fortify, we may be able to inflict heavy losses on any Dornish attempt to capture this system.”

“You don’t look...convinced they will try that, Admiral.”

Garlan nodded with a frown.

“Replaying the massive defeat on my tactical display, I am convinced Rhaenys Targaryen – or whoever was in command of the operation as a whole, it’s possible it was the Red Viper – planned this trap before the first shot of this new war was fired at Westbrook. It might have been engineered years ago, for all I know. They wanted to erase our numerical superiority by one big nasty trap to compensate for their numerical inferiority. When you add the sneak attacks at Westbrook and elsewhere, the crushing defeat of the Caron forces at Nightsong...I can safely make the hypothesis they began this war with an elaborate and complex set of operations to defeat us.”

Garlan bit his lip in annoyance and shame.

“And for the moment, much as I hate admit it, the Dornish plan is working to perfection.”

**Queen Margaery Targaryen, 28.09.300AAC, Highgarden System**

Margaery had seen many demonstrations spreading in the large avenues of Highgarden’s capital in the last five years. The majority of these had been peaceful. A minority had ended with violence and damage. However, all had been authorised by the Seneschal of Highgarden.

House Tyrell and the Houses dominating the nobility of the Highgarden System were not tyrants in their home systems. They were not House Lannister, breaking demonstrations with cohorts of Red Cloaks and sentencing the participants of the demonstrations to decades of imprisonment. They were not the Stormlanders, who challenged in duel any smallfolk having the temerity to protest the Lord’s command. They were not the Northerners who enjoyed throwing out by the nearest airlock those contesting their choices. And they were not the Greyjoys, pirates and murderers who declared everyone not voting for war unfit to be called an Ironborn.

Demonstrations were authorised at Highgarden and across the entire South...under the reserve the organisers of the demonstration had cleared it with the office of the Seneschal at least ten days before.

This wasn’t the case today. There had been no authorisation demanded to block the air-car and low-altitude transports for smallfolk to announce their opinions. There had been no warning from the smallfolk...and even less preparation coming from the watchmen paid by House Tyrell. Another time, this would have been grounds for dismissal but alas this time she wasn’t able to accuse them of incompetence. No one, not her, not her grandmother, not her brother, not any of the intelligence services, had seen this coming.

The news of the Battle of Harvest Hall had begun to spread five hours ago, and this was the result. Millions of people descending in the streets, stopping whatever duties and jobs they were supposed to fulfil today, and joining the ranks of the contestation.

Since her holo-console hadn’t any top-secret additions, Margaery wasn’t able to have the estimates. But as the avenues, parks and plazas leading to the palace she was currently occupying were black with people and tens of thousands people forced their entry on several skyscrapers to paint messages of anger and incomprehension, there was no way the situation could be considered good.

Her screen was too small and the holographic resolution was too low to examine one by one the visages, but she could see the messages and the banners the smallfolk had written in all haste. Most were in a bright red and it made for unpleasant reading.

WE DON’T WANT THIS WAR

NO MORE BLOODSHED

GIVE US BACK OUR SONS

WHERE ARE THE VICTORIES KING AEGON PROMISED US?

Not every insults and accusations were directed at her family, of course. The crowds were disparate movements and clearly there was no unifying figure. Thus there were many sheets painted red who wanted something to be done with the enemy they had every reason to hate.

DEATH TO SUNSPEAR

A GOOD DORNISHMEN IS A DEAD DORNISHMEN

BURN ALL THE MARTELLS AND LET THE SEVEN HELLS SORT THEM OUT

KILL THE VIPERS

KILL THE SNAKES

REMEMBER THE CONQUEST OF DORNE

VENGEANCE FOR THE FALLEN

But for every placard or warning sign shouting its hate of Dorne, there were three or four demanding an accounting for the monumental military defeat suffered by the Reach forces.

INVINCIBLE AND DEAD

WE HAVE SO MANY SHIPS WE ARE USING THEM LIKE MISSILE SPONGES

ADMIRAL OF THE IMBECILES

A MARTELL WHORE HAS MORE BRAINS THAN TEN TYRELLS

In hindsight, the Targaryen-sponsored propaganda they had broadcasted for long weeks had not been the wisest move they could have made.

True, it was not like she or her grandmother had been asked to give their advices on the issue in public or in private, but at the time it had seemed like a good idea.

Eh, ‘it had seemed like a good idea’.

Margaery had been forced to acknowledge in the last three or four days that a lot of past decisions taken by House Tyrell had now a great chance to cause them bleeding ulcers.

It must have looked like it was a good idea to marry Crown Prince Aegon Targaryen when her father had signed the nuptial contract seventeen years ago.

AFTER THE USURPER’S REBELLION, THE WARLORDS’ REBELLION

Even three or two years ago, it was an enticing proposition. Neither King Rhaegar nor his eldest son had the inclination to study how to compose a coherent economic policy, different social programs or an education stance. Margaery had thought she would be able to use these silver-haired arrogant dragons for her own purposes and those of House Tyrell. If she had to tolerate sleeping with Aegon Targaryen and the presence of a few whores next to her husband, so be it.

RECONQUER ASHFORD, NOT KING’S LANDING

But Rhaegar Targaryen had one year ago massive support in the River Sector, a large base of loyalists in the Vale and Storm Sectors, the Crown Sector was ruled as his personal fiefdom and most potential troublemakers had been laying low, with only the Lannister baring their fangs in defiance. And she had not yet met Aegon Targaryen, who in private was an odious and arrogant excuse for an human being. Of course, it was because he thought he was a dragon...

BILLIONS OF TAXES FOR MORE DEFEATS

MACE TYRELL, GIVE US BACK THIS GRAND FLEET

This last message was obviously popular, as hundreds of smallfolk had taken decided to paint it on whatever materials they had at their disposal. Margaery honestly didn’t see why. If House Tyrell could go back in time and cancel the results of the Harvest Graveyard, neither Willas nor she would have hesitated a single second doing it. This disaster was costing them too much influence and military resources. It had cost them a father and a brother – whether they were prisoners of the Dornish or dead, no one at Highgarden knew - and it was a near-miracle Garlan had managed to escape alive and save something from this disaster.

“We must find a new plan,” Willas declared as he entered and half-collapsed on the green couch. “The Generals and the Admirals supposed to provide me ‘sound advice’ are all losing their heads. Now that the Dornish have handed us their defeats, they are convinced ten thousand Martell capital ships are going to jump in this system tomorrow and annihilate our infrastructure.”

“Everyone is panicking...” Margaery commented with a wince. “It’s only a matter of days before Tywin Lannister resumes his offensive and strikes Dustonburry. And without our father to act as a shield, our chances of victory are not that good.”

For the first time in several decades, House Tyrell was really at risk of losing a war. It was not something she enjoyed contemplating but it didn’t make it any less true.

“This is why I’ve recalled every fleet which can make a difference...the problem is Mathis Rowan and the Crown forces are really far away and it’s going to take them days to acknowledge, never mind turning around and return to Highgarden.” Willas sighed. “Lord Rowan is loyal, but father sent him really far away from every other fleet and important flotilla.”

“As long as he is there to present a reasonable voice in the circle of arrogance my husband surrounds himself with...” Margaery returned watching the demonstration. “I just hope he is not going to do something stupid, we really don’t need more bad news after this nightmarish month...”

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 29.09.300AAC, High Chelsted System**

“The resupply operations are complete?”

“Yes, your Grace.”

“Better late than never,” King Aegon VI Targaryen remarked in a loud voice.

Jacaerys mentally rolled his eyes before crossing eyes with Theon and exchanging a look full of consternation and relief.

“I want the fleet ready to jump in five hours for Bywater Rest,” their sovereign ordered them. “We have lost too much time as it is. My treacherous uncle and his forces have been given the opportunity to evacuate the system without opposition; I won’t tolerate more delays and excuses.”

If the speaker had been someone below him in nobility status or military rank, Jacaerys would have interrupted him and told him to stop being an imbecile. Bywater Rest jump point was far away from the inhabitable planet of Bywater Rest; there had never been any prospect to take the space and ground forces garrisoned there by surprise. But assuming somehow a squadron found a way to inflict a decisive defeat on some light and scout cruisers...then what? Bywater Rest had not profited from the rebuilding of 292AAC, unlike High Chelsted. It had not the funds to increase its static or its mobile defences. It was not a maintenance base or hosted several industrial mega-companies making their fortune with heavy industry. Viserys Targaryen was certainly guilty of high treason, but nothing in the spy reports had shown the now self-proclaimed ‘Green Dragon’ had lost senses and decided to concentrate his forces in a worthless system.

By 298AAC, Bywater Rest had something like four hundred and fifty million inhabitants. Now, as a three-way civil war had raged between the last men of House Bywater and their betrayers of House Follard and Farring, it would be extraordinary if there was two-thirds of the pre-war population still around. It was not High Chelsted, which boasted over seven hundred million souls...and far more loyal hearts willing to stay true to the True Heir of King Rhaegar.

“We will be ready, your Grace.”

That was the theory. In practise, he and all the ship commanders would have to expedite a lot of procedures that traditions and safety measures insisted not to skip. But to convince Aegon of the necessity of every supply operation, overhaul and the myriad of things was making Aegon more and more impatient, and there were hundreds of courtiers, not-so-chaste young women and of course the Red Witch always whispering in the royal ears.

Needless to say, none of them had one hour of military experience whatsoever, but it didn’t stop them from voicing their opinion...and his cousin from listening to them. Normally Jacaerys should have been confident Aegon was recognising the absurdities in this sea of insipid flattering, but for someone who had received top marks at the academy, Aegon was perfectly willing to ignore every action which didn’t involve smashing traitors and deciding who was in command of the different attack formations.

“I want the *Balerion*, the *Meraxes* and the *Conqueror* leading our offensive in the Bywater Rest System, Jacaerys. I want my bastard of an uncle shiver in fear when he realise the size of the fleet we have coming for his head.”

He was forced to mumble something positive in return, but his head and his heart weren’t in it. In the end, it was not likely to matter as the enemy had no good counter to the three-battleships and unless Viserys Targaryen was deaf, blind and dumb, he had to assume the entirety of the 1st Crown Fleet was coming for his head. But there was expecting something, and there was revealing your entire order of battle before the first shot was fired. If the Grand Fleet was supporting them, their numerical superiority would have carried the day but with the effectives they had, a bit of subtlety would not be unwelcome.

Alas, given how his last suggestions had been received, it was better to say nothing. Better preserve whatever credibility he has for the vital decisions which would need to be taken in the days to come.

“Lord Mathis Rowan will have the honour to form the first line behind our super-battleships. The second line will be our King’s Might ships of the line.”

Jacaerys and Theon nodded but of course the courtiers crowding the reception room of the Balerion had to cheer and transform the simple comment in a mummer’s performance.

“There will be no mercy for the traitors!” Aegon shouted raising his fist in the traditional Valyrian salute. “They shed the blood of my father, broke their oaths, and seized a crown they never had any rights to claim! I am King Aegon VI Targaryen, descendant of Aegon the Conqueror! And I say the days of my uncle Viserys the traitor are counted! DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

Jacaerys had no choice like all the officers present to shout their approval, like this battle-cry was going to convince King’s Landing to return magically back to the fold.

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

**Lord Varys Tivario, 29.09.300AAC, Redfort System**

Varys couldn’t remember an Admiral being so unhappy after winning what was by all accounts a splendid victory.

The purple eyes of his niece were watching the fortified planet with what could be fairly described as a threatening glare. The bridge was silent, as sailors and officers sworn to their cause were for the moment sent away to deal with the reparations and the post-battle maintenance a ship like the *Black Dragon* required.

Thus it left them alone, and under the light of Red Star, Rhaenyra looked like a black and silver statue facing the stars.

“I think I’m beginning to deeply dislike Jon Arryn,” the victor of Gulltown said at last. “Now that I have battle-experience between a competent Vale commander and an imbecile, I think I prefer the latter. They are easy to get rid of, and they’re predictable.

“I think you admitted in your own words during your last council Jon Arryn was a dangerous opponent it was best to not underestimate.”

Rhaenyra curtly nodded, tightening her fists in controlled fury before calming herself. There was no rant, no objects thrown...but the implacable purple eyes were still cold, calculating once again the scenarios, evaluating the possibilities and analysing the problems.

“Jon Arryn will suffer no fuel shortages for the short-term future,” his niece articulated. “To give credit to the Old Falcon, I must admit his strategy was brilliant. Five days before the start of the war, he used his heaviest super-tankers to move about half of the Redfort fuel reserves to an unknown location.”

Turning back and pacing between the windows and the consoles of her officers, the new Blackfyre Queen hissed several Essossi curses between her perfect white teeth before giving him her undiluted attention.

“Since it would be stupid to hope the Master of the Eyrie is becoming senile, I must assume he has done the same for every depot I wanted to attack.”

“I don’t know if I fully agree with you. Yes, he certainly did it for the Egen Fort facilities. But Longbow Hall is a system where Arryn authority has been shaky for the last five years and Old Anchor is next door to Ironoaks. It’s...probable...he didn’t want to raise suspicion before the hammer came down.”

“I see your reasoning, uncle.” Rhaenyra murmured before speaking louder. “But the fact remains hopes are not entering in this line of work. I must be realistic, and the cold and simple truth is that Jon Arryn emptied his fuel storage facilities before I had the time to seize them.”

Fingers clicked and the purples eyes grew more thoughtful.

“This battle was not a waste of time,” Varys tried. “You have total naval superiority in the Redfort System and whatever fuel Jon Arryn took, the fact remains we have now the other half plus the extraction facilities and the refineries.”

The tactics employed in this stellar system, while staying objective, had been a work of art. His niece had used a small portion of her fleet to race in the outer system, while the other prongs jumped inside the gravity well with minimal emissions and then by a series of coordinated strikes had managed to board and capture the ship of the line commanding the Redfort forces.

Ser Creighton Redfort had been captured alive, and the rest of the Redfort forces, surrounded and leaderless, had promptly capitulated to her.

“For all the good it is going to give me,” Rhaenyra snorted. “Yes, the conquest is nice but I have no doubt the planet is going to explode with a massive insurrection if I make the mistake to put Golden Company or sellsword troops on the ground. The Redfort is an old system and its population is over two billion and four hundred million. I can’t control what happens under the orbital stations...and we’re too far from Gulltown for me to feel comfortable about stationing a fleet permanently here.”

Stopping her walk across the bridge, she took her command seat and began to type new combinations on the consoles nearby.

“Ser Creighton Redfort is prisoner and we captured one ship of the line and two battlecruisers with three thousand starfighters and some escorts as a bonus, but I can win battles like this every day and still lose in the end.”

This was likely an exaggeration. Jon Arryn and his bannersmen had less than fifty ships of the line all told and they could not afford to lose important systems like Redfort or Gulltown every three days. Or soon there would be no Vale Sector for them to command.

“I suppose the question is what you intend to do now.”

A thin smile appeared on the rosy lips of his niece.

“A decisive battle against the Arryn main battle-fleet remains out of question,” the reply came quick, decisive. “I must force its commanders to disperse it and use their fuel existing reserves in a long war of movement. It is going to take months instead of days, but if our squadrons managed to take Egen and Old Anchor or at least destroy the fuel-based industry, we might yet force them to experience a fuel shortage. Gulltown accounted for thirty-one percent of the Vale total fuel production. Redfort was producing fifteen percent if your reports are as reliable as ever.”

“Jon Arryn can retake the Redfort,” Varys pointed out.

The silver-haired Arch-Dominarch rolled her shoulders in amusement.

“He can but the flotilla I will leave here will have the order to blow up the refineries, the depots and the extractors if they face a massive counterattack before evacuating. No, one way or another Jon Arryn will have lost over forty-six percent of the Vale fuel production in this phase...more I hope if we achieved my goals on one of the other targets. Egen Fort has few major facilities, they were accounting for only nine percent, but Old Anchor gives them twenty-three percent of their production. If they were at peace, it might not be so bad but in these troubled times, the military is known to devour fuel like there’s no tomorrow.”

It was all well and good...and yet there was a tiny flaw in this strategy.

“You have not spoken about Longbow Hall.”

“I think it’s better to assume our plans for Longbow Hall are not worth the digital support they were encrypted on,” Rhaenyra declared bluntly. “Jon Arryn was smart enough to empty many fuel depots before some of his son tried to stab him in the back and House Grafton rebelled. A man that smart will not be blind to whatever plans a snake like Baelish schemed at Longbow Hall. I think that by the time I return to Gulltown, a raven-drone will await me with the demise of our Master of Information in high-resolution holographic video.”

“This is going to cause a lot of delay for your other plans.”

“It can’t be helped,” his young niece affirmed. “If I am not able to conquer a Sector and administer it properly, I have no right to involve myself in the wars ravaging the other Sectors...”

**Lady Alysanne Arryn, 29.09.300AAC, Longbow Hall System**

“Are you my bannersmen?”

The question cut through the many voices voicing their innocence, accusing their neighbours, or protesting their actions had been somehow misinterpreted.

At least they were all intelligent to stop speaking and close their mouths. Good, because her father was really, really in a bad mood now.

“I was just asking the question,” the Lord of the Eyrie snarled, “because your lack of respect, your disloyalty, and your arrogance almost made me believe someone else was the Lord Paramount of the Vale Sector. The more I try to find any redeemable qualities in your House, the more I am convinced you are betrayers and oath-breakers.”

The members of House Hunter shook their heads, shoulders and tried to protest with their bodies, but they stayed silent, as the two neat lines of Arryn guards on each side of their group were ready to slam them a vibro-halberd in the ribs if they dared make a threatening move.

“A few days ago, I wondered when I confronted my son Robin why the boy had stood against every honourable ideal I tried to put in his head. There are times in the evenings I sometimes wonder if I was not blind to leave him close to his mother...but then I see you, Lords of the Vale. Men who should have stood next to me in war and peace...men I favoured, men I treasured the advice...you were ready to sell me to the Targaryens at the first opportunity.”

Lord Gilwood promptly bent the knee in supplication in front of this voice of iron.

“Please, my Lord...I recognise my errors...my faults...I was led astray by my brothers and treacherous councillors.”

This was exactly the wrong thing to say.

“I am pleasantly surprised by your admission, Lord Gilwood.” Her father paused for a moment for theatrical effect before continuing. “We found letters and documents signed with your personal signature and the seal you always keep around your neck proclaiming your allegiance to King Viserys Targaryen. Can you explain me how it is possible your brothers managed to ‘lead you astray’ in this manner?”

Gilwood Hunter stayed with his mouth wide open like a particular stupid fish and his brother Eustace snickered next to him. This was another wrong move.

“Ah yes, the valiant, the incredible paragon of virtue named Eustace Hunter,” the young knight reddened under the obvious mockery. “While your eldest brother was busy trying to profess his allegiance to the Admiral of Dragonstone, you, Ser Eustace, exchanged dozens of raven-drones with the West. Once your brother was out of your way – tragic hunting accidents are not very imaginative, but who I am to judge? – you were going to sell half of your soul and a tenth of your assets to Lord Tywin Lannister. You wanted to become Lord Paramount of the Vale, and supporting the claim of Prince Joffrey Targaryen seemed a nice and safe way to do it.”

The youngest brother of the trio kept an emotionless face, but it didn’t save him from the diatribe he deserved.

“Ser Harlan...I must admit you chose well.”

“Excuse me, my Lord?”

“Your allegiance to the Red Viper of Dorne is well-suited to your tastes. Both of you have a tendency to eliminate your opposition by poison and other massacres where the tenets of knighthood and honour have not their place. Given the similarity with your methods and those of the Dornish in the last five hundred years, I must admit your reasons to join the Dornish in exchange of the recognition of your Lordship made sense. I fail to see a post-war Westeros where Rhaenys Targaryen sits on the Iron Throne, but I must admit that at least you did not hide your murderous predilections.”

Alysanne noticed Harlan didn’t know at the end of the tirade if he should feel vindicated or insulted.

“And then there is the Royal Couple of Betrayals itself. Lord Petyr Baelish and Lady Janyce Baelish born Hunter.”

Of the two Vale nobles named, it was the man who was the most unassuming. Average height, average hair, average face...it was the eyes however which were not able to hide the truth. These were amoral, ugly irises. The soul behind these eyes had to be dark indeed.

“My Lord...”

“Guards, if Lord Petyr Baelish open his mouth again to speak without my approval, cut his tongue.”

Two men in light blue armours stepped forwards, and the former Master of Information closed his mouth.

“At least with you, Lord Baelish, I can sleep soundly. I don’t know how Lord Hoster Tully could be so ignorant to see what sort of treacherous slime he was nursing into his home, but I know it is his fault, not mine. From the moment you swore your oaths to me, you never stopped trying to ignore them or to violate the spirit and the letter of your feudal contract. I don’t even think you know the definition of the word loyalty. Each time you tried to convince me you were a loyal man when all the evidence dug by my agents proved the contrary. You took the post of Master of Propaganda for the Targaryens against my will. You married Lady Hunter without my consent. You never paid over a tenth of the taxes you were supposed to pay. Did you think you were going to find a warm welcome at your return to the Vale?”

Many Lords would have felt shame at these serious accusations. But the expression on Petyr ‘Littlefinger’ Baelish’s visage was more akin to cold rage than remorse at seeing his illegal actions discovered.

“Even in your betrayal, you were not able to stay true to a single master or mistress. As far as we have been able to discern, you tried to sell your network and your allegiance to my son, Crown Prince Aegon Targaryen, the new Blackfyre claimant, the unlamented King Rhaegar, five Lords of the River Sector, Lord Eddard Stark, Lord Roose Bolton, Lord Lannister and the Seven know how many others. You can’t swear an oath without breaking it for the next ten days. You disagree, Lady Janyce?”

 “I do,” the red-haired with a voluptuous chest replied. “He stayed true to our marriage oaths...I made sure of this.”

“And your reaction about his...divided loyalties?” This was a point they had wondered before arranging this ‘audience’ in orbit over the home of House Hunter.

“Why should I care?” This was...unexpected.

“Janyce, we are your brothers!” For the first time, Harlan Hunter looked genuinely shocked.

“Ah yes, my poor brothers,” Janyce Baelish born Hunter stuck her tongue at them. “As the Usurper’s Rebellion raged, you were trying to convince our father to sell me to Lord Walder. I heard your suggestion of ‘why should we care if she becomes the broodmare of the Twins, Walder is not demanding a dowry to touch her fat tits.”

The unrepentant woman made an ironic bow.

“I regret not having the time to arrange their deaths with my husband, my Lord,” the three young men gave her loathing looks as they heard the ‘confession’. “And I didn’t swear any oaths to you, Lord Arryn. I am not an oath-breaker. You can thank the deceased Lord Eon Hunter for this oversight.”

“You have a point.”

Lord Petyr Baelish looked almost gleeful at this...until he was once again the target of the Falcon’s anger.

“However, Lord Petyr Baelish definitely violated his vows...so many vows in fact I would be surprised if he even remember the meaning of the first oath he swore to me. You want to protest, Lord Baelish?”

The former member of the Small Council indeed moved his arms like windmills in a vain and silent attempt to protest.

“I do, my Lord.”

“I am not your Lord. You made this very clear years ago as you preferred serving the Targaryens in the Crown Sector and preparing holo-emissions where I was presented as an ‘old senile fool’. It was under your advice funds and weapons were provided to the Graftons and their band of malcontents. All the while you were happy to stay out of my reach until I died of old age and you were able to whisper your treachery in the ears of my wife and my son...but you failed.”

“I was forced by the Targaryens! They menaced my family, my Lord!” The expression of surprise showed by Lady Janyce next to him told Alysanne how little truth there was in this ‘revelation’.

“I amend my previous judgement. You are not just an oath-breaker, a betrayer and a perpetually disloyal Lord. You are also a pathologic liar, Lord Petyr Baelish. But then as the Chief Liar of the Targaryen Regime, I suppose you had plenty of experience.”

“But...a trial...”

This was the point she intervened.

“A trial took place one year ago, Lord Baelish. You were summoned to the Eyrie; raven-drones were sent to the Southern Fingers System, your holdfast, to demand your presence. A jury of your peers, merchants, knights and smallfolk was assembled to judge your crimes and defiance of your liege.”

“You aren’t serious! This is a farce! This is not justice!”

“You were declared guilty of each of the five hundred chiefs of accusation levelled against you, Lord Petyr Baelish.” Was it wrong to feel so much pleasure at seeing the bastard become livid? “The sentence is death, the method of execution is left to the Heir of the Eyrie.”

Before meeting the man and knowing the intentions of her brother, Alysanne might have been merciful...but not now. She couldn’t afford politically to appear weak, and honestly there was no mercy for this traitor.

“Your tongue will be cut,” it was a fitting punishment for his uncountable lies, “and you will be given seven days to repent your sins before the airlock of your prison-compartment will be slowly vented into the void....”

“NOOOOOO!” Baelish suddenly lost whatever composure he tried to maintain and tried to flee the hall...only to be stopped three seconds later by the punch in the jaw of one guard. The treacherous Master of Information collapsed like a sack of potatoes.

“Lord Gilwood Hunter,” the Lord of Longbow Hall, of the three siblings, was the only one showing something like remorse. Given that he had probably supported Viserys Targaryen by conviction of reforming the realm, he was going to be granted some leniency. “Your treason is worthy of death, but you are given the choice between the sword and the black.”

“I will join the Night’s Watch, my Lady.”

“We will...”

“This choice is not given to you, Ser Eustace, Ser Harlan,” her father intervened. “You have proven you were ready to kill your Lord and betray the Vale for your greed and own advancement, not for any principle or loyalty to a cause. You will go directly to the gallows leaving this room, and may the Father just you equitably.”

When one took into account the magnitude of their crimes, this was very much a curse. The guards had to manacle them and drag them out of the room by force. At a sign of their Lord, most of the regiment assigned to the Arryn ship’s security departed, leaving them alone with Lady Janyce Baelish...well Lady Janyce Hunter once more, for Petyr Baelish was an attainted traitor, and had lost his rights to call himself a Vale Lord.

Alysanne wanted to demand out loud why the wife of one of the most dangerous enemies of the Vale was granted a private audience, but she kept her mouth shut as her father spoke to the red-haired woman.

“Lady Janyce? Existence is an absurd comedy which is played in front of a multitude and ends in solitude.”

The behaviour of Lady Janyce Hunter changed completely in the blink of an eye. Gone was the courtesan attitude, instead she stood to attention like a soldier, completely ignoring the fact part of her robe had not handled the stress very well and was now revealing several parts of her anatomy. It could have made her laugh, but her eyes...her eyes were cold and dead.

“Agent Four-Two, reporting for duty, Lord Arryn,” the Heiress of the Vale kept her uneasiness under wraps as a long interrogation started where Janyce revealed everything of her husband’s machinations from the last month. This was...ugly. And all the while the woman’s voice was emotionless, dead. This was a sort of mental conditioning Alysanne had heard which sometimes was going on the Free Cities, but it was hellishly expensive and the Seven Sectors had signed several accords in the past they would never hire specialists in this domain. Obviously, her father had violated these treaties.

“Are they many of them?” Alysanne forced herself to ask, hiding difficultly her disgust as Janyce Hunter left the hall by a secret door anonymously with a helmet and an Arryn uniform.

“No, thankfully not. At first, I wanted to have a few select agents in several critical power seats in case a new civil war was to be fought. Janyce volunteered to be a spy at the Twins under the condition her father paid the price for selling her to Walder Frey...but the Rebellion changed a lot of things and she was incredibly useful to keep an eye on the Royal court and Petyr Baelish.”

“She volunteered?” Heiress or not, politics or not, Alysanne was nauseous at the idea of...no better not even to think about it. “The treatment destroyed her personality, right?”

“No, I’m afraid this is her real personality you saw after I gave the mental sentence-code.”

Alysanne shivered. Janyce Hunter had been a sociopath then...she still was one, for that matter.

“It’s not...how far are we ready to go, father, if we want to win this war?”

And yes, her voice was pleading. But manipulating the minds, creating lies and more lies, turning killers against killers...where was it going to end?

“If we had won the Rebellion with Robert to lead us, I would not have ordered it...but Robert is dead and I am forced to do a lot of things I don’t like, daughter. As will you.” And for a moment the armour cracked and Jon Arryn, father, Lord Paramount of the Vale, Warden of the East, Lord of the Eyrie and the Gates of the Moon, Grand Seneschal of the Vale, looked terribly old and exhausted...and then the image was gone and the warlord was back. “Now...the Blackfyre issue must be talked about. Our last scouts from the Iron Sector are back and they have dark news with them. I want to hear what the Blackfyre girl has to say for herself and I need an emissary.”

This command had least deserved a humorous quip.

“There are not going to be many volunteers...”