**The Dying Peace Arc**

**Chapter 3**

**The Lies of the Long Peace**

*According to the Targaryens-bought maesters, the Long Peace was a period of peace – the name supposedly spoke for itself – and prosperity. A new generation was born and lived without experiencing the atrocities of war and bloodshed. Cities were rebuilt. The damage caused by rampaging armies and orbital strikes on countless planets was erased. Tempers and feuds were forgotten. Hastily recruited young men returned to their homes and enjoyed a long period of rest and celebrations. From the date of 18.04.290AAC onwards, Westeros was at peace and the Seven Sectors united benevolently under the Iron Throne.*

*This was nothing more than a huge lie.*

*Every Lord of importance was increasing his military forces. Overtly or secretly, hundreds of new warships were built in the orbital shipyards. Tanks, aircraft, rifles, anti-air artillery, battle-armours and countless other devastating weapons were produced. The former supporters of Robert’s Baratheon had not forgotten their grievances of the Usurper’s War. Among the Houses who had supported House Targaryen during this civil war, many were feeling unjustly sidelined by the Iron Throne. Dorne in effect if not in name was independent from the rest of Westeros. The River Sector was divided like it had never been before. The Storm Sector was at the edge of bankruptcy. Riots and attacks against symbols of power were spreading throughout the realm.*

*For the common smallfolk in the streets, the sensation was not one of peace. Many planets had established new systems of conscription. Taxes were on the rise, and the monthly income next increase was not coming, despite the promises conveyed by Galactic Targaryen News. New regulations came out of nowhere to become the law, and few of these texts were to the taste of the population.*

*This was peace. No Blackwood trooper was shooting at a Bracken-owned building. Lord Jon Connington was recognised as the legitimate Lord Paramount of the Storm Sector. There were no Dornish raids in the Marches. The great merchant companies were free to trade at will. But it was a very uneasy coexistence. The erratic commands signed with the Royal Seal were not inspiring joyous thoughts to the highborn and smallfolk.*

*And in reality, even this peace was a lie.*

*The Iron Sector, defeated and forced to surrender on 18.04.290AAC, was burning again in the fires of rebellion and insurrection.*

*When one examined the facts, it was completely illogical. The Ironborn had been crushed during their ill-fated Rebellion. The survivors had learned hard the price of treachery and the occupying forces had lengthily and methodically destroyed most of the arsenal built on Balon Greyjoy’s orders. There was no money to buy weapons from outside sources, no great resources which could interest foreign interests and no friends to come to the rescue. For millions of Ironborn, the survival of Victarion Greyjoy was a cruel rumour and besides the man’s reputation was tainted by his monumental defeat of the Arbor. The Regents and other high-ranking Westerosi Generals and Admirals had bluntly delivered speeches where they were warned fighting their new masters would be an extremely quick death sentence.*

*Rebellion in these conditions should have been close to insanity. But there was a little condition Rhaegar and his councillors had forgotten while they were carving the Sector for their bannersmen.*

*The life under military occupation had to be bearable.*

*Many conquerors had forgotten it time and time again on the galactic scene to their dismay. Each time, the oppressed people broke their chains and fought to reclaim their freedom. And why would the Ironborn be so different?*

*The ‘peace’ King Rhaegar Targaryen, Lord Tywin Lannister and Lord Mace Tyrell had imposed to the Iron Sector was not to last long. By 05.09.290AAC, the Tyrant-General of Great Wyk Ser Gregor Clegane, more infamously known by his nickname of ‘the Beast’, wiped out an entire village. Its inhabitants had apparently had the temerity to protest the rapes and the murders of several young women. They were incinerated by plasma guns in retaliation.*

*This day was the last one the planet of Great Wyk knew peace. The Ironborn had seen the true face of their conquerors, and knew they had no justice, no prosperity and no mercy to wait from them. The insurrection organised in the shadows and struck the Western soldiers at their most vulnerable moments. Gregor Clegane counter-attacked by seizing thousands of people in the streets and giving them to his torture experts. With the assistance of his subordinate Ser Amory Lorch, a regime of terror was enforced on Great Wyk. Tens of thousands Ironborn were killed, and yet the bloodier massacres never stopped the attacks and revolts. The reparations the Nobles Houses were supposed to pay were close to zero. The illegal weapon trade was flourishing, blockade or not blockade, laws or no laws. The ground garrison of Western soldiers, initially one million and a half strong, was reinforced each year to reach three million and a half regulars by mid-300AAC. Great Wyk was costing House Lannister billions of gold dragons to hold for no return save harsh critics of non-Westerner parties. Gregor Clegane was uncontrollable and killed many Ironborn lords, driving the rest underground. These new rebels did not wait long to take up arms with the old ones and strike back. The Western soldiers were assassinated right and left, and the most spectacular terrorist attacks saw sabotaged shuttles slamming in military bases at Mach speed.*

*Great Wyk was unsalvageable and the pleas of the other military governors to King Rhaegar Targaryen and Lord Tywin Lannister were ignored, with predictable results.*

*Out of eight planets inhabited in the Iron Sector, there was a single stellar system which was not erupting in violence every week: Harlaw. The authority of Lord Paramount Rodrik Harlaw and the reasonable stance taken by Inspector-General Axell Florent had until 300AAC managed to keep the occupation calm and the economy functioning – though the benefits were invariably swallowed by the reparation payments.*

*Unfortunately, it was the exception in a dark ocean of violence. Sellswords, pirates and corsairs were circling around the Iron Systems, lending their strength to one side or the other. It was bad enough most of the military governors had arrived without a strategy when they were nominated for this task; in their minds, the occupation had been a way to fill their pockets with gold, platinum, trade agreements and raw resources. The Westerosi Lords didn’t want to hear that before taking that wealth, there was a lot of investment and rebuilding. The Ironborn would have gladly accepted a return to their pre-war lives. Ser Desmond Redwyne, Ser Lyn Corbray, Ser Tygett Lannister and Lord Corwin Musgood –among others – weren’t willing to let this future exist. The religious persecutions started by the end of 290AAC, generating outrage and disgust. The reforms of the justice system – giving the garrison forces a free hand on practically everything – antagonised further the population of Pyke and the other major urban centres. The heavy and light industries were owned by Reach, Western, Crown and River companies. Licences which had been property of Ironborn elites were sold to their ‘benefactors’ for ridiculously low sums.*

*These were exactly the measures required for a maximum of unrest to spread. While the disobedience and the revolts never reached the level of Great Wyk, the garrison forces from the Lonely Light to Orkmont were firing their guns every month and not for the customary training exercises.*

*There were a few optimist commanders to report at home these problems were going to be minor nuisances in the long term. After one decade of military occupation which gained them the hatred of the Ironborn, these voices had long been silenced. The garrisoning was thankless, sabotage of the production lines was business as usual, the workforce was poorly educated and unmotivated, the sums they squeezed from the destroyed economy were smaller than in their darkest nightmares and worst of all, the duty never ended.*

*In a failure that was sadly typical of the final years of the Targaryen dynasty, there had been no rotation system to garrison the vanquished Iron Sector. There was also very little supervision; one of the reasons the Beast could remain in post no matter how many atrocities he caused. In the Florent-Harlaw case, the consequences were positive, as the young Lord Alekyne Florent was perfectly willing to endorse his uncle’s actions as long as they remained bloodless. In the Saltcliffe case, it was the complete opposite: Lyn Corbray and the forces he had gained from Houses Corbray, Lynderly and Grafton had no one to answer to: Lord Jon Arryn had not given his assent to this move and never provided any help.*

*Balon Greyjoy was long dead, but his sins continued to haunt the living of the Iron Sector. As long as the Long Peace continued, the loyalists could strangle the Sector for another decade. It was a very unreasonable condition, when Reach and Western men vied for total supremacy at court...*

Extract from the Lies and the Vengeance, Anonymous author, 320AAC.

**Ser Axell Florent, 08.07.300AAC, Pyke System**

The meeting opened, as usual, by the customary ten minutes of silence.

“Let it be known,” said finally Ser Desmond Redwyne in his authority as host of the council, “that the representative of Great Wyk has failed to present himself or to send a delegate speaking with his authority. Again.”

Ser Lyn chose this moment to snigger loudly, an unpleasant sound if there ever was one. And unavoidably, the ire of certain senior military commanders was roused.

“You find the insubordination of Clegane amusing, Corbray?” snarled Lord Corwin Musgood. The Storm Lord looked tired, in Axell’s opinion. His usually great beard was getting shorter year after year, and a lot of his hairs had turned grey and white. His eyes were bloodshot and there were new wrinkles on his middle-aged visage.

The Lord gathering in a single body the titles of Musgood Hall and Sentinel-General of the Lonely Light was not fifty name days old yet, but he looked like a man fifteen years older. Priceless medical treatments could do nothing when the patient was killing himself to save his fleet and his army from ruin.

“I’m finding amusing by the fact you still pretend we have any control over the Beast’s actions.” Ser Robin Ryger flinched when the name was uttered by the Vale commander. “The only person Clegane and Lorch listen to is Tywin Lannister. Only the Lord of Casterly Rock and the King can recall the monsters of Great Wyk...and last time I checked they were both busy ignoring us.”

The words were certainly blunt, not that it was a surprise Lyn Corbray was not a diplomatic man. But that didn’t mean he was wrong.

“I resent your accusations,” growled Ser Tygett Lannister, slamming his hands on the polished round table they were all seated around. The staring between the Valeman and the Westerner was impressive.

“Well, what do you wait to challenge me in duel?” Lyn’s smirk was back and becoming clearer by the second. His fighting hand went to the hilt of his long Valyrian blade. “It has been too long my Lady has tasted a warrior’s blood.”

It was amazing how fast the vast council room where the military governors of the Iron Sector had gathered could get frosty. One second, they were watching each other calmly, the other they were ready to kill each other. Idly, Axell wondered if the Small Council’s meetings were that interesting...probably not.

To his credit, Tygett Lannister continued to stare and didn’t react to the provocation. Good point for him, because Lyn Corbray was not a man who bluffed his way out of duels. The wielder of Lady Forlorn had ended many lives on the field of honour and thousands more. There were nasty rumours the younger brother of the current Lord Corbray was organising illegal fighting rings in the underground arenas of Saltcliffe with himself as the prime gladiator. They might be true, for all he knew.

“Enough,” ordered Ser Desmond, quickly followed by his second-in-command, Ser Humfrey Hightower. “Corbray, if you want a duel so badly, go to Great Wyk and challenge Ser Gregor Clegane.”

The tone employed by the cousin of Lord Paxter told the others men no tears would be shed for the one who lost this duel.

“Clegane is a Beast, not a swordsman...” The grumble was half-disdainful, but there was a light of fear in the Lyn’s eyes.

Seeing the biggest problem present around the table placated, the Regent of Pyke turned towards Ryger.

“How fares things on Old Wyk?”

Big, bald and old, the Riverlander was not an impressive figure and by the stone-faced expression he was harbouring, the answer to this particular question was all too predictable.

“Bad enough, Lord Regent.” In his brown uniform, Ser Robin Ryger had tacitly acknowledged the Regency of Pyke gave Redwyne a superior position to his title of Castellan-General of Old Wyk. Whether it was a command coming straight from House Darry or not, Axell had not managed to discover it. “The destruction of the last two Void Temples two months ago has enraged the population. Taxes collected have decreased by five percent, eight orbital mining extraction centres have been damaged, sabotage and disrepair on the ground are taking their usual tolls and I’ve lost over six thousand men dead with another fifteen thousand wounded in the last fortnight.”

Axell showed a grim expression of circumstance. He had not to force it, really. Once more, the soldiers were paying for the mistakes of their commanders. What had Ryger been thinking destroying religious cults right and left? If there was one poison they really didn’t need to throw into the toxic bath, it was the holy war of faith...

“And how many Void Priests did you kill?” The worsening economic situation left Desmond Redwyne and the subordinates he had come with insensible.

“Between four hundred and four hundred and thirty,” revealed the River Vice-Admiral. “The leaders of the *Prophets of the Void* have all been sentenced to death and their followers will dig in our darkest pits for the rest of their lives.”

“Very good,” the smile of his fellow Reacher was not feigned at all. “Soon the Void Religion will be utterly annihilated and the orders from our beloved King will have been accomplished to the letter.”

Ser Jarmen Buckwell coughed very loudly in the seconds after this declaration.

“You disagree, Admiral?”

“Oh no, Lord Regent,” There was something dark in the Crownlander’s posture. “I am sure we have methodically destroyed this heretical worship to the root. Their temples are blown up, their priests are dead, their holy texts and grounds have been burned and their material wealth has been confiscated. The few Priests we haven’t been able to kill are hidden in holes so deep they’re for all intent and purposes dead.”

“I’m not hearing a question,” remarked lightly Humfrey Hightower, and many junior officers behind him chuckled.

“Ah yes, how forgetful of me,” agreed Jarmen. “My interrogation is: what exactly was this feat supposed to accomplish?”

“We are paving the ground for the Seven!” How Hightower and his subordinates achieved this virtuous look in all sincerity, Axell preferred not to know, thank you very much. “Once the Void Religion will be utterly eradicated, there will be nothing to stop us from declaring the Faith the true and only religion of the Iron Sector!”

“Yes, because the Ironborn are going to flock to the septs by the thousands any day now,” Humfrey and Desmond’s face went red when they heard the sarcastic sentence.

This might be a little unfair. There were about one hundred thousand Seven-worshipping Ironborn these days...all on Harlaw granted...and for a Sector of around five billion people?

“All we need is a decade or two and the Ironborn culture will be forced to assimilate our religion and the traits we want,” added the Redwyne officer in a more composed affirmation.

“We don’t have a decade,” there was no irony in the Crown Lord’s words now. The man was deadly serious. Square and black-haired, the knight of House Buckwell serving as Defender-General of Orkmont was like a solid rock in the middle of a tempest, preparing to defend his point of view against all enemies. Not that he risked much: House Buckwell and his Lord were openly keeping their hands off this mess, and the worst which could happen to him was his recall at home...an unlikely possibility assuredly.

“My analysts have studied the numbers. The Orkmont System is in a better state than most, but their conclusions are I have a maximum of three years before the situation on the ground gets out of control and I’m forced to resort to extraordinary measures. I have not yet received a third of the money and a quarter of the materials I need to rebuild adequately the planet, and the men, women and children on the ground are tired to hear my excuses.”

“You’re right: these are poor excuses,” the glare which was directed at Tygett Lannister showed this intervention had damaged a bit more the relationships between the Western Sector and the supporters of the King.

Axell was ready for another dispute when a messenger ran inside the conference room, his face looking somewhere between horrified and terrified. The brown-haired youth in a superb green uniform handed the data-slate to Desmond Redwyne.

Whatever information was in it, it was sufficient grave for the Regent of Pyke’s face to become livid.

“There was a chemical attack on Great Wyk several days ago.” The commander of all space forces in the Pyke System managed to articulate after a moment to consider the news. “Gregor Clegane wanted to gas thousands of rebels...and ended launching the bombardment on his own men.”

Axell Florent had the sudden urge to hit something. He had come to build a power base safely away from Mace Tyrell’s reach, but idiots like Clegane and Lorch had ruined his plans before they had even begun...

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*According to the whispers spreading after the Greyjoy Rebellion, the antagonism between House Baratheon and House Connington started when Lord Robert Baratheon made a joke about Lord Jon Connington’s friendship with the then-Crown Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and matters escalated from there.*

*This was partially inexact, according to the archives of the Citadel and other old historical documents. While no one can doubt the enmity between Storm’s End and Griffin’s Roost reached its worst point after the Greyjoy Rebellion, this was far from the first time Lords of these two stellar systems had loud disagreements.*

*One jump away from Storm’s End itself, the system ruled by House Connington was a tenacious opponent for the Durrandon Kings in their conquest of the Storm Sector. Many fleets of the stag were lost in offensives to destroy the shipyards of the Griffin’s Belt and the numbers of armies bloodied trying to gain a foothold on the planet was not small. The Kings of the Storm fought many wars in order to see their stubborn neighbours bend the knee, and it was said with some justice that save House Swann of Stonehelm, no enemy proved as difficult to vanquish.*

*The victory of the Durrandon Kings and their unquestioned domination over the Storm Kingdom was not a boon for House Connington and tensions remained high for generations. Griffin’s Roost was a critical system to hold as it controlled the nexus of jump points making possible to get in and out the Rain sub-sector and exploit its vast resources. Taxes were high, and House Connington never received the authorisation to build more than the bare minimum of shipyards and orbital fortresses. Griffin’s Roost had been a powerhouse when it was independent, but under the Durrandon rule, the red and white banners were at best a second-rate power. The Lord of the Marches received the greatest part of the war investments and Griffin’s Roost had to arm its warships and army groups with very limited funds.*

*Yet House Durrandon disappeared with the Conquest, and the new House Baratheon proved far more amenable to their pleas. Orys Baratheon was named first Lord Paramount of the Storm Sector by the Conqueror himself. The formidable General needed political support to counterbalance the ambition of House Swann, House Grandison and House Fell. Lifting several military restrictions and taxes in exchange of the undying support of House Connington must have appeared like a good bargain to the new Lord of Storm’s End. Obviously, House Connington was never going to be authorised to challenge the centre of the Storm Sector but thanks to them, the southern flank of Storm’s End was going to be heavily guarded.*

*Two hundred and eighty years later, Lord Robert Baratheon discovered at his return in the Storm Sector they must have kept a better surveillance on their bannersmen. Lord Jon Connington stayed loyal to King Aerys II, delaying the mustering of a third of the Storm Sector by weeks and forcing the man who would be called the Usurper to fight three battles in the Summerhall System in a disadvantageous position. When Lord Mace Tyrell invaded the Sector after the Battle of Ashford, House Connington proved to be the dagger which destroyed every defensive effort made by the Storm Lords to stop this relentless offensive. Storm’s End was blockaded, and at the end of the war Lord Jon Connington for his unconditional loyalty was made the new Lord Paramount of the Storm Sector.*

*A new era began, but it was not one of prosperity. Indeed since his ascension to the Paramountcy, the domination of House Connington is by all unbiased accounts an economic disaster without precedent...*

Extract from the Tumultuous History of the Griffin and the Stag, by Novice Krael, a work censored by the Maesters for its pro-Baratheon stance in 298AAC.

**Stannis Baratheon, 08.07.300AAC, Storm’s End System**

If he was given the choice between eating rat’s meat and granting an audience to his prestigious visitors today, he would have chosen the rats. After all, the worst which could happen by devouring such vermin was death by poisoning. If only he could say the same thing about the delegation which had come straight from Griffin’s Roost...

Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End, readjusted his black cloak as he entered the vast hall the Durrandons had once called a private throne room for hundreds of years. The main difference between the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ throne room was a question of size, for those who wondered. In this place renamed an audience room in subservience of their dragon overlords, there was sufficient space to parade a regiment with ease. The great throne room of the Storm Kingdom, on the other hand, was so vast they could build a ship of the line there and still have room to spare. It was also completely unsuitable unless you had to summon tens of thousands people for a great ceremony.

Walking in long strides, the eldest Baratheon alive sat on his seat. It was a comfortable and practical armchair, not the huge thing Robert had ordered for himself before fleeing to the Vale Sector for a life of debauchery and weapon training. No, that seat had been sold in the weeks after the end of the Rebellion to pay the ruinous reparations the Targaryens and their bootlickers had pushed for and that Storm’s End could not refuse. Not that it had been a great loss, really. Robert had always found it easy to spend money he had done nothing to earn and his throne-chair had had so many gemstones, gold and onyx on it that it was seriously indecent. Truly, Stannis had several times shivered in his personal solar these last years at what would have happened if the roles were reversed. Had he died in the great battle of the Trident and Robert surrendered after the long siege...well, there would have been really unpleasant consequences. Stannis had done his best to present to his people the image of a Lord conscious of his duties, a good husband, a father of two children and a planetary governor burdened by the taxes, penalties and other punishments that King’s Landing and Griffin’s Roost loved to torment the Stormlanders’ population. Many important wages and privileges had been severely cut down, centuries-old tapestries and paintings that had been collecting dust for the last decades were sold, and sobriety and austerity had made their way in the lands he ruled.

It was purely imaginative by this point, but Stannis had large difficulties seeing Robert of all people adopt his lifestyle. His eldest brother had never been fond of ruling but the best wines, the best battle-armours, the best prey birds, the most impressive parades and the most expensive weapons were all somehow finding their way to him in his youth. He had also sired many bastards during his campaigns. It would have been difficult to force him to listen to the ugly truth of harsh numbers and the sad reality of poor finances...Stannis was realist enough to know he was not and would never be Jon Arryn or Eddard Stark.

“The audience can begin,” he gave the command to one of his most trusted Morrigen captains on his left. “Let them enter.”

The man saluted and left by a door hidden behind a two centuries-old Baratheon battle-armour. Silence fell on the audience room, only troubled by the fifty guards aligned against the walls and his own respiration. In other circumstances, Stannis would have loved having his beloved wife Ryella by his side, but the last times they had received a Connington at Storm’s End, it was his wife who had exploded first after one insult too many of these arrogant dragon-lovers. His children were away and most of his senior councillors were too busy with important duties to be recalled for what was going to be anyway a waste of time and thus he was alone to receive his ‘guests’.

The four metres-tall doors opened slowly and majestically to reveal a black-gold herald and a group of about twenty people. And then the Baratheon announcer shouted the names of the highborn which had arrived yesterday and rudely demanded a moment of his time.

“Ser Rhaegar Connington, Heir of Griffin’s Roost, Marshal of the Rain Rift, Master of the Griffin Belt and Defender of the Loyal!”

The first teenager who advanced before him was a Connington, of this there was absolutely no doubt. Red-haired, a few bristles on the chin, the eldest son of Rhaegar Targaryen’s most lovesick sidekick was so in love with his own importance it was a minor miracle the ground wasn’t giving way under his shining black boots.

His appearance was sadly one very similar to the young men frequenting the capital these days – which was fair, since Rhaegar Connington definitely belonged to this category – an atrocious attire in red, white, black and blue. Stannis had seen spectacles where the mummers didn’t wear so many colours. And because bad taste was never satisfied by itself, the fifteen years-old boy had a sort of necklace with five diamonds around his neck and rubies encrusted in his costume’s sleeves.

To add insult to the injury, there was no salute or mark of respect coming from the son of Jon Connington. Perhaps this moron thought the title of ‘Marshal’ his father had given him dispensed him from protocol. Stannis hid the anger he felt in his heart with an unfeeling face. He had practised on many occasions in the last decade.

“Ser Loras Tyrell, third in line to the Lordship of Highgarden, the Knight of Flowers, Knight-Commander of the Eighth Spacefighter Fleet and Spear of the South!”

The Connington spawn had decided to be presented in outrageous clothes; the proud son of the Fat Rose had decided to wear a full set of battle-armour minus the helmet. And not just any common armour. It was a customised Terminator model, with finely engraved flowers of platinum as primary decoration. As a result of this silver colour and the thorough polishing, the extremely expensive battle-armour was so perfect it almost could serve as a mirror. It was beautiful...and Stannis knew this work of art cost probably less than four or five battle-tanks bought together.

It went without saying the quality of the protection offered was minimal when like Loras Tyrell you didn’t wear your helmet. Seven Hells, the Reacher had not bothered to come with it today! The new generation of the Reach had really abandoned all its survival instincts in the last decade.

“Ser Renly Baratheon, third in line to the Lordship of Storm’s End, the Knight of Stags, Admiral of the Fifth Battle Squadron and Blade of the Storm!”

It was painful to see his youngest brother strut like an insipid Reacher and wearing bright gold-blue clothes. He didn’t care what the Tyrells did between themselves, but watching the brother he had done his best to shield from the awful reality of war eighteen years ago was a dire wound.

What would they parents think of their little boy, now that he was a caricature of a Tyrell vassal?

All these years, Renly had been the dagger the Tyrells and the Conningtons were happily showing him every time they invented more unreasonable demands or simply felt in a mood to anger him. And for this alone he hated the Tyrells, the Conningtons and the Targaryens more than he believed possible.

Worse, the lovesick looks Renly was giving the young Tyrell were obvious even to him....

“Lord Bryce Caron, Lord of Nightsong, General of the Twentieth Army and Grand Protector of the Marches!”

The only Noble House the Lord of Griffin’s Roost had managed to convince to side with him politically since the Greyjoy Rebellion. Bryce Caron was young, dashing...and like the ridiculous Knight of Flowers, he wore a Mark 6 ‘Terminator’ battle-armour. At least his would not seem out of a place on a battlefield...provided the colour orange didn’t horrify you of course.

Unlike Rhaegar Connington – a name which gave him the urge to grit his teeth every time he thought about it –Bryce Caron had the decency to avoid strutting around at Storm’s End...maybe because he had a clue or two who had the greatest number of Storm Lords answering to him in the room.

The rest of the young men and teenagers in the group were quite unimportant in status and mediocre in intelligence. Parmen Crane, Emmon Cuy, Richard Farrow, Edmund Ambrose and Mark Mullendore were names that were now firmly associated with the entourage of the Crown Prince. Connington had really gathered a sizeable number of idiots to his banner. On the positive side, there were going to be easy to get rid of. On the negative side, his brother was in their ranks...

Looking at them as they tightened ranks before him, Stannis could say without reluctance Mace Tyrell had well-trained this generation to be pathetic excuses of soldiers and Lords. These teenagers and young men had all been handed titles, rewards and income they had done nothing to earn. Examining them one by one, Stannis searched in them one reason, a single excuse, not to execute Operation Cataclysm.

He didn’t find it. Not in Renly, not in Bryce Caron...and certainly not in Rhaegar Connington or Loras Tyrell.

“Welcome to Storm’s End, Sers.” He saw some of the idiots in the group facing him one metre and a half away murmur between themselves. By the Father, Stannis really hoped these young highborn had expected to be greeted one by one with the usual bowing and courtesies they took for granted. He was the Lord of Storm’s End and if he gained a reputation for bluntness among them...well, it was not like their opinion was going to matter a lot in the next months. “You requested an audience.”

The tone he used made obvious they better have a good reason for intruding without sending a raven-drone of warning beforehand.

“Alas,” said Rhaegar Connington. “It is of treason we must warn you Lord Baratheon.”

The words should have been full of gravity, but the smiles of his sycophants and the poor manners of Rhaegar Connington made the accusation look like a poorly-made joke.

In fact it was so ridiculous Stannis had to wait a few seconds to realise the red-haired threat and his friends were serious. They had caught none of his preparations; they were just trying to involve him in one of their dreadful ‘conspiracies’.

“Prince Viserys Targaryen is conspiring against the Crown Prince,” continued the Heir of Griffin’s Roost. The revelation was made to provoke the maximum of shock, but personally the incentive was to yawn and order one of his guards to bring him a pillow. “His heinous actions include usurping the authority of the Prince of Dragonstone and authorising illegal military patrols in the Blackwater Rift and the Narrow Void, embezzlement of funds, hiring several unrespectable sellsword companies, refusal to obey Royal Orders, and allying with enemies of the realm.”

“Awful,” The master of Storm’s End replied. “These are grave accusations against a Prince of the dragon’s blood and must be reported in all haste to the King and the Small Council with all urgency.”

Whatever answer they had awaited from him the disgraces of the Reach and the Storm Sector had not counted on this one.

“The Small Council and the King have not yet been informed,” spoke Loras Tyrell, all arrogance momentarily banished from his traits. “The Crown Prince lacks the evidence to move against Prince Viserys but his presence near Dorne offers us an opportunity...”

This was no lamentable Stannis wasn’t finding the words for it. They landed screaming ‘treason’ and ‘betrayal’ without any evidence. It was clear their master had ordered them to secure Storm’s End support without informing anyone in power at King’s Landing. And he was ready to bet Jon Connington had not given them a signed order of his own hand too. They wanted to use him as a scapegoat to get rid of a potential rival before the first shot was fired...they really cared for nothing but their games of thrones and power, weren’t they?

“So there isn’t any evidence.” He dearly hoped his voice conveyed how unimpressed he was. “And by your own words, the Small Council has not been warned of these terrible accusations.”

And since the Small Council was divided these days, such accusations could have initiated the largest political crisis of the decade.

“Is our word not enough for you, Black Stag?” Emmon Cuy’s arrogance was really something. Truly the Lords of the Reach had failed utterly when they had to teach their Heirs respect and wisdom. As for the nickname, it was just a name nothing more. He was not always wearing black, contrary to the rumours spread by these courtesans and dragon-flatterers.

“No, it isn’t.” The steel expression he sent at the buffoon in gold-pink clothes was not faked. “You barge in my home without warning, you accuse a Prince of Blood to be a traitor and you lack the most basic evidence to support your accusations. Be thankful I’m not imprisoning you immediately for high treason, there are Kings who would have already demanded your heads for the sentences you have just proclaimed.”

Aerys would have killed them all, that was a certainty. Rhaegar however was not going to move against the friends of his eldest son but Stannis was going to send a message or two to the capital before the day was over. Everything spreading a bit of chaos in the corrupt machine of the Seven Sectors was a good thing.

“You are going to regret this, Baratheon,” the Connington spawn hissed like an injured animal, his ugly face taking a colour on par with his hairs. “When my father hears about this, you and our pitiful allies will enjoy paying new taxes.”

About two thirds of the group seemed to rejoice hearing this, and Renly was in it. It hurt. He wished to speak face-to-face with his brother in private once more, wrest him away from the Tyrell’s corruptive influence.

But he had already tried it and it had not worked. It never worked.

“Guards! Escort them out of this room. The audience is over.”

“I am the Heir of Lord Paramount! Lord Jon Connington will be informed of this perfidy!”

Stannis tried hard not to smile. He had received thousands of threats like this from the Targaryens and their minions, after a while they were very boring. He would have to do his best to circumvent a few edicts of his ‘Lord Paramount’ in the next days. Doing so never failed to enrage the Master of Griffin’s Roost. The red-haired flatterer had almost had an aneurysm when he had learned Stannis was indifferently recruiting men and women in his armed forces. His poor medical personnel, underpaid and understaffed, truly lacked the manpower to recognise if a person was male or female.

Stannis sighed as the last of the Reach youngsters disappeared from his view. Things were going to get bad before there was any improvement.

In the end, his duty to the Storm Sector and his family was far more important than saving a ‘brother’ who preferred the Tyrells to his own blood.

**Margaery Tyrell, 08.07.300AAC, Highgarden System**

The Green Gardens of Gardenia were particularly beautiful this year. Margaery was feeling somewhat guilty watching the thousands of golden roses surrounding her. The Tyrell-owned lands where the Green Gardens were located were not on Highgarden Prime, which was honestly the main reason she rarely visited it. Her lessons, ceremony obligations, art patronage and other duties left her little time to travel to the other planets of the Highgarden System, no matter how interesting the travel promised to be.

The rains of the last month had been a benediction for the flowers and the vegetation. The centuries-old garden built fifty years before the Conquest was resplendent as all the colours of life flourished and developed in a fantastic spectacle. The famous Highgarden roses were dominating the floral competition as it should be, but there were other flowers and fruit trees too. Large trees were providing huge shadows where the highborn and their servants could avoid for a few hours the warm and hot rays of the yellow sun. Thanks the Seven, the Green Gardens had their own canal, providing much needed water to the plants and the little squirrels so common in the parks of Gardenia. More important, the humans could refresh themselves in these pure blue waters and the temperatures were far more pleasant than they would have been otherwise.

For now, Margaery was seated on a flower-decorated chair under a massive oak tree which had probably been planted when the Tyrells were still the Stewards of Highgarden and not its Lords and Masters. She had just finished eating two peaches and a servant had just cleared the white table of the remnants of her lunches.

The Gardens were strangely peaceful to her ears. Margaery was a Tyrell of Highgarden, and it was a rare moment where she was alone. Most of her days, the daughter of the Warden of the South was expected, no encouraged and volunteered to speak with hundreds of people. The fact most of her interlocutors would never be in her presence again was something she had accepted years ago. So was the nearby presence of dozens of cousins, the betrothal with the Crown Prince, and the activities she was to excel in. For the common smallfolk, the life of a highborn lady must appear absolutely wonderful, but Margaery knew how much work and preparations it really entailed.

Birds sang in the branches above her head and Margaery for countless minutes listened to their joyous thrills. The music, the soft caress of an afternoon breeze and the silence made the moment absolutely divine.

It did not last. It never did. In the distance, she heard loud human voices, and since her escort had been commanded to be as discreet as possible, it left only her invitees. Shifting her attention to the platinum-covered watch her father had gifted her on her last name day the daughter of Highgarden had to stop a grimace from appearing on her traits. She knew the tradition of coming late to an appointment you didn’t want; she had practised it several times herself this last year. But two hours past the agreed hour had to be some kind of performance in itself. Fortunately, the wait was almost over.

On the neat path carefully maintained by hundreds of gardeners and servants thorough the year, two young women of her own age were walking with expressions telling her the fierce conversation of the last minutes had been anything but friendly.

One of the women was a cousin and a trusted ally. The other was not her cousin, and had caused her grandmother and the women of the Reach plenty of headaches in the last years. Today it was going to end, at last.

On the left, wearing a modest magenta robe with curt sleeves and subtle gold jewellery similar to the ones Margaery possessed was her cousin Desmera Redwyne. House Tyrell and House Redwyne had married and tied their destinies in blood and politics for several generations that they had met each other a lot of time in their childhood. Desmera was a good friend, intelligent and well-mannered, and had cute freckles to complement her orange hairs. When Margaery left for the Crown Sector and her grand marriage, Desmera would go with her as one of her handmaidens.

On the right was a young woman which had nothing in common with them save their age. Calla Rowan had celebrated her seventeen name days like Margaery, but it stopped there. Where Desmera and she had their long hairs carefully dressed in all occasions and cut regularly not to go lower than their shoulders, the golden mane of her second invitee was wild and descending to the hips. The highborn women of the Arbor and Highgarden had chosen robes that were both tasteful and fashionable; the Heiress of Goldengrove was dressed like an expensive prostitute. Her slim pale yellow robe had no sleeves. Calla Rowan was showing so much flesh it was indecent and the transparency of the yellow material indicated the daughter of Lord Mathis Rowan was obviously wearing nothing underneath this outrageous robe.

Oh yes, it was time for this Heiress to stop causing problems in the heart of the Reach. House Rowan was one of the most powerful and trusted Noble Houses of the Reach Sector, it was out of question for this brainless courtesan to imperil the strong alliance decades of effort had been necessary to build.

“Now that you’re here, I suppose we can begin,” her eyes were of course facing directly Calla. She had asked Desmera to wait for her reluctant guest in a pavilion at the entrance of the Green Gardens and to give her a good tongue-lashing for her punctuality failure. Desmera’s lips slightly twitched in amusement; the visage of the Goldengrove Heiress took a moderately embarrassed expression.

“Your behaviour at the last Solstice Ball was completely unacceptable of a Lady of the Reach, Calla Rowan,” yesterday she had thought when she had prepared this discussion that her interlocutor would receive the message better if it came with the usual courtesies. After two hours of waiting however, she wasn’t in the mood anymore.

But the bitch simply pouted and smiled.

“Not everyone has already a husband coming to her, Lady Margaery.” The Tyrell daughter had to force the anger back inside, but by the Mother how she wanted to slap her. “I want a good match for my House. There are no rules against speaking with promising candidates for my hand.”

No, but there were rules of modesty and protocol. The Rowan girl outfit had been on the same level of indecency as today, and the methods she had used with the ‘candidates’ were simply not done.

If it had been limited to this, perhaps it would have stopped there and her grandmother would have reluctantly endorsed the proposal of a few aunts to let the daughter of Lord Mathis Rowan stay under close guard for a couple of years.

But it wasn’t.

The young men Calla Rowan had all but invited in her bed were Lord Alekyne Florent and Lord Samwell Tarly. And as much as she wanted to laugh at the hypothetical marriage of ‘the Fat One’ or the ‘Mediocre’ to this slut, it would be a political disaster to let a Tarly-Florent-Rowan bloc take shape.

“Well, in this case you’re going to be happy, my dear. Your father has decided it is time for you to be married.” Margaery smiled widely and her interlocutor frowned. A white letter in old-fashioned paper – a rarity if there ever was one - was placed on the wooden table.

Betraying her lack of composure and education, Calla seized the object and opened it without waiting. Now there was just to wait for the explosion...the tanned visage became pale, then furious...and then there was the explosion.

“Lord Peake? You have convinced my father to marry me to Lord Titus Peake?” Fury and incredulity were fighting in the whore’s voice. Margaery savoured it like the meal she had eaten before this meeting. It was absolutely delicious to demolish the arrogance of this girl. She had never liked the Rowan Heiress and now hopefully her two younger sisters would be more promising candidates for the Ladyship.

“Yes, Lord Titus Peake has manifested a deep interest in a union with House Rowan.” It was not exactly a surprise. The Blackfyre Rebellions had been a heavy blow to the power of Starpike, and the Peakes were definitely not key players in the Game of Thrones anymore. “You might remember the beloved wife of Lord Peake has sadly passed away six months ago and Lord Titus has alas no heirs of his blood.”

The demise of Lady Margot Peake born Lannister had of course been ordered by her grandmother. The lioness had tried to use her family ties to spread the influence of Tywin Lannister in the Reach Sector, a betrayal which could not go unchallenged.

“I remember,” there was fury in the blue Rowan eyes. “I also remember Lord Peake of Starpike is over fifty years old!”

“No, it’s actually forty-eight, not fifty,” corrected Desmera. If looks could kill, the venomous glance Calla Rowan sent to her cousin would have killed her on the spot.

“You married me to an old man,” and the expression of despair on the Goldengrove young woman was a bit comical, Margaery had to admit.

“A shuttle is waiting for you at the starport,” she tried to keep the satisfaction out of her voice but it was a bit difficult. “You leave for Starpike tonight. Lord Mathis is on his way from the Northern Marches and will arrive in time for the wedding’s day.”

It was extremely fascinating to see all the multitude of feelings expressed by Calla Rowan’s visage and gestures. There was despair, rage, anger, betrayal...and after a minute or silence reading and reading the letter, there was a tear at the edge of her left eye. It was immediately removed and her traits became stone-like.

“Do you want to know the reason I wanted to be betrothed to the Florent or the Tarly Heir?” Her voice had lost all anger, and for a moment Margaery didn’t know what to think about this change. As such, it was Desmera who answered the question.

“You wanted a husband who didn’t care about being a cuckold,” and yes, this had been her reasoning too. “Tarly is always speaking of his wonderful machines and Alekyne interests have never been with women.”

A humourless chuckle answered Desmera’s words.

“No, I chose them because you are going to lose.” The disgraced Heiress of Goldengrove stood from her chair, not departing of her emotionless expression. “House Tyrell has shackled itself to the corpse of a dragon and you are all going to fall into the abyss with it. Have fun with your Crown Prince, Margaery. I heard he’s bedding five different women each night.”

No more words were spoken and Calla Rowan marched out, neither asking leave nor giving any sign she had been in presence of persons of higher station than hers. It could have been a dignified march, but the breeze in the Grey Gardens was showing in a limpid manner how lightly clothed she was.

Her cousin waited for her invitee to have disappeared before she scoffed.

“You are going to lose,” the imitation was not perfect, but Margaery and Desmera had a good laugh. “Like this stupid whore understands anything which does not include selling her body.” The daughter of the Master of the Arbor did not spit on the ground, but the envy was definitely there. “We have the biggest fleet of the Seven Sectors assembled one jump away from here, you are going to be Queen and soon the Lannisters are going to be humbled. If she can’t understand this, she really deserves her new husband.”

Margaery nodded in approval. The alliance of the Crown and the Reach Sectors had now the military strength to crush all opposition and their influence at court had never been stronger.

“I completely agree, but in all fairness I must recognise Calla has at least been useful to point a major problem.”

“That Lord Tarly and Lord Florent are not married, I take it?” As Margaery confirmed it with a simple smile, Desmera made a concerned gesture with her right hand.

“Absolutely, those two Houses are the loudest voices against us.” The rest of the Reach Sector was completely obedient before the Highgarden-Arbor-Oldtown alliance. Right now, Brightwater Keep and Horn Hill were the only sources of opposition to their power inside the Reach. Unity of purpose to win the Game of Thrones had never been closer.

“I suppose Lady Olenna has taken steps to remedy to this?”

“Indeed,” Margaery smiled while watching the Grey Gardens in all their greenness continue around them their peaceful vigil. “Indeed.”

**Samwell Tarly, 09.07.300AAC, Horn Hill System**

“I have to do what?”

Until his dying breath, Sam would swear he had not shrieked after the sentence had been spoken. He was the Lord of Horn Hill, the son of the great war-hero Lord Randyll Tarly, who had given his life to kill the treacherous Usurper Robert Baratheon.

He didn’t shriek like a little girl. He just manifested his surprise loudly and vigorously, yes it sounded better in his own head.

“Mother, there must be a mistake,” he hated how his voice was trembling when it had been so assured moments ago. But Sam couldn’t control it. Give him a speech including engines, fusion reactors, laser weapon conception and the construction of orbital defences, and he could recite it with his eyes closed. But when it came to anything else...he was a bit cowardly. Not much, but the world outside his research and development labs, simulations rooms and mechanical engineering stations was a bit too frightening and bloodthirsty to his taste. Sam enjoyed designing new technological marvels. He couldn’t say the same thing about politics and the game of influence and backstabbing between the different Noble Houses. “I never said I wanted to marry anyone.”

His mother smiled, but he could recognise the frustration behind it.

“Evidently someone at Highgarden disagrees, my son.” The choice of the words gave him pause. Throwing a new look at the fragile sample of expensive and old-fashioned paper in his hands, Samwell could see the officials seals on the lower part of the document included a very infamous rose symbols with a lot of thorns. The message did not come from Lord Mace Tyrell or one of his councillors, it was the Queen of Thorns herself who had written it – or at the very least dictated it.

“But mother...why do they want me to marry *Asha Greyjoy* of all people?” His question was uncomfortably close to a whine, but he ignored it.

And his mother chuckled. Chuckled!

“Maybe they saw you speaking with Mathis’ daughter at the last ball and decided there was no reason for you to remain unwed any longer.”

Samwell blushed, the embarrassment seizing his entire body. He knew this had been too true to be good: girls never listened to him when he attended formal receptions, festivals and balls. They never cared about his inventions, the new class of ships of the line which had emerged from the Horn Hill shipyards. The girls found him fat. They wanted to hear poetry and songs, but he didn’t manage to utter one verse without becoming a gibbering mess and he was clumsy when it came to play music instruments. He didn’t understand the girls, they might as well be a foreign species for all he understood them. And he really didn’t like Lady Margaery, her cousins and her massive court. He may be the youngest Rear-Admiral in the engineering hierarchy, but the sole preoccupation the daughter of Mace Tyrell and her little army cared about was spreading ugly rumours on him and his cousins. Alekyne had suffered a lot last year when they had spread rumours he loved men.

Calla had been different. She had stayed when he had told her the very concept of the battlecruisers championed by House Fossoway was a complete mistake. The Rowan Heiress had debated with him for a few hours, giving him genuinely her opinion and correcting him when he made a mistake. And she was rather pretty, he had to admit. In hindsight, Sam figured, it had probably been too good to be true. No good deed goes unpunished and all of that crap.

“I can disobey,” he received a very firm stare from his mother and was forced to look away. “Mother, Asha Greyjoy has killed the last two men the Tyrells tried to wed her to. Everyone knows that! The first didn’t get to the altar, and the second died before the bedding! I don’t want to be the third!”

“The marriage will take place here at Horn Hill. You will be surrounded constantly by hundreds of guards,” replied his mother in a patient tone she gave him when she believed he behave like a spoiled child. “And let’s be no mistake, my son, this union is not a suggestion. Should we fail to comply, there would be unpleasant economic consequences for House Tarly.”

For a second Sam wanted to scream and rail against House Tyrell. After all the loyalty his father had given them, these up-jumped stewards were really prompt to throw him under the tank column. Oh sure, they had built a big statue of his father and given his name to several streets here and there. But when the gains and the titles were ready to be shared, House Tarly and the Houses which had bled at the Trident were put on the sidelines. Lord Mace and his friends were generous like that.

“And the dowry?” He asked in a last attempt to escape his doom. “House Greyjoy has lost everything in its failed Rebellion, including their money and their warships.” He could care less about it, being the Lord and Master of a stellar system where two billion and nine hundred million souls lived, but it was the kind of argument his mother appreciated. “Lady Asha Greyjoy may be the daughter of a Noble House officially, but the Ironborn Houses do not rule their systems anymore. In status and in wealth, House Greyjoy is a fifth-rate Knight House, not a Noble House like House Tarly, Florent or Oakheart!”

“Lord Harlaw has graciously accepted to give his niece a dowry worthy of her noble birth.”

His mother made a side-step to observe the stars and the warships on the other side of the supraglass bay.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t an insult, Samwell.” For the first time, he heard in his mother’s voice something like bitterness. “But you will have to accept.”

Truly he hated politics and the ‘Game of Thrones’ the uncountable legions of boys and girls of Highgarden loved to play. Unfortunately, he had to curb the chin, bend his knee and play along. His father would have said ‘no’, but Sam was afraid and he didn’t have a lot of allies.

“What happened to Calla?” Sam was not aware of all the considerations behind the Tyrell spider spinning its web behind the Lord Paramount of the Reach. But he knew the young Tyrells loved mocking him.

“She is to be married to Lord Peake before the end of the month.” Despite himself, the Lord of Horn Hill felt a cold shiver on his neck. The Bard Guild could play the *Rains of Castamere* all they wanted for everyone to have in mind the brutality of the lions, but the Tyrells were as dangerous in their own way. Marrying a young woman to a Lord twenty or thirty years her senior...Margaery Tyrell was really a bitch.

Not that he would ever call her like that in public or in private, Samwell Tarly wanted to keep his head.

“Fine, I will graciously accept the bride suggested by our esteemed friends of Highgarden.” Sam said it with all the enthusiasm he could muster – and it wasn’t a lot. In fact, it sounded to his ears like his funeral eulogy. “When is the marriage supposed to take place?”

Dreadful question and he wasn’t eager to know the answer.

“One month,” and just like this the urge to take a starship and depart for the Free Planets had never been higher. This was not cowardice, not exactly. It was...self-preservation.

“One month,” he repeated morosely before leaving the hall and returning to the test-trials of the new SAM-3000 missile (called for Superiority Anti-Ship Missile, not because he wanted something with his first name). Maybe he could console himself with the satisfaction of humiliating the Javelins AS-21 equipping the Tyrell warships...

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*For forty long years, the Targaryens boasted countless times that they exterminated the Blackfyre usurpers. From the bridges of their golden flagships they took comfort that Maelys the Monstrous had perished as their control over Westeros slipped away. Even as the Usurper’s Rebellion sapped the very foundations of the realm, several Crown Lords and loyalist supporters of the Iron Throne shared their relief the descendants of Daemon Blackfyre were no longer there to exploit the situation to their advantage.*

*Forty years and the gaze of the Iron Throne turned its attention away from Tyrosh and the Golden Company, the two institutions harbouring the remnants of its mortal enemies. There were far bigger problems in Westeros to deal with, a lot of them created by the very actions of Aegon the Conqueror’s blood.*

*It was a terrible error. As the Seven Sectors prepared for the cruellest of all civil wars, the Black Dragon was once more reborn from its ashes to strike again...*

Extract from the Last Dance of the Dragons by Maester Ulrich, 328AAC.

**Queen Rhaenyra Blackfyre, 11.07.300AAC, Tyrosh System**

Nobody spoke on the conference room of the *Black Dragon* as ‘King Victarion’ was escorted away.

Rhaenyra could safely say this was not a mark of respect from her allies seated on the lavishly decorated seats around the great holographic image of the Seven Sectors.

“This man is going to be trouble,” declared Admiral Salladhor Saan. For once, the flamboyant Lysene was harbouring a very serious expression. “I know you told us we didn’t need to trust this Ironborn, Arch-Dominarch, but...”

“But you wonder if he will even bother reading the plan I’ve given to him.” The young woman finished, inwardly a bit irritated the Essossi continued to call her by this name. She was an Admiral, damn it! She was also a Queen but for a reason which continued to escape her, the men and women under her command had decided to give her a Valyrian rank long abandoned by the military forces of the Free Planets.

“Yes, Arch-Dominarch,” on a regular navy, the self-styled ‘Prince of the Narrow Void’ would have been shot by a firing squad for his indecent uniform. The silver suit he wore was of the latest fashion, which meant everyone could admire the muscles underneath. The brilliant green cap adorned with feathers of exotic birds, the green belt and the high white boots completed his unique appearance.

“For all his claims of kingship and legitimate claims, Victarion Greyjoy is nothing but a brute thirsting for revenge.”

“Don’t underestimate him,” she warned the Lysene. In every strategy class and hired tutoring she had received in the last decade, Volantene, Lysene, Pentoshi, Myrish and veteran sellswords all agreed on one point: underestimating someone was a fast and sure path to the grave. The younger brother of ‘King’ Balon was not unduly alarming her, but she had taken precautions against him nonetheless. “Victarion Greyjoy, for all his rudeness and his total lack of manners, has managed to stay alive and expand his pirate fleet.”

“Yes, but he is the only thing holding this rag-tag group of murderers, rapists and outcasts together,” the flawless visage of Admiral Iovinos Helloquo of the Volantene Navy was not inspiring great confidence. “He is also so intoxicated with experimental drugs that I can’t help but wonder how many years he has left before his body breaks.”

And it was a Volantene who was talking. Iovinos was fuming and ingesting a lot of addicting substances millions of Essossi and Westerosi alike would never have tried unless the alternative was death. Most of the drugs were perfectly legal at Volantis and its tributary systems, but it was something she was not going to emulate on Westerosi planets.

“Your arguments are noted.” The silver-haired claimant of the Blackfyre line affirmed. “Fortunately, the usefulness of Victarion Greyjoy is not that critical to our plans.”

“You convinced the Archon to sell him at a ridiculous price fifty battle-spheres and five flag-dreadnaughts, my Queen.” The voice of Harry Strickland was unimpressive, and the body it was associated to was not the one of a bodybuilder to say the least. It had needed months of persuading for the Captain-General to join her cause and four major battles against sellsail opponents. But in the end, he had capitulated before his men rose in revolt and nominated her to replace him.

There was some part of her regretting it, but Strickland remained an excellent logistical officer and an endless source of information on certain subjects. He had also a spy network of appreciable size which did not depend on the one of her Uncle. Rhaenyra trusted Varys with her life, something she could not say for the Captain-General, but their men did not operate in the same social classes.

“Old units that were about to be retired from service and scrapped,” she affirmed, and it was the truth after all. “Besides, the campaign of liberation led by the legitimate Iron King needs to be something credible. If I had not boosted his numbers with these warships, the only outcome waiting for him once he went back home would have been an explosive death in the first battle.”

Oh, the Ironborn would have fought, that she had no doubt about it. But they were between ten and fourteen ships of the line spread on eight stellar systems to defeat. And Victarion Greyjoy’s assets were very limited to deal with these major threats. He had gained the *Storm of Iron*, a Lysene super-cruiser slightly superior in length to Westerosi battlecruisers. There was also the *Wings of Revenge*, a Volantene strike carrier. But one of his two remaining longships had required heavy repairs – and given the different blueprints she was not that convinced the Tyroshi experts had managed to fix everything. The rest of his units were not suited to a prolonged campaign, pirate vessels or light units were built for skirmishes between corsairs.

The flag-dreadnaughts and the battle-spheres would change the equation. These units were basically the Tyroshi equivalent of ships of the line and heavy cruisers, giving the Ironborn an exponential increase of firepower. They would be still significantly outnumbered, but if Victarion fought smart, he had a chance of liberating his home. It was not a good one, and when the unavoidable counter-attack came, the ‘King’ was going to be monumentally screwed, but it was a chance.

“I want Victarion Greyjoy to set the Iron Sector aflame and neutralise the Deep Space forces the Targaryens have sent there, making them unable to intervene for months. I do not think the Ironborn will be able to win, but they will force the Reach and the West to send more forces to crush the uprisings.” She explained with a smile to her allies.

Her parents had given her a lot of books on the Ironborn culture and while some bias was unavoidable, Rhaenyra had been sick when she had had a clear idea of what the Greyjoys had truly reigned upon. The recent massacres were horrible of course, but the bloody fist used to annihilate the Greyjoy Rebellion had been perfectly justified.

“I am impressed by your willingness to plunge an entire Sector in fire and blood,” Saan sent her a very funny look...unless he was trying to see her breasts under her black-silver uniform. In this case she would have to find some light punishment for him...again.

“The Iron Sector is already a huge disaster,” if she had tried to do worse, Rhaenyra was not sure she would have succeeded given how badly the Iron Throne had handed this mess in the last years. “I have some plans to deal with it once I will be on the throne, but for now it will have to wait.”

She turned back her head to the Volantene Admiral.

“Have we other important topics to deal with today?”

“Just one,” and Iovinos Helloquo genuinely looked happy. In the next seconds, someone in this system was definitely going to be very sorry or her name wasn’t Rhaenyra Blackfyre. “We caught a spy a few hours ago. He was on your ‘list of interest’ and we consequently arrested him instead of spacing him out of an airlock.”

“His name?”

“Jorah Mormont.”

“Oh, him,” It was Uncle Varys who had advised her to be careful of this Northerner. The only bannersman of Winterfell to have betrayed his allegiance for a Hightower girl and the man had not even had the courage to fall on his blade when his betrayal became known. “Future negotiations with the North are going to be easier if we can give the Starks his head...”

**Lord Eddard Stark, 13.07.300AAC, Winterfell System**

Once upon a time, councils of war - especially for conflicts on a galactic-wide scale - were quite serious affairs.

Eddard did not know when and where it had begun to unravel. He truly didn’t know and he was sure the Old Gods were laughing at his predicament. The Lord of Winterfell wouldn’t have believed Taranos, Sironia, Abnobia, Nantosueltos, Roboros, Camulia, Dispatos, Arausia and Borrumos had a deep sense of humour, but as improbable events succeeded to improbable events, a divine joke was not something he was ready to dismiss out of hand anymore.

To be honest, Eddard longed for a day where all this surreal issues disappeared and House Stark had nothing more problematic on its list of enemies than the degenerate product of incest known as the Rapist.

It would be quite a pleasure to take his fleet to the galactic south, defeat the Targaryen fleet and remove the head of the ‘King’ and those idiots enough to follow him.

There was something in his heart telling him it was not going tomorrow.

An inhuman race of monsters powerful enough to scour planets and animate the dead of all living beings was on its way. The corpse of an ice dragon was lying on the snow of one of his planets. An egg of the same species was on the table in front of him, stabilised by a magical creation of the Green Priests. His children had all received direwolves pups for companions, and after being buried under the paperwork by his own subjects and the priesthood, he had capitulated and accepted the unavoidable.

Now he had the same direwolf eager for steaks and caresses following him everywhere – and yes it included the room he was present at this moment. In turn, it meant he had to keep every time with him two sworn swords to make sure the irritating animal didn’t manifest his enthusiasm in a destructing way. Or cause more chaos than whatever norm the direwolves were accustomed to. Because if by some mysterious turn of fate and blessing of the Old Gods ‘Dragon’s Doom’ – a name endorsed by a majority vote of the Winterfell population – behaved like a well-civilised pet, it was still a direwolf with a respectable size and an incredible appetite. The latter was more commented on the holo-net than the former, strangely.

Catelyn had laughed a lot...until their return at Winterfell and the mother of the direwolves’ pups began to follow her everywhere. Everywhere. Thanks to the privileges of nobility, House Stark had been the Kings in the North for untold generations and as such had built huge ancestral fortresses. Winterfell Castle had wide corridors and other avenues, an architectural feat he had never been more thankful than he was now. It would have cost him a fortune to rebuild Winterfell to the ‘direwolf standard’ otherwise.

Abandoning these thoughts which conveyed how insane the Northern Sector was becoming these last days, Eddard Stark took his seat at the end of the rectangular table and gave one or two glances at his grey uniform to see if the contacts with his ‘pet’ hadn’t left too many fur on it. To his relief, the answer was negative and as he watched around the table, twenty Green priests representing the nine deity cults of the North met his eyes without flinching.

“I have a general briefing in two hours with the commanders of First Fleet and I don’t want to be late, so this meeting will have to be brief.” The Lord Paramount of the North said to the men who had become his magical experts by default. “The Sword?”

It was the Priest-Knight of Taranos Bur who answered his question.

“We have sealed this abomination in one of our renovated fortresses and spent hundreds of hours drawing runes here before we transport them to build new walls of containment. For the short-term, Her Sword is sealed and not able to influence any mortal’s soul.”

“But the Others know it is somewhere in the Winterfell System,” interjected a second Green Priest harbouring the symbol of the hourglass, making him a servant of Roboros, the Old God of Time. “It is highly unlikely they will be able to locate it more precisely if they do not come in person, but we can’t underestimate the problem. It is Her Sword and it will attract Her Servants. We can build the strongest defences known to us and bury it in the entrails of the earth, but I fear the danger will come from outside.”

Eddard ignored the headache he felt hearing these news. Fortunately, he had always intended to leave a strong garrison at Winterfell, both on the space and ground side, so it should be enough to deter the monsters as long as the Wall defences, the Night’s Watch and the Northern forces about to be deployed held their positions.

“We have new sensors and new platforms, hopefully they will be sufficient to prevent another Fall of Pyke.” Not that he intended to keep praying for luck. There were other research programs on the way and each day passed gave the Northern Navy a bit more time to become stronger and get ready for what was coming. “I suppose that except as a lighthouse for the Others the Sword is impossible to use?”

“I would not use this thing even if this was the last option available to us,” the hate transmitted by the only Priest of Dispatos, Old God of Death, was not hidden at all. “This relic was forced in madness, hate, frost and insanity. Nothing good can come from it. Better the galaxy be consumed in flames and ice than let this cursed relic touch mortal hands.”

“I am not sure I would go that far,” told Bur, receiving a glare from his colleague. “But unless all other possibilities of victory have disappeared, I agree we can’t use the Sword. I’m rather worried people who don’t have our perspective and our knowledge will not see it this way, though.”

“If the Abominable Relics are dispersed across this galaxy, we are in big trouble...” whispered one of the Green Priests though it was difficult to say who.

“How probable it is the Enemy has already intercepted them with its ice dragons?”

“Impossible to say but judging by the result of its attack against the tree-ship...”

Eddard let the discussion continue for a few minutes before interrupting them anew when it became clear it was leading nowhere.

“How many Relics are we speaking about?”

“We have the Sword and the ninth relic is not exactly...transportable,” a middle-aged woman worshipping Nantosueltos replied. “That leaves the Horn, the Crown, the Ring, the Mirror-Orb, the Keys and the Grave unaccounted, if the Children have truly managed to steal them all.”

Seven cursed artefacts were somewhere in this galaxy, and by the grim faces his advisors were showing, these things were probably as dangerous as the Sword, not less. If he met the genius behind this idea, Eddard was going to have a few words for him and it would not begin by ‘thanks for your help’.

“Are there any reliable methods to detect them?” He asked, knowing by experience the next words were not likely going to bring hope.

“No and the existing methods are terribly dangerous for the caster.” Yes, he hated being right. “However the cursed artefacts are not exactly subtle, Lord Stark. The moment someone begins using them, it will be all over the news from Sunspear to Last Hearth in days.”

“And it will be beyond our ability to stop...” rumbled pessimistically one of the Priests.

The next minutes were used to prepare the contingencies. The Lord of Winterfell knew as he signed them they would not probably be enough. Agents were going to be trained to recognise the cursed artefacts and deployed across Westeros to ensure they did not fall in bad hands but they would be less than a thousand of them and the galaxy was a big place. Furthermore, should their intervention be required, it was going to be far behind enemy lines and with people far too ready to silence Northern spies.

He would have done to do more. He could not. There were too many resources absorbed by the war preparations, not enough Green Priests and too little time left to change his priorities. When it came down to it, he ruled a Sector of thirty billion souls with a Gross Systemic Product extremely low compared to the Western Sector. And he could not afford to accumulate the debts like some Southerner Houses were so fond of.

For a minute he mused about the measures he could have financed if he had Tywin Lannister’s treasury and Mace Tyrell’s manpower available to him. It was a nice dream...but it was all what it was: a dream. The other Sectors were not interested in reinforcing the Breach-in-the-Stars. At best, the Lords wrote back excuses and apologies, telling him in long and complicated words ‘later’. At worst, they didn’t write back.

They were all busy arming themselves for their next war and dividing future spoils. The notion of duty was unknown to them.

“And the egg?” He demanded, pushing aside for the moment his opinion of the Houses governing systems south of the Neck sub-sector.

“A powerful greenseer has linked the threads of fate of the dragon inside with your niece. For what purpose, we don’t know.”

Dragon’s Doom howled behind him, abandoning for a few seconds the illusion he was an extremely large grey carpet.

“Like with the direwolves of your children, refusing the bond is...not advisable,” a Priestess of Sironia with long dark hairs affirmed. “This is a powerful magical blessing and trying to break it would hurt both parties.”

It was hard not to grit his teeth and remain composed. The more he learned about it, the less he liked magic. Not because he didn’t trust the Green Priests, far from it: all the women and the men around the table had done their best to explain the intricacies of their abilities and they were loyal to the North.

The problem was that magic could not be easily quantified and the Order of the Green Priests was small and lacked power to deal against the greater threats. Magic did not answer rules like spatial battles did. And it was increasingly evident certain events were manipulated behind the scenes by unknown sorcerers and certainly not in his people’s best interests. Supernatural skills were akin to unstable world-destroying bombs: you knew the power was real, but there was no manual and you never knew when it was going to blow up in your face.

“Very well,” after all, the method to verify their judgement was rather simple...though the cost was likely to be significant for him and his family. “Deactivate your protections around the egg...and tell my niece to join us.”

The shimmering veil around the sapphire-coloured object vacillated before disappearing completely and the temperature became fresher. Not enough to become truly unpleasant, but a few Priests adjusted their green cloaks and murmured incantations in the Old Tongue. The direwolf in the room became more agitated, and had to be given a piece of meat for calm to come back.

Ten seconds later, and his niece came in. As always when he saw her, Eddard was reminded of Lyanna. True, Lyanna had never had silver hairs – apart from her time in the snowball battles where she had been covered in white – but the visage and the grey eyes were the same. She and Arya had very close traits and it would be a lie the two had not become closer in the last years.

Today Baela was wearing the grey uniform with the white insignia of a Lieutenant. The white bird under the Stark sigil was indicated her specialty was in communications.

Slowly, Eddard stood and moved around the table, while Bur took the egg to place it in front of them.

“Are you sure?” He asked to the girl who he considered one of his daughters no matter what the official records said.

“The call is getting more pressing every night,” the grey eyes were like those of Lyanna, determined and not a light of fear in them. “There was no direwolf to bond with me because I was not destined to be tied with the pack.”

He could just offer a gesture of comfort and a poor smile at this. The fur balls were curious and extremely popular, not having one when the rest of the family had them was not a pleasant thing.

“There will be several Priests with you at Moat Cailin to watch over you.” A firm gesture prevented any objection. “Everything I told your siblings about direwolves is magnified with this egg. This is not something you can wake up one day and abandon because you do not like it anymore. Magic aside, it will make you a symbol and a threat. Spiritually, it will be your partner and your animal counterpart.”

He did not turn his head to acknowledge it, but he knew when Arya and Joanna entered without a noise followed by the rest of his family, Catelyn and the mother direwolf in tow.

“I am ready, Father.” Despite is worry, he felt a burst of pride in his chest and the Baela removed her slim grey gloves.

She touched the egg.

For long and endless seconds, nothing happened. Somehow, Eddard prayed inwardly the Green Priests had been wrong and the dragon egg was going to stay as silent as for the Northerners who had been chosen to transport it away from its discovery place.

A futile hope instantly dashed as the moment after he had thought this, large cracks appeared on the sapphire surface and noises of scratching were heard. The fissures soon broke the egg from top to bottom and a muzzle rapidly emerged. The effect was immediate around the room. All the Green Priests without exception seemed to be surrounded by shimmering auras. The temperature became even colder and he could not stop a shiver.

From the now thoroughly destroyed egg, a cat-sized reptile was crawling out. Its scales had the delicate shade of the sapphires, the pupils of its eyes were silver and its small wings were of a lighter blue.

The baby dragon shrieked; a sound which was both wonderful and terrible. It was something which had not been heard for more than a hundred years and the rare books he had read on the subject did not do it justice. As it was not enough, all the direwolves in the room howled – or in the case of the pups, yapped – and the newborn ice dragon jumped into the arms of his mistress for protection.

“I name you Icefyre,” said Baela in the middle of the infernal ruckus.

Eddard smiled and ordered his guards to go find more meat to come the turbulent animals while he opened the reserve where he locked his alcohol in this room. He had a feeling he was going to need a drink before the hour was over.

**Tyrion Lannister, 15.07.300AAC, Casterly Rock System**

War Room Sixty-Two was not the favourite meeting place of the Generals and the Admirals of the Western Sector. First, it was small. At maximum capacity, you could invite three hundred people and it would be incredibly crowded, with senior officers forced to press themselves against the massive tactical display representing Westeros. Secondly, the lack of decorations and comfort tended to offend his Lord Father’s greatest bannersmen and most influential cousins. Thirdly and it was the crucial factor, it was one thousand metres below the ground and roughly eighty kilometres away from the great headquarters of the Army and Navy on this planet. It was also next to Archive One-Four-Leopard-Tiger, a succession of rooms built for the sole and only purpose of gathering data on the Ibbenese Navy.

The number of conflicts between the Rock and this distant Essossi nation was exactly zero, and this Archive was only opened by the maintenance teams once per month. As such, the possibility of a curious noble or ambitious officer walking by was infinitesimal.

It was good, because the participants of the reunion today were working with very sensitive information. The kind they couldn’t present in front of a holo-news commentator and hope to get away without answering some pointed questions.

Too bad his proposal to establish a whorehouse near it had been firmly rejected by higher powers. The wine cellars were also ridiculously small, by the way. Ah, this was the moment he was supposed to go back to the tactical display, no?

The systems of the Western Sector were shining brilliantly with red lights, each one symbolising warships, army formations, fortresses and other existing assets. Unfortunately, they were utterly dwarfed – what a hilarious pun – by the thousands of green, brown and golden lights representing the Reach, River and Crown military forces.

No need to be a military genius to realise they were facing an unfavourable rapport of force. And it was if he felt like telling it in a polite manner. Otherwise, the words ‘we’re completely buggered’ would have been out of his lips at the first opportunity.

“When will the next wave of Reach hulls come out of the shipyards?” asked Ser Addam Marbrand. In his perfect red uniform, the young Vice-Admiral of Ashemark looked the Warrior Himself but his traits were worried this morning. For good reason, Tyrion knew.

“In eight months the battlecruisers they build at Westbrook, Highgarden and Cider Hall will be commissioned.” He answered with the patience of someone who had already explained it to nine different committees. Father Above, he needed a drink. “The other major shipyards are a bit behind, except Brightwater Keep and Horn Hill which have different rotation programs. Their new ships of the line are still fourteen months away from completion.”

“Will they be able to crew them adequately?” The visage of Field Lion Marshal Damion Lannister was sceptical. “I do not profess to be a specialist in naval matters, but I know of the difficulties Ser Kevan and the Board of Personnel have to find the hundreds of thousand men for our warships. The Reach Navy is already outnumbering us more than two-to-one, and they want to build more?”

The third and last member of their little conference shook the head to show his incredulity.

“The sources of Intelligence all tell us many obsolete hulls will be retired from service along with second-rate warships.” Of course it wouldn’t be a huge help, because both the old and new warships of the Reach were extremely manpower-intensive to manoeuvre. And the Crown classes were not exactly cheap in that department when he thought about it.

“So we need to strike them before they are ready.”

Tyrion snorted loudly.

“I admire your enthusiasm, Ser Addam, but I don’t think we have the forces to launch such an attack.” He underlined with his small fingers the different systems which would have to be attacked for any plan to slow down the monumental build-up. “The capital ships are dispersed between Highgarden, Westbrook, Goldengrove, Oldtown, Cider Hall, Bitterbridge, Ambrose, Honeyholt, the Arbor and Old Oak plus a few others. And it bears to mention these systems are defended by squadrons largely outnumbering the entire Western Navy. Fighting the Tyrells in their own backyard is not a plan filling me with joy.”

His Lord Father should be so proud, he had not uttered sentences like ‘in this case we’re utterly fucked’, ‘this plan has so few chances to survive I would prefer trying my chance against the Beast in duel’ or ‘what sort of venom your mother poured in your mouth when you were a kid’.

“I know,” Addam looked like Jaime when he made this painful admission. The two of them were never happy to admit there was something they couldn’t deal with. “But waiting for the Reach and the Crown Prince to begin the war on their terms is not something I find particularly endearing.”

It was remarkable that no one made the slightest sign of pious denegation. Initially, the thousands of warships had been a large project to crush the Rebels of the Usurper’s Rebellion sixteen years ago. But in the meanwhile, goals and alliances had changed. Now it was not for a war against Winterfell they were all preparing for, but a terrible and total conflict against their former allies.

“Assuming the war was declared this week, what would Mace Tyrell and our beloved King Rhaegar be able to send against us?” And yes, the irony was dripping in Damion’s voice when he spoke the word ‘beloved’.

“Ah...” Tyrion looked at a few data-slates purely for the appearances before giving the numbers. “If we combine the numbers of the Reach, Crown, Vale, Storm and River loyalists we have correctly identified, we arrive to the following numbers for the capital warships: nine super-battleships, two hundred and eighty-one ships of the line, thirty-eight armoured cruisers, five hundred and fifty-four battlecruisers and forty-one fleet carriers.”

It did not count of course the hundreds of heavy cruisers, light cruisers, scout cruisers, light carriers and escort carriers in their enemies’ arsenal. And as bad as it was, the new constructions the Tyrells were building as he spoke could double their effectives.

Despite himself, he felt something awful in his stomach when he uttered these numbers. The mightiest space engagement of the Usurper’s War – the Battle of the Trident, in case you had been living under a rock for the last half-century – had involved no more than a hundred ships of the line on both sides and the devastation it had caused was still studied by millions of amateur tacticians.

“And the land forces?” The Army Marshal knew by his groan that he was not going to love it.

“If they are planning for a total mobilisation,” and the Reach Lords probably would if the war lasted more than a couple of months, “they can muster the next best thing to nine billion men to storm our greatest fortresses.”

The Board of Strategy and Planning, of which he was the second-in-command, had made all the necessary investigations and they had been verified countless times to see the analysts hadn’t been hallucinating. Sadly, they were not. The magnitude of the sword prepared to crush the West was somewhat awe-inspiring...as long as you weren’t on the receiving side.

“So as long as we are on the defensive, this war is unwinnable?” Addam demanded for confirmation, and Tyrion did it with a nod.

“Our supporters in the River Sector are Lords in their own right, but they can’t unite their forces easily. Together the Freys, the Brackens and the Mootons could present a credible threat but House Darry will intervene to prevent it.”

Together, they were likely buggered. Alone...they were going to be annihilated and administered a thorough spanking.

“In this case, I propose a new war plan called Vanguard,” the Marbrand Vice-Admiral spoke. “I don’t think I need to explain why our strategy to push by Deep Den is unadvisable.”

The two Lannisters grimaced at the same time, although Tyrion was ready to bet his was the uglier of the two. The frontier stellar systems the River Sector had with the Reach had surrendered to the influence of House Tyrell with alarming alacrity when their emissaries arrived. Castlewood, Pemford, Atranta and Lychester: four systems which could not be trusted to choose neutrality when the fleets of the West wanted a safe path across the stars. In the case of Atranta, it was even worse: House Vance had not been forced to dismantle its orbital defences and had promised to send a sizeable percentage of its fleet to help their cousins of Wayfarer’s Rest. They were visiting the Riverrun System as he spoke, a shield of steel able to rush wherever the Lannister forces attacked.

When one added to the fact the planets of Houses Chelsted, Cressey Stokeworth and Bywater were completely unreliable...the Deep Den-King’s Landing travel had never been more dangerous.

They were other plans nonetheless. The current war plan his Lord Father and Uncle Kevan were tabling on right now was called Red Claws in the Barrel. For the brilliant observers who noticed this name didn’t mean anything, congratulations you had won a warehouse full of Duff Beer barrels.

“And what is the concept of this...Vanguard?” The most infamous dwarf of Westeros – he had worked very hard to gain this title – asked while opening a bottle of wine and filling a golden cup with it. He had a feeling he was soon going to need it. For a reason he had found no explication for, Casterly Rock was full of staff and field officers who all believed the ideas in their thick skulls were the miraculous solution to beat the unending waves of the Reach.

“The first move is fairly straightforward,” affirmed Ser Addam, looking recognisant Tyrion hadn’t dismissed his plan before he had the chance to explain it. “We attack the system of Wayfarer’s Rest with one battle-squadron of our new Victory class and support elements.”

“This should give you, what six ships of the line and twelve battlecruisers against two River ships of the line and four battlecruisers?” There was genuine curiosity in the Marshal’s voice now.

“Yes,” agreed curtly the Heir of House Marbrand. “We will go straight after the planet, making sure the forces of House Vance have no choice but to fight us head-on no matter how bad the rapport of force is. And it will be very bad for them. Their forts and stationary defences are a shadow of what they were twenty years ago. My simulations give us complete victory and a final surrender from the surviving leadership of House Vance in less than fifteen hours.”

Tyrion taped a few commands on the mentioned region of the River Sector. He studied it for a few seconds before opening his mouth again.

“You’re trying to execute a variant of Operation Traitorous Shield,” it was an affirmation, not a question.

The Vice-Admiral bowed slightly his head in approval.

“Indeed, though it differs on one critical point. Traitorous Shield plans for only House Tully warships to come to the rescue of their Vance allies. With Vanguard we bring enough carriers and tow several small forts in orbits to give the illusion we really intend to bring the system inside our sphere of defence.”

It was not exactly difficult to guess how of the River Lords would react to this outrageous move. It was Damion Lannister who voiced it first.

“You want them to abandon the protection of Riverrun and charge to save Wayfarer’s Rest.” A shrug came from the Lannister serving in the Army. “The River fleet has lost a lot of its best elements and they don’t have a commander like the Blackfish to help them. It might work. But...” Brown icons moved towards Riverrun before doing the jump to Wayfarer’s Rest on the display.

“But our commander would be at a severe numerical disadvantage,” finished Marbrand. “If the situation demands it, it will be a grand alliance of House Tully, Piper, Deddings, Goodbrook and surely Vance of Atranta coming for our squadron.”

Tyrion had seen the hard numbers enough time to recite them in his sleep.

“Edmure Tully and his friends can gather within a week twelve ships of the line, twenty-four battlecruisers, hundreds of smaller cruisers and nearly three thousand starfighters. I suppose you don’t intend to fight them with a small task force which will have already taken losses?”

House Vance of Wayfarer’s Rest may have an empty-headed idiot as Heir, but given the simple choice offered to him, he was going to go down fighting and he had still teeth to bite. Two ships of the line and four battlecruisers was a respectable amount of firepower.

“No,” the smirk of Vanguard’s was impossible to miss and the tactical display zoomed completely on the Wayfarer’s Rest System. A massive amount of brown warships rushed directly at the red units. The Western warships rapidly changed their formation for a fighting retreat, the River ships pursued...

“They are bait.”

And then the display changed completely as three large formations of Western capital ships dropped their furtive systems and fired. One second, the Tully-allied warships had been triumphing. The next, they were encircled by thirty-six ships of the line in three twelve-strong groups.

The result could not be called anything but a massacre.

The first task force was stopping its false retreat and closed the distance again for the kill. The River ships fought well, but they were in a cauldron of explosions and they had only so many missiles tubes. In fact, knowing the last reports of Intelligence, Tyrion knew Marbrand had perhaps been too pessimistic in his simulation. Fire-control, sensors and missile range on the Royal Gift and Pelican classes – the brand-new ships of the line of the River Sector - were not that good.

The River fleet was torn apart. Due to their acceleration and their course, they could not avoid the Lannister capital ships anymore. The simulated enemy Admiral decided to order the retreat but during long minutes the warships sworn to Riverrun received a nightmarish beating.

Not a single River ship of the line survived and of the twenty-four battlecruisers, a single unit was still fighting. The percentage of survivors running to the Riverrun jump point was higher in the heavy cruisers and their lesser cousins, but ‘better’ did not mean good: three out of four were gone or surrendering.

“If the Tullys and rest of the Houses they can call upon are defeated like this, a third of the River Sector is ours for the taking.” The words of Damion Lannister carried a certain amount of respect.

“Indeed,” a new series of commands was entered on the console and Addam Marbrand continued his presentation. “According to the last reports, fourteen ships of the line represent twenty-seven percent of the River Sector’s strength in their heaviest unit and the numbers are roughly the same for the battlecruisers and he screen.”

The young Vice-Admiral returned the tactical display to an image of the River Sector.

“The Blackwoods and the Mallisters are firmly on the North’s side; that’s seven other ships of the line which are unavailable. Our allies have ten ships of the line to support us and will take the undefended systems in the back. Ten days into the war and the Darry-Whent fleet will be the only force of note able to oppose us in the River Sector.”

Tyrion emptied his cup, savouring the taste of hill flowers in it. Inside, he was to admit the plan was thorough and well-thought. There were some points to redefine or to precise, but overall it was not an unreasonable strategy. Furthermore, the Darry-Whent alliance had always to look at a potential intervention of the North and the Vale. They couldn’t easily deploy galactic-westwards.

Bah, time to play his favourite role of killjoy.

“The destruction of the River Lords space forces is of course something to rejoice in,” he told the other two officers. “But every Lord and his grandmother know we can crush the Tullys at our leisure. Your method, Ser Addam, is one of the best we have at our disposal to deal a crushing blow to Riverrun and the bannersmen still following them.”

Tyrion paused and the silence in the war room was almost deafening.

“No, the problem lies elsewhere. The moment half of our fleet invades the River Sector, the Reach and Crown forces we are supposed to ignore the existence of at Inchfield and High Chelsted will receive the message. Then it will be a matter of weeks before they unite into an invincible armada and force us to choose between an unwinnable battle and a shameful retreat.

We will have taken losses against House Tully and House Vance. We will need to land tens of thousands soldiers to eliminate all resistance at Pinkmaiden, Riverrun, Deddings and Kneeling’s King. We will be in no shape to fight an enemy fleet of one hundred and twenty ships of the line with five super-battleships to lead them. And if the North and the Vale stays at home, it is entirely possible more loyalists will add their strength to the Darrys and jump into the melee.”

In this case, they were royally screwed and the shiver he felt on his skin was not imaginary. For all the disgust he felt at certain members of House Lannister – names would stay out of the text but you could say it began at the very top of the Sector – Tyrion Lannister liked his head where it was. A location it had no guarantee to stay if the precious Crown Prince of King Rhaegar began the war everyone was awaiting since the Fall of Pyke.

“I can’t say I disagree with the plans you’ve just raised, Lord Tyrion.” Well, well, well Marbrand was extremely polite today. The Vice-Admiral must really have worked his strategy before this unofficial meeting. “But it is where phase two of Vanguard begins.”

“Oh?” The second son of Lord Tywin Lannister drank his second wine cup. Seven Hells he was really interested now. “By all means, tell me more.”

“We will make sure enough survivors of the first set of battles survive to have a good idea of our numbers before moving on to the Goodbrook System. This will make our squadrons a very enticing target to whoever is in command of the Reach fleet. And then...we spring the second trap.”

Watching Ser Addam, it was too easy to remember the words of House Marbrand were ‘Burning bright.’

**Lord Varys Tivario, 17.07.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

Sometimes he truly wished there were fewer enemies for him to worry about. It was increasingly difficult to find the time to deal with one threat before the next appeared to perform its special brand of mummery. It was also deeply frustrating. In the early 280s when Lord Tywin had still been hand and Aerys’ madness had been at least slightly manageable, the interval between each crisis had been of several months. Under his son’s rule, the problems were arriving each day and most of the time it was because the madman sitting on the Iron Throne had ordered something without bothering with the political implications or asking the opinion of his Small Council.

Take the recent departure of several members of the Royal family for example. Varys in his position as Master of Whisperers had known about it days before anyone else, but he had been unable to delay their travels. Now he had just to hope the Braavosi were feeling reasonable, the Northerners were not in a mood for a rematch of the Usurper’s Rebellion and Dorne was not thinking about cutting the head of one Kingsguard and send it back for sole answer. There were also the thousands of machinations, little betrayals and murder plots continuing behind the scenes.

As a result yes, he was feeling a little anxious. The plans made with Rhaenyra had been somewhat flexible given the fractious nature of the opposition and how chaotic the next weeks were going to be, but he had not expected Rhaegar to be that stupid. An error he would not make again, he swore. Already new spy devices and human resources had been installed to watch over the crazy prophecy-lover. The first reports they had given were...not encouraging at all.

At a moment where the enemies he was supposed to warn the Council were becoming more competent, this was definitely one thing he would have preferred not to hear. But since he was not like the stupid birds of Essos hiding their heads into the sand to not see the danger coming, he was forced to deal with these massive problems...as much as his powers authorised him to, anyway.

“So the training ground of the ‘Seven Sparrows’ was in the Sloane System.” This was really an unwelcome revelation, but at least now he knew why all his searches in the Crown Sector were leading nowhere.

“Yes, Lord Varys,” replied his subordinate. Today the bland black-haired man answered to the name of Jon but the Chief of the Crown Intelligence Agency was sure his spy could change his looks in a few minutes and disappear forever if given sufficient advance warning. “We were investigating some suspicious weapon deals by smugglers using old River weapons when we stumbled on them. The Seven Sparrows had almost abandoned the facility when we stormed it, though.”

This was somewhat problematic, but less than being deaf and blind to the moves of these fanatics.

“Excellent work nonetheless, it is more information we have managed to gather on the terrorists than the rest of the kingdom.” He would not point it out in front of the Small Council, but a few murmurs here and there would probably light some fires under the backsides of people who had been asleep when they were supposed to do their jobs. “Is there any indication Lord Sloane was involved?”

The Lord of the Sloane System was completely unimportant and had never been included into the formidable rearmament programs ordered by Highgarden and the Iron Throne. The only noteworthy feat about it was that it was both connected to the Tumbleton and Bitterbridge Systems. But if the man was really financing Seven-worshipping killers...

“There was no oral or written proof Lord Sloane was aware there were terrorists training for their illegal activities on his lands.”

The Master of Whisperers nodded, slightly disappointed but not discouraged. He would have to add Lord Sloane to the list of potentially incompetent and/or treacherous nobles then. It wasn’t like the list was empty these days and the man would not be the last to have his name added to it.

“I have not the time to search the entire Reach Sector with the limited resources I have.” He told his senior Agent bluntly. “One way or another, you will have to secure the help of the Reach intelligence services operating in the compromised planets.”

“This is going to be problematic,” and Varys had an unpleasant feeling he was not going to like the news. “The Crown Prince has given new marching orders to his minions when he was at Bitterbridge a week ago. No official agent of any Westerosi intelligence service can operate outside his Sector without Prince Aegon’s seal.”

This was the kind of stupidity which a few years ago would have left him breathless. It was a sad thing that these days he was able to shrug and carry on when the initial moment of surprise had passed.

“In this case, continue your investigation with your cell...but consider this meeting your unofficial notification to begin Operation Bard’s Tale.”

The eyes of his spy widened for a moment before his usual bland visage was restored, proof his subordinate had known the situation had become sufficiently grave the era of operating in everyone’s sight was nearly over.

“We may need some money to compensate the losses of the last operation but apart from this, we are as ready as we can be, my Lord.”

“I will see what I can do,” he promised, inwardly sighing at the difficulty he had to pay correctly his employees when certain corrupt Lords were sinking billions and trillions in gigantic projects of no strategic value. Even if he hadn’t been a Blackfyre loyalist, the pitiful income the Crown Intelligence Agency received would have ensured his swift betrayal of the Targaryen dynasty. “Send your report to the V-4 centre before going silent.”

The black-haired spy nodded and marched out of the casino room they had been meeting in. Varys imitated him two minutes later, after ensuring there would be no holographic or physical evidence he had ever been there. Not that he was overly worried because he would never be back there in his spy persona. Of all the protocols of his profession, the one imposing an intelligence agent to always use a different place was one which made the most sense. It wasn’t convenient to organise in a hurry, but enemies had rarely the occasion to prepare the terrain against you if you were always on the move.

The night was warm and noisy when he came back out an abandoned alley and began a late walk on the Conciliation Street. Despite the late hour, many shops were still opened. King’s Landing City was truly a megalopolis which never slept. It was polluted, ugly, and filled with highborn too ambitious for their own good.

It was going to burn and this time he was not going to stop it. With Bard’s Tale, the majority of the men and women loyal to him were going to disappear in the shadows and their priceless reports would go to House Blackfyre. There was one month left, maybe two in an optimistic scenario, before he abandoned his job.

“It seems so calm,” he whispered to himself as he watched the lights of the skyscrapers and the aerial vehicles in the distance. “But it is always like this before the first shots of a new war.”

There would be no trumpet to herald an apocalyptic conflict in the reality they were living in. There was not going to be a Great Council to deal with the endless grievances of every Sector. The negotiations of last-minute had no chance of achieving anything when the Targaryens had proven their word was worthless.

He could not stop it. All these months of desperate struggling and deals in dark rooms had just delayed the start of the war.

The future was darker than the capital’s blackest nights...and Vaelor Blackfyre smiled.

“At last, we are going to have our revenge...”

**Lieutenant Joanna Snow, 17.07.300AAC, Moat Cailin System**

The view around Moat Cailin was impressive when the Stark transport finished its journey sixteen hours after its translation in-system. The ugly ball of green that most people called ‘Death World’ had not changed at all since their last visit with Father. On the other hand, the number of warships in orbit around it had.

It was still far from the official reviews of the fleet at Winterfell which had taken place over six months ago but no one impartial could watch this gathering of starships and not give it the name ‘fleet’.

First, there were the lords of the void, the ships of the line. Only a single squadron was present, but these eight warships were all of the new *Inferno* class and less than four years old.

In second came the armoured cruisers, the long-range strikers of the wall of battle. Between the *Robert Baratheon*, *Brandon Stark* and *End of Glory* classes, there were thirty-two of them. This was four complete squadrons and according to the latest exercises one squadron had the firepower to annihilate half of the River Navy.

The forty battlecruisers completed the picture of the capital ships. All were all-rounded designs; the *Dreadnought*, *Lyanna Stark*, *Builder* and *Direwolf* classes were hulls built and armed for war.

All in all, it was a solid and flexible capital force able to demolish easily ten times its tonnage when they unavoidably moved in the direction of the galactic south.

When it came to the escorts, the situation was a bit less brilliant. There were only thirty-two heavy cruisers, forty-eight light cruisers and forty scout cruisers. The carrier force was also extremely light, even by Northern standards: one fleet carrier, five light carriers and twenty escort carriers. The North should have been easily able to send twice that many hulls for an eventual revenge against the Iron Throne...if they were not forced to adopt the perilous strategy of fighting a war on two fronts.

Inside her mind, Joanna cursed the Others. Could the undead abominations not have waited twenty years for their grand return? A generation later and Westeros would not be ruled by the Rapist anymore. Ten years and they would have at the very minimum reformed the former River-Vale-Storm-North alliance and brought the force of four entire Sectors against the Enemy.

But it was not to be and whereas the entire Northern Navy had – according to information which was in theory far, far over her Lieutenant pay – thirty-nine ships of the line in active service, only eight had been sent here to create the core of what was going to become the new Twelfth Fleet.

The starships encircling Moat Cailin like a terrible spiral were still a considerable force. The warships aside, there were hundreds of transports, ammunition auxiliaries, hospital ships, mobile reparation yards and every category of supply starship required for a proper fleet train. If the forts, the minesweepers, the asteroid bases and the hundreds of starfighters permanently assigned to the defence of the stellar system were not enough, the Army and the Marines had also huge garrisons ready to give any invader a welcome they would never forget.

Moat Cailin was of course not impossible to take. Joanna had made a few war games with Robb however, and assuming Father and Lord Manderly had not kept any nasty surprises out of the briefings – and they had, she would bet her direwolf and her yearly pay on it – the South would lose a minimum of three hundred ships of the line before the Northern space defences crumbled.

The Lords of Highgarden and Casterly Rock of course had proven they were perfectly ready to drown their enemies in an ocean of Westerner and Reacher blood to win, Pyke had proved this beyond doubt.

But Moat Cailin was not Pyke. The extensive reports of the White Harbor, Mormont and Bolton expeditionary forces had not been shy to reveal ‘King’ Balon Greyjoy had before the Greyjoy Rebellion a small budget to consolidate his redoubt, given that he expended billion after billion of gold dragons to build his short-lived ‘Iron Fleet’.

The North had not this problem, at least not to this degree.

If the elite forces of the Rose, the Lion and the Dragon came, the death swamps of the Moat would be their mass grave. Millions of Crusader’s bones and armours had been absorbed by this putrid atmosphere in the last millennium, House Stark and the North would be happy to add a few more Targaryen Legions to the ancient records.

Her direwolf Phantom chose this moment to jump in her arms, and the daughter of the Lord Paramount of the North winced under the sheer weight her companion had managed to gain in the last days. The old stories and records on direwolves had contained information the veterinary were not sure to believe at first...but their legendary growth was by Roboros not exaggerated...they may be minimising the truth, truth to be told.

Phantom had been a very little white ball of fur when she had taken him for the first time in her arms under the vigilant gaze of the gigantic mother direwolf. But right now, he had the size of an adult middle-sized dog...and she was forced to put him back on the ground, because no matter how fluffy his white fur was, the direwolf was becoming heavier day after day.

“Next time sister, keep your white wolf away when I try to give Icefyre a bath,” growled Baela as she arrived in the observation bay with a shrieking ice dragon in her arms, a scene which seemed to amuse the household guards charged of their protection to no end.

“I will keep it in mind,” she said a disappointed glance to Phantom, but the white-furred cousin of the wolves proved once more his hearing was absolutely perfect. The long ears were lowered, the red eyes were looking in the opposite direction and the young direwolf rolled had rolled on its back as soon as the word ‘bath’ had been uttered.

“So this is Twelfth Fleet,” Baela said once she had dislodged Icefyre from his or her place – no one knew how to discover the sex of a dragon - and she watched the scenery Joanna had enjoyed for the last minutes. “Father has not skimped on the armoured cruisers for this force.”

“It’s not like he has a lot of choice...the ships of the line are going to be used for far bigger preys.”

Evidently, from the lowest soldier to Father himself every Northern soldier hoped the concentration of the most powerful assets available to Winterfell, the Dread Fort, White Harbor and the rest of the North was going to be massive overkill. Unfortunately, given the first incoherent mumblings of the first wildlings emerging from the Eye of Woe, it was improbable.

“I’m sure this why a newly promoted Vice-Admiral got Twelfth Fleet,” shrugged her silver-haired sibling. “One more squadron of ship of the line and the Admiralty would have put Lord Bolton, a Glover or a Manderly in charge.”

“Vice-Admiral Davos Seaworth has proved his loyalty and his competence,” she told Baela more vehemently than she had wanted to.

“Someone has a crush on our new commander,” chanted Baela as she tried to stop a blush from appearing on her visage. Old Gods damn it, it was not because she admired the tactics and the doctrine of their new superior that she had to tease her with it!

“I will remind you of this when you will need to achieve the communication section’s best scores and maintain your equipment in perfect condition for the next watch.” The not-so mature reply consisted in sticking out the tongue, really funny since the baby ice dragon tried to do the same thing with the long appendage natural evolution had gifted the dragons.

More than once she wondered why Baela was going into communications. With her grades at the Winterfell Academy she could have largely taken one of the top spots in tactical, and this was acknowledged by every officer or non-commissioned spacemen as the fastest way to command a starship.

“Any progress with the contact-meditation?” The daughter of Ashara Dayne asked. Her own mental bond with Phantom was progressing very slowly...the aptitude certainly looked useful and was the only sure way to control a big direwolf, but it certainly wasn’t easy.

“No, none at all,” Grey eyes watched the dragon and the direwolf staring at each other in a show of dominance. “The Green Priests thought it was worth a shot, but it doesn’t look like the dragons have the same inner capacity to forge the bonds like direwolves do.” Baela rolled her shoulders though Joanna could tell she was slightly apprehensive. Without warging, your animal companion could only answer your words and your gestures: not too bad for an air transport-sized direwolf but very, very problematic for an ice dragon able to swallow a herd of elk for appetiser.

“We will find a solution,” she promised.

“Well, it’s not too bad,” amended the sole dragon-owner of Westeros. “At worst, I will be stuck at Moat Cailin for the better part of the next decade...”

**Ser Preston Greenfield, 26.07.300AAC, Braavos System**

Preston didn’t like Braavos. He didn’t like the Braavos System, full of greedy merchants and billionaires who had nothing in mind but gaining more money when they would never be able to spend the content of their purses in a hundred years. He didn’t like Braavos’ Masque, the only inhabited planet of the Braavos System. It was a sea world and he had just discovered he hated sea worlds. The ground was always moving, you were on gigantic boat-cities which were sailing forever the endless oceans and the storms were so bad he had been what they called ‘sea-sick’ for the better part of yesterday.

He didn’t like Braavos City, sea capital of the feared Braavosi Republic. There were too many architectural styles, it was giving him nausea. You could enter a square and see at a Ghiscari-inspired pyramid in the centre, an ancient Westerosi building on the left, a gigantic Lysene palace on the right and different ostentatious houses imitating the Valyrian houses between them. There was no coherence in this cacophony of styles and colours. Gold, silver, brown, pink, red, blue and green could be watched on one street and then come back ten minutes later. Unlike the better quarters of King’s Landing, there were no large avenues or something looking like an orderly plan. The Braavosi had used a massive irrigation system to transform their ship-city into a city of canals. The final result looked like a maze and Preston could safely say that without satellites and air support to give a relatively accurate map, an army or two could lose themselves in this labyrinth.

Despite all these faults, it was evident Braavos City was a very prosperous place. The streets were pristine and the old-fashioned grey cobblestone under their feet was well maintained. In a forty minutes excursion, they had seen the offices of over seventy banks and twenty-five cartels. At every corner of a street the name of companies and industrial forces renowned from Volantis to Gulltown were visible. Men and women in suit and long robes lunched on terraces with view on the great canals. It would have been unimaginable for most of King’s Landing, where the pollution was so dense it was openly discouraged to eat in open air. The ruckus caused by air-cars and other motorised methods of transportation was utterly absent. On the Braavosi city-islands, the only way to move from one point to another was your feet.

It was this last point which made the lone Kingsguard really unhappy. The combination of narrow streets and people of all social classes walking in the same streets was making their progression a security nightmare. In his authority as Prince Joffrey’s head of security, Preston had politely requested their Braavosi contacts to land with a hundred guards. This had been refused. The Western-born Kingsguard could be wrong, but he was reasonably sure the gold-thirsting Essossi had been laughing in private afterwards at the idea of denying his recommendations one after the other. In the end, ten people had been authorised to disembark...and the ten included Preston and the Prince himself.

Last despicable measure, the only weapons they had been able to take with them were vibro-blades and not the ones Westerosi Knights found useful to train or to battle with. From Casterly Rock to the Eyrie, soldiers used durasteel-forged weapons whether they were two-handed or bastard blades. These weapons were large and in theory supposed to last a few years if they were cared for properly. The Braavosi used different alloys with a freaking mini force-field to forge slim toothpicks they had the gall to call ‘rapiers’.

He didn’t like the weapon hanging to his side, only good for an ambush in a dark street or two before breaking when an armoured opponent smashed it. To his surprise, it was the Hound who had been the loudest to protest this change. The other Westerner had not liked at all exchanging his large blade for a ‘girl’s dagger’. His words, not Preston’s.

Judging by the scowl Sandor Clegane was harbouring as he led the way in the crowded streets, his wrath was not calmed in the least. But then the Hound was not here to be pretty and nice. After several assassination attempts two years ago, Lord Tywin Lannister had decided his grandson needed a dangerous watchdog and his choice had stopped on the younger brother of the Beast. So far it was an outcome Preston and the rest of the detachment assigned to protect Prince Joffrey had reasons to regret. Sandor Clegane’s face was horrifying to watch and the man was as foul-mouthed as a smuggler of Fleabottom, but the man was a born-killer when he had something sharp in his hands and all attempts since then were ended brutally and mercilessly.

“I think we are close to the Academy’s Square,” said Prince Joffrey, his brilliant green eyes suddenly becoming visible as he lowered the large map he had kept open the moment they set foot on Braavos’ Masque.

Several murmurs of relief were voiced in the small Westerosi column. The envoys of the Sealord had ran away as soon as they could get away with it and Preston was not ashamed to say none of his party had the orientation skills to navigate into the Braavosi maze.

“This is far nicer than the palaces of King’s Landing,” mused the Prince, though the Kingsguard was unaware if he talked to him or to Clegane. “Maybe I will come back with Barbara once Aegon’s marriage will be celebrated. I think she will like the place...”

“Of course, my Prince,” Preston Greenfield answered, though personally Braavos was far from the destination of his dreams. For sure, the sums demanded by the restaurants and the hotels here could be classified as high-class robbery. This shouldn’t be an issue, ultimately. With the King’s tendency to piss off every foreign nation and his bannersmen, the odds of Prince Joffrey being authorised to visit regularly Braavos were close to non-existent.

They passed before a temple to the God of Waves and Storms in the mean time. Because Braavos had not only thousands of warships, a considerable space merchant navy and a governmental system which made no sense for anyone who was not Braavosi, they had also thousands of Gods worshipped here. Seven, Old Gods, Rhoynar deities and Essossi pagan creatures...if you thought about a divinity, then it was surely worshipped at Braavos. Had Aegon the Conqueror or any other King tried this religious diversity through the last three hundred years, the result would have been unimaginable violence on a galactic scale but the Braavosi made it work somehow.

“Thank the Father, we didn’t come during the masquerade...” grumbled one of the rare Crown-born guards he had kept in the inner guard of Prince Joffrey. The Kingsguard made a nod of approval. The Masquerade of Braavos was famous – or infamous depending on your point of view on masked feasts – all around the galaxy. Ten days of feast where the city-ships of Braavos gathered around the Titan, a colossus built on one of the rare rocks above the sea existing on this planet. And at midnight on the tenth day, everyone removed his or her mask, celebrating therefore the Uncloaking of Braavos.

Needless to say, the affluence, the prices practised by the merchants and the duels fought for the courtesans were skyrocketing during this period. But the celebrations had been nearly five Westerosi-standard months ago and today Braavos was calm. Or as calm as Braavos was supposed to be anyway. There was none of the constant inter-gang fighting which was so problematic at King’s Landing, but it didn’t mean the Essossi city was not dangerous in its own way.

“Ah, the Academy is here,” commented the young Targaryen as dozens of men and women went to the right, revealing a construction which had the shape of a red-coloured palace with gigantic statues. “Prince Joffrey Targaryen and his escort,” the King’s son told the two guards blocking the small way between two canal which was the only land access. “We’re expected.”

After a few seconds where the Hound glared ferociously at the two men – who were completely unfazed by it to the Westerosi’s guard amusement – the ceremonial halberds were lowered and the Braavosi soldier spoke in a bored tone suggesting he had repeated the same sentence today.

“The Prince can enter. One bodyguard only,” and while Clegane grumbled, the hard black eyes of the man showed no sign of contrition. Preston whispered some rapid orders to the ear of his second before following his charge.

The walk from there was not long and before their eyes, the Sea Academy, the first University ever built on the artificial soil of Braavos City was revealed in its full glory. The impression of a red-coloured palace when he had looked at it first was not wrong. The Braavosi had built this building with the pomp and splendour the bankers, merchants and elites of the Republic saved for their precious progeny. The entrance was under a great archway where diverse legendary creatures were sculpted, they climbed two stairs and finally they arrived in an immense courtyard.

It was then Preston realised the magnificence outside was literally nothing for the masters of the Braavos System. The ground and dozens of antique columns had been built in a light purple stone which had all the appearance of marble. A huge fountain the height of five men was in the centre, with many mermaids sculpted at the top and on the surroundings. A large garden with thousands of blooming flowers was proving a heart of nature and on the outskirts the Braavosi architects had reproduced a small Valyrian forum.

It was there the majority of the students were concentrated as he and the Prince observed the new environment. Unlike King’s Landing or the Rock, the students certainly didn’t wear a uniform and their traits were extremely varied. Some boys and girl had Westerosi looks, but there were teenagers with the dark skin of the Summer Sector, the bronzed visage of the Dornish and even a few Yi-Ti young adults.

“And this is why the high rate of interest our banks impose to the Princedom of Pentos is in fact harming us more than it restricts the Pentoshi economy. It is not a world-ending truth that the rivals of the Republic are always finding new ways to evade the First Law and the terms imposed by the last war they lost.”

“Lies, I say!” retorted a muscled young man in blue-silver clothes who had jumped on his feet like his life depended on it. “If Pentos try to evade the reparations and enslave more men and women, they must pay the price! The laws of the Republic come first and we mustn’t tolerate the machinations of the Pentoshi! Braavos is becoming stronger and this strength comes from our freedom!”

The debate was...well-spirited. For the life of him, Preston couldn’t remember heirs and Heiresses of the nobility speaking like this in public when they were at court. Not when it came to criticize the policy of the Iron Throne at any rate. In private, yes there were a lot of people doing it – including the Prince next to him – but the official audiences in front of the Hand of the King were not like this. If someone contradicted Lord Whent like this, the Hand of the King would certainly throw the dissenter off court for a few weeks.

“And I say breaking the wheel like you want is not the solution,” said in a patient reply the young woman who had been speaking at first. Her dark blue robe was of a style he had often seen in the streets of Braavos City in the last hours, her visage was quite seducing and her hairs were...silver. “Pentos is not as isolated as they were fifty years ago. Their ties with Tyrosh and Myr have never been stronger and the last thing the Republic needs at the moment is to trigger a general war across the Narrow Void. Gives peace a chance, blood and war only create more enmities.”

“Maybe I should hire her to give speeches in my place,” Prince Joffrey seemed to have understood far more quickly than him who was speaking and the Prince applauded with the other students as the tirade ended.

“I don’t think the King and the Small Council would approve of talks supporting republicanism,” he warned the son of Queen Cersei. Anti-slavery should be fine, since the Seven Sectors had all signed the conventions forbidding genetic slavery and the like, but there was far more to Braavos than their stance against slavery.

Prince Joffrey didn’t answer and waited for the crowd to disperse to approach the small forum and his violet marble. The very reason they had come to Braavos was waiting for them. Preston was not surprised. As much as they had not shouted or provoked a riot when they had arrived in the courtyard, there were adults serving as security services and he had also noted several modern defences lasers behind the statues. Besides, a knight in white armour and a silver-haired Prince in all likelihood were not seen every day, Academy of Braavos or not.

“My Aunt,” Joffrey bowed largely, making the small group of girls who were watching the scene with attention giggle. “It is a pleasure to see you and your beauty. Your voice-“

“Tell what you have to say and leave,” the visage of Princess Daenerys Targaryen, only sister of King Rhaegar, was showing absolutely no happiness at the sight of her nephew. It was a pity, because frankly the Princess was really a beauty. The Kingsguards had a lot of opportunities to see noblewomen and top-models at King’s Landing, but Daenerys was beating them without trying with her pure silver-hairs and her perfect violet eyes. She had none of the martial stance of Princess Visenya and she had abandoned the last signs of childhood Princess Shiera kept. Added to that, her dark blue robe was sufficiently conservative to not be included in the courtesan category but there was enough cleavage and legs showed to reveal her flawless body. Assuredly, if there was an air-race contest or a starfighter tournament, the participants would not wait long to proclaim her Queen of Love and Beauty.

“Very well,” for many observers it would have been impossible to discern, but Preston had been next to the grandson of Lord Tywin thousands of hours in the last decade. He could see the signs of disappointment in the Prince’s behaviour. “Your Royal Brother, the King of Westeros, has ordered your return.”

“Oh, really?” A smirk appeared on the Princess’ lips as if she knew something truly humorous and they didn’t. “I must suppose then he has agreed to spend the tens of trillions dragons negotiated with the Sealord ten years ago. The treaty was clear: either the Iron Throne paid the reparations for the attack on a Lorath ship, or a Prince or a Princess of Targaryen blood was fostered at Braavos....”

There was no falsehood in her tone, no attempt to complicate things. It was the raw truth...and now Preston understood why the Small Council had not been informed of the official reason for this little Braavosi expedition. There was going to be hell to pay when they came back to King’s Landing...

“What.” Apparently, Prince Joffrey had not been aware of this too.

The expressions on their faces must have been comical, for the Princess laughed loudly, it was pleasant to hear...apart from the fact she was rejoicing in their lack of information.

“You didn’t know.” It was not a question. “He sent you there like errand boys and you didn’t know.” Princess Daenerys seized with her right hand a rather large bag before looking at her relative with something like pity.

“I wish I could say I’m surprised, but every time the Braavosi media comment on Westerosi politics, it’s to explain another imbecility of the King and his allies.” A small chuckle came to her pale lips. “He is getting madder.”

“He is still the King, and his orders are law,” the Kingsguard could not miss the fact Joffrey didn’t bother denying these accusations. “You have been ordered to return to the capital, my Aunt.”

Far from being angered, the purple eyes had obviously amusement in them.

“If I return, it will be with a Braavosi fleet and they will want to install me as Queen,” the statement did not seem to please her at all. “Several factions of the Senate and the Lower Assembly want a good war to expand their commercial interests. Pentos is the lead candidate, but if the King insists to continue this idiocy...”

Preston had a disagreeable feeling this wasn’t a joke. Could the Braavosi think they could get away with a coup? It was true King Rhaegar and popularity were not compatible words, but there were powerful Lords behind the scenes each having invested a lot of money and influence in their own claimants. Braavos, for all the might of its invincible Deep Space navy, was rather lacking in conventional spaceships and ground armies...

“I will not obey when millions of lives are at stake,” Princess Daenerys Targaryen, last child of the defunct King Aerys, declared to her nephew. “I will not help this madman begin the war his diseased soul craves. I will stay at Braavos, per the treaty stipulations...and if he has something to tell me, he can very well do it in person.”

Knowing King Rhaegar like Preston did, it sounded like an idea best avoided at all costs.

**Ser Jaime Lannister, 28.07.300AAC, Sunspear System**

Their arrival at Planky Town yesterday had lifted a great weight from his shoulders. For the duration of their journey in the Narrow Void, he had wondered if he was not making a mistake by using another warship than his beloved *White Paw*. These doubts had been silenced the instant the displeasure of the Dornish population to their arrival had manifested itself.

Six assassination attempts had been made on him in four hours of reception and greetings. Fourteen Crown soldiers had died in various ‘accidents’ and he knew the number would have risen only higher the longer they stayed.

Yes, it had been a wise decision to let the men who had followed him in years after years of boring inspections to stay at home with their families and friends. The King had ordered him to go to Dorne, but it did not mean he had to sacrifice good soldiers for no good reason.

Obviously, should he go back to King’s Landing breathing and in one piece, people would wonder why he had taken the *Crown of Crocodiles*, one of the new Blue Swordfish-class battlecruisers built at the capital and specialising in Deep Space duties. The answer was simple. This crew had the lowest performance records of all the potential warships which had been available when the King had given his orders. The captain of this hull was Ser Roger Wardfire, of the Masterly House of Wardfire sworn to House Langward – and no, he hadn’t known this fact before coming aboard. The man loved listening to the sound of his own voice.

Given how House Langward was licking the boots of Prince Aegon at every opportunity, Jaime had thought the powers-that-be were not likely to protest if he took a ship full of spies. He had been right, though he didn’t think they would smile if he explained to them he had demanded this ship because its destruction would not harm the influence of House Lannister in the Crown Fleet.

Ser Roger Wardfire might have been a good space officer a few decades ago. Might. In all likelihood, there was more chance the pigs would fly tomorrow, the Dornish would suddenly apologise for their rude behaviour and the King was going to give sane orders to his Small Council. In truth, the Senior Captain’s career had stalled in 288AAC when he had been caught negotiating the moves of his patrols in the Narrow Void with a Tyroshi slaver.

Ser Roger Wardfire had survived the following court-martial thanks to his family connections, but it had stopped his rapid climb in the fleet’s hierarchy and by the sound of it, he was making everyone but his corrupt body responsible of his disgrace. A few pointed questions to one of two Admirals owing him a few favours, and Jaime knew the dealings with slavers were not a thing of the past for this slime.

If this had been the Western navy, the Kingsguard would have probably gotten away with spacing him out of an airlock, but as it was, he had figured the man could enjoy the legendary Dornish hospitality with him.

The *Crown of Crocodiles* had in its living quarters, hangar bays and weapon control rooms many scumbags taking example on the master of the ship. He would not mourn their demise, and already fourteen out of a complement of two thousand eight hundred men were no longer of this galaxy.

And escorted by no less than three squadrons of Martell heavy cruisers, they were in high orbit around Sun’s Radiance, the single inhabitable planet of the Sunspear System. The real problems were about to begin.

“We are authorised to land, Ser Jaime,” no animal but a sloth could have considered the tone employed by Roger Wardfire’s martial and motivated. His gold uniform was wrinkled and the political officer supposed to maintain a correct level of discipline and loyalty aboard was more or less of the same cloth.

“In this case, please prepare my shuttle Captain,” he commanded with a flat expression. “It would be unwise to make the Dornish wait.”

Several men-at-arms and junior Lieutenants shivered, proof some of the crew had at least some self-preservation instincts. Good, they were going to need them.

The progression to ‘his shuttle’ was made in silence. The men preceding him who were clad in the red and black of House Targaryen looked nervous...maybe they understood now how insane the entire idea was. The gold uniforms were showing even grimmer expressions.

Without one more word, his escort and he entered the shuttles bound for the surface. There were ten of them in all prepared for what was an ordinary void-ground flight. There should have been more, but the good captain – and yes, Jaime was sarcastic there – had announced him there were ‘occasional difficulties’ with some of them and that the stock of spare parts for certain flyers had not been ‘properly counted’ by the shipyards of King’s Landing. Translation: Roger Wardfire and his officers were not doing their jobs and had sold the spare parts to other captains or on the black market to fill their purses.

Once they left the ship, they had a proper view of Sun’s Radiance, capital planet of the Dorne Princedom. In high orbit like this, it didn’t look so bad. There was a large blue ocean, two large continents looking like two spears and a multitude of islands. From his talks with Prince Lewyn an eternity ago, Jaime knew Sun’s Radiance possessed some fantastic beaches on these heavenly locations, which attracted very wealthy Essossi magnates for weeks of leisure and detente. In the hinterlands, great mountains provided an endless playing field for those who loved climbing. There was never enough snow for proper ski stations; the planet was too close from the sun for these sorts of activities.

But the further they descended, the better the Kingslanders and every man aboard the shuttle could see the big issue. The coasts looked divine, the mountains were high and noble...but between them, there was something everyone with two brain cells knew when ‘Dorne’ was uttered.

“The desert,” groaned someone in the back of the shuttle. Jaime didn’t even bother turning his head.

“The desert,” he agreed. There was no description needed for the horrors it conjured in their minds were far more than adequate. In two wars against the Seven Sectors, the Westerosi population had learned well from depressed veterans the terrible suffering these wastes could inflict on a modern force.

It did not stop the whispers to begin around him.

“I heard the Dornish are throwing everyone in a bath of scorpions and they torture those who survive,” said a twenty name day brown-haired youngster, his face livid.

“Their women are milking the snakes of their venom and pouring it in the drinks of the foreigners,” a bulky warrant officer escalated with no sense of mockery in his behaviour.

“They are treacherous and bury alive in the sands the soldiers challenging them in duel.”

“They betray you the moment you have your back turned.”

“They tie you to a rock and let the vultures prey on your body.”

The sentences became more and more ridiculous until the Chief Petty Officer piloting the shuttle broke the exchange by announcing worrisome news.

“The Dornish are telling us to divert our course for a third-rate starport.” There was definitely fear in the man’s voice.

“Maybe they want to avoid the riots and violence which happened at Planky Town,” He replied on his private channel, knowing that unfortunately each and every one of the men near him could hear him talk.

“Maybe,” but the pilot didn’t sound convinced. To be honest, Jaime was not either.

As the shuttle landed with the usual braking and landing shock and they were allowed to leave their transport, this impression was more than confirmed. The Crown delegation was...in the middle of nowhere. The ten shuttles from their battlecruiser were landing on the usual hard and smooth surface used by all the starports in this part of the galaxy, but there was literally nothing around them.

There was sand and an arid terrain no matter the direction you stared at. There was no vegetation of any kind. There was no water and relatively few signs of human infrastructure. An old grey watchtower was about two or three kilometres away, and it looked the structure had stood for the better part of the last two centuries without major renovations. And it was hot, terribly hot under this hard sun. The blonde-haired Kingsguard congratulated himself to not have come in full armour. Temperature-regulation systems or not, he would probably have collapsed under this hard sun.

Jaime could see that for the proud Targaryen guards, this was a very cold shower – and not just because they were sweating a lot in this warm atmosphere. They had obviously expected to be greeted by the nobles of Sunspear in a majestic ceremony where delirious crowds, music and splendour would have been the master themes. Being debarked in the middle of nowhere had not entered their minds.

“This is an insult! This will not be tolerated!” snarled the leader of the black-red guard which had surely been ordered by the imbeciles of King’s Landing to report scrupulously every move he did. “Ser Jaime I suggest we return to the *Crown*...”

The Targaryen guard did not have the seconds to finish his protestations. Swift and agile, the Dornish newcomers arrived in manoeuvres their bulky shuttles would have not been capable. Orange aerial vehicles roared over their heads in an improvised spectacle before landing one by one.

It did not escape him that their hosts were encircling them, not forming a line before them. And then Jaime made several steps back as a massive flyer released a massive amount of black substance mere metres away from the Targaryen vanguard.

“Flee! They are releasing scorpions!” screamed one of the young spacemen.

“No it’s shit!” exclaimed a grey-bearded Warrant Officer.

The fetid odour which reached their noses in the next seconds proved the experience of veterans was invaluable. This was indeed shit...and it was assaulting all their senses violently.

“These Dornish are humiliating us!” growled threateningly the same Targaryen officer, not realising about twenty men behind him in gold uniform were exchanging some coins after each of his interventions.

“I’m afraid they are just warming up...” said another trooper, pointing his hand in the direction of several columns of orange uniforms. Jaime narrowed his eyes; unless he was mistaken the men were unrolling the traditional red carpet so why...oh, no, no and no.

The Dornish soldiers...they were...they were pissing on the carpet after it was unrolled.

“This is treason!” snarled the Targaryen Captain, his hand trying to draw his blade, only to be stopped by Jaime’s intervention.

“Don’t draw your sword or any of your weapons,” he whispered in the ear of the dragon’s minion. “The moment you do it, we are all dead!”

The man chosen by the high authorities of King’s Landing tensed visibly but didn’t move. What a relief, they were less than two hundred guards, spacemen and pilots of the Crown Sector against perhaps five or six times that number of Dornish soldiers.

His party was alone, with lightly armed shuttles and only a battlecruiser as potential reinforcement in the middle of the hellishly hot Dornish desert. Their possible opponents were...the entire Dornish Army and Navy. This was not the Western battle-squadrons, but the son of Lord Tywin knew they were up to the job of tracking and eliminating his group.

“Your orders, Ser?” his shuttle pilot asked.

“We wait,” Jaime answered. “They want to make us furious, don’t give them this pleasure. And share the water gourds we have, this sun is giving us all headaches.”

It was the hard truth. The Crown-born men were suffocating under the Dornish sun and the odious smells of shit and various excrements. By all means, the reputation of the Dornish hospitality was well-founded.

The next minutes were long, very long. Jaime would have loved to tell the Dornish behind this series of dark jokes had finally stopped their awful pranks but this would be a lie. Several abominable acts against public decency were performed in front of them, pink paint with animal entrails was thrown on top of their shuttles and flags supposed to represent dragons were used as an alternative of paper toilet.

Jaime had lost his devotion for the Iron Throne a long time before this day, but he had to admit these provocations shook severely his discipline more than once. Moreover, the fact he was not in battle-armour did not stop him from being disagreeably sweaty and tired. Sun’s Radiance had really an unpleasant climate compared to the Storm Sector planet he had visited beforehand.

Last but not the least of the humiliations they had to endure, their delegation had to walk on the red carpet, under the very satisfied faces of hundreds of Dornish men and women. By the end of the day, Jaime felt sure all their shoes were going to be burned or sent to the dustbin.

This carpet stank like it had been sent to the Seven Hells with the mission of making it as disgusting as it was possible. Two soldiers vomited on it as they couldn’t bear the smell, which made it...something he didn’t really want to think about it.

Their ordeal mercifully ended – though he was sure his clothes were going to be removed the minute he could away with it – and they were surrounded by a regiment of orange-armoured women with gold insignia. Jaime recognised the model without effort. Battle-armour Mark 13 ‘Nymeria’, the standard equipment for women officers in Sectors where they were authorised to march to war.

A son began to play in the background and a sixth of the Dornish opened to reveal the leaders of this force. For a second or two, he believed he was in front of snake-sized humans but fortunately it was only incredibly realist snake-shaped helmets and painted scales on the rest of the protections. The armours had shades of orange on them, but the dominant colours were different. The protections were obviously better; he had looked at so many customised armours he could recognise the work reserved to Heir and Heiresses of Noble Houses.

A herald sounded a trumpet and a light voice boomed in the arid Dornish waste.

“All bow before Princess Rhaenys, Lady of Hellgate Hall and Commander of the Sand Wyrm Army!”

Jaime bowed largely, as did the majority of the gold-uniformed troops having followed him. The men sent by the King, alas, did not imitate them and only inclined slightly their heads.

The woman in the middle of the formation removed her helmet and Jaime’s breath for a moment had the air expulsed out of his lungs. In a pale yellowish-white battle-armour before him, was a young woman who looked exactly like a twenty name days Elia Martell. The same black hairs, black eyes, thin lips and olive skin were present. But the stance was different. The defunct Princess had had a warrior past but had always preferred gentleness before the violence. In her daughter the threat of violence was strongly implied and the decoration of the scales on the armour emphasized it. Rhaenys had absolutely nothing of House Targaryen in her looks...and as much as he hated to admit it, Jaime could not help but feel a bit sorry.

“Princess Rhaenys,” he saluted.

“My valiant white knight,” and the genuine smile he received for fifteen seconds made him almost forget this was not Elia he was talking to. She was not tall the Kingsguard remarked as her pale armoured fist touched his chin with infinite care. He was still a good head and a half above her...and since she was in armour, the difference in height was probably greater than that.

The moment of calm did not last, like everything in this galaxy. The rude intervention of the Targaryen Captain brought them back to reality.

“Princess Rhaenys, acting on the orders of His Majesty Rhaegar Targaryen, King of Westeros, Lord of the Seven Sectors, Protector of the Realm, Defender of the Faith...”

Seriously, was the man going to recite the three hundred titles of House Targaryen and its Head?

“Your Royal Father commands you to return to King’s Landing. Your presence is required at court.”

The smile disappeared on the Princess’ visage and there was something determined in her eyes when her mouth opened to answer.

“This monster is not my Father and Dorne does not recognise him as our King.” There were moments you could tell Lords and Ladies lied; this was not one of them. The tone of Rhaenys Targaryen was disarming of sincerity. “Rhaegar the Oath-Breaker, Emperor of Hypocrites, Madness and Ruin has no right to give me orders.”

The next sentence was added almost as an after-thought.

“Besides, the moment I would be back, he would sell me to the Arryn Heir or another non-entity to fulfil one of his eternally-damned prophecies.”

Jaime did his best not to wince. He was not the best judge of the King, since he was always on inspections or on whatever long and boring duties the Crown found him, but it sounded plausible to his ears.

“This is treason, then,” declared the red-black clad Captain. For the hundredth time, Jaime wondered what good his presence did. The man had obviously received his instructions straight from the Royal mouth.

“You can see it like this,” retorted the Princess. “Personally, I think it’s more the result of Dorne being humiliated, betrayed and stabbed in the back repeatedly by two Kings. If there’s any justice, Aerys is burning in the deepest part of the Seven Hells and my genitor will follow him soon. Your madness corrupted the dream and destroyed alliance, peace and unity...I think it’s time to end everything.”

“Signal the *Crown of Crocodiles*!” snarled the dragon-sworn officer. “Tell them to-!”

“Nymeria, kill this battlecruiser.” The order clacked like a whip and one of the women in an elaborate blue-green snake-armour whispered something in a communication device.

The result was immediate. Less than ten seconds after being spoken, the part of the sky above them was lightened by something looking like extremely powerful fireworks. But there was not much doubt about what had just happened. Ser Roger Wardfire, his battlecruiser and the rest of his crew were dead. And it was confirmed in the woman’s own voice seconds later.

“Target destroyed, Princess.”

“Thank you, Nymeria,” the smile harboured by Rhaenys was different than from the first one this time. She was fixing the Targaryen Captain like a predator which wonders what taste the flesh of its prey tastes like.

“You can be proud, madwoman. You have just declared war to the Seven Sectors!” As little as Jaime wanted to admit it, the man had a point. Ten years of peace had just been killed with this order. While Sunspear was not a great trade nexus, it was not an insignificant backwater either. People talked and the news of this slaughter was going to spread. The Crown Navy was going to be enraged to have lost a battlecruiser and the Iron Throne would have no choice but to declare war. It may not happen tomorrow, the delays thorough the Narrow Void being unavoidable, but it was going to happen.

“Is this the moment I’m supposed to be meek and fearful? Please.” The contempt showed by the daughter of Elia was evident. “You speak of Seven Sectors but the majority of your planets have dreamed for endless nights of rebellion and insurrection.”

The officer loyal to the King tried to seize his side-arm. It was a grievous mistake. One of the women wearing serpent-decorated armours – this one was clad in black and yellow – slammed her vibro-spear through his throat and the Captain’s body fell lifelessly on the sand, giving it a bloody red colour.

“I am a reasonable woman,” said the black-haired young woman, giving the freshly-made corpse a good kick before turning her black eyes in their direction. “You have served my father but you are not responsible for his dreadful policies and the madness he spreads. Kneel and swear to serve me loyally, and you will be forgiven.”

“You don’t dictate who will be forgiven, bitch! ARRRGGGH!” These were the last words of a red-black guard before six spears transformed him into a brochette.

This had been the last straw for the soldiers of the mad sovereign and they tried with a distinct lack of unity to grab their weapons and try to kill as many Dornish opponents as they could. It was stupid and all died without shedding a drop of their opponent’s blood. Outnumbered as they were, even the greatest warrior in Terminator battle-armour had no chance to survive. When you added that the Dornish women had had their rifles pointed on their back all this time, hundreds of deadly vibro-spears ready to strike and wore no Terminator battle-armours...the outcome was very predictable. A few spacemen tried to intervene and were slaughtered as they stood. Overall, it took less than a minute for close to a hundred men to meet their end in this Dornish desert.

“Will you follow me, my white knight?” Small white-yellow armoured fingers enclosed his right hand and his eyes plunged in familiar black eyes.

Eighteen years ago, it would have been a hard question. But it was eighteen years ago. Before ‘King’ Rhaegar had refused to give him any duty worthy of a Kingsguard. Before his cousins of the Rock showed him how much value he had now that he was out of the succession for Casterly Rock and the cruelty they showed to Tyrion. The capital had sunk in internal feuds and petty politicking. His ‘inspections’ had shown him how many planets were waiting for the slimmest chance to begin a new rebellion. But there was one woman who had not betrayed him, in actions, memory or spirit. She was dead now, but for the love of her he could obey her daughter.

“I will, for the love of your mother.” Jaime Lannister replied and kneeled, a movement the rest of the Crownlander men followed. “Hail Rhaenys Targaryen, daughter of Princess Elia Martell and true Queen of Westeros.”

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 1.08.300AAC, Longtable System**

“I don’t like this plan.”

Jacaerys tried to ignore the colossal headache which was killing his brain and prayed to find an answer which wasn’t too rude. He should not have drunk that much wine all day in hindsight.

“Which part?” The young Lord of Driftmark asked to the Prince he was serving as chief of staff in everything spatial-related.

“All of it!” exclaimed Aegon. “We must attack the Lannisters the moment our new secret fleet is ready! Who cares if we lose a system or two in the River Sector to these traitorous vermin! We will make examples of them with massive orbital strikes when the Rock will surrender to us!”

Jacaerys racked his brains in search of a diplomatic answer. Unfortunately, just as he had settled on ‘if we abandon loyal systems to the rebels, people are not going to be happy’ Aegon had already turned his heels and was leaving the room, followed by the Hightower Kingsguard and other Targaryen troopers.

Exhausted, he collapsed in his seat and looked at the three other members of the staff he had the honour to command.

“You heard the Crown Prince, he doesn’t like the plan.” He paused trying to find something brilliant to say but between the after-effects of alcohol and the late hour, the words evaded him. “We need to create another one. The floor is open for any suggestions.”

Silence greeted these words. It was Theon Greyjoy who broke them first.

“He liked the first draft of Operation Jackpot Tiger,” the Ironborn who had been granted the rank of Crown Rear-Admiral by courtesy said.

“We haven’t yet the warships for Jackpot Tiger,” the reply had come from Aelyx Langward, Vice-Admiral and Heir of House Langward.

Jacaerys nodded darkly. As tempting as the idea was, an offensive straight through the Crakehall-Tarbeck Hall-Lannisport-Casterly Rock corridor had slim chances to achieve anything apart from killing millions of spacemen and armsmen. There were ‘only’ four stellar systems to take but three were extremely fortified and the fourth had been forbidden to civilian shipping since the end of the Reyne-Tarbeck Rebellion – in practise they had no idea whatsoever about the traps waiting for them in the Tarbeck Hall System.

“We could lose as many as two hundred ships of the line before facing the defences of the Rock,” Jacaerys agreed. “And each system conquered can be retaken by flanking attacks if we don’t leave enough forces to garrison them. Crakehall can be reinforced by Hawthorne’s March, Lannisport by Broom’s Redoubt and the Rock itself has four or five stellar systems sufficiently close to ensure it never falls.”

Aelyx and Adrian didn’t disagree but the expression harboured by Theon was clearly mutinous.

“I say we can take them!” At times it was not difficult to remember the son of Balon Greyjoy was not a Crownlander. This was one of these cases. “The Lannisters have currently in service one super-battleship, sixty-two ships of the line, eight armoured cruisers, one hundred and twenty-eight battlecruisers plus fourteen fleet carriers and seventy-five light carriers.”

Theon lighted on the central display to reveal other numbers in neat green columns.

“On the other hand, the Reach alone has three super-battleships, one hundred and ninety-six ships of the line, fifteen armoured cruisers, four hundred and twenty battlecruisers, twenty-seven fleet carriers and three hundred and forty-five light carriers available. There are also powerful space squadrons in the Iron Sector ready to fall on the detached units of the Western forces. Aegon has the Crown Navy, half of the River Navy and about a third of the Storm and Vale Navy supporting him. Why can’t we smash these Lion bastards and be done with it?”

The hatred of the legitimate Lord of Pyke was very real. The Crown may have commanded the forces crushing the Greyjoy Rebellion, but it had been the Beast of Tywin Lannister who had massacred Theon’s father. And it was the Westerners who by their atrocities had made quite sure Theon could not go back to the Iron Sector despite his time as war being officially over. The situation was so difficult on the ground at Pyke that the legitimate Lord returning was sure to provoke an explosion and worsen considerably the task of the garrison forces.

“Because we can’t afford to send all these ships right now straight into the Western Sector,” explained quietly Vice-Admiral Adrian Buckwell, the brown-haired and twenty-two years old Heir of the Antlers. “Mace Tyrell will not thin out his defences in the Marches as long as there’s a risk that Dorne can plant us a poisoned dagger in the back.”

“Still it isn’t like the Dornish have thousands of warships,” remarked Aelyx. “Nightsong is on our side and heavily fortified so they can’t pass this way. Blackhaven is less defensible but the Black Stag and his allies will be forced to fight for House Dondarrion if the Martells are stupid enough to invade.”

Jacaerys frowned, though it was more about the headache killing him than because he dis.

“Do you have the latest estimates on the number of ships of the line available to every Sector by the way?”

“Yes, but it took far longer than we thought,” told Theon. “Varys and his Crown Intelligence Agency have tried to give the most pessimistic figures without a single hard proof to show us. These spies and their little games...”

Everyone around the table nodded to agree with this judgement. No one would deny the Spider was useful, but sometimes his assertions and the information he gave were alarmist to the highest degree when there was nothing wrong at stake.

“This is what we and the different navies will have by the end of next month. For simplicity’s sake, we didn’t count the ships of the line sent to the Iron Sector for this study.”

A holographic map of Westeros materialised for the background, quickly followed by the numbers the analysts had compiled on the ship of the lines available to each Lord Paramount.

Crown Sector: 48

Reach Sector: 196

Western Sector: 62

River Sector: 50

Storm Sector: 35

Vale Sector: 47

Northern Sector: 18

Dorne Princedom: 15

“Given the similar rapport of force in battlecruisers and carriers,” concluded the Rear-Admiral, “I don’t think the Lannisters can afford to defend against us and raid the River Sector with significant forces.”

It was logical...but then Jacaerys knew that Tywin and his legion of cousins could look at a map and arrive to the same conclusion. And a lion had claws, no matter what the reports said.

“How many capital ships did the Lord of Highgarden want to leave at home anyway?”

“Around twenty-four ships of the line and twice that many battlecruiser for the Dornish Marches,” replied Aelyx with a deeply unhappy expression. “The battle-squadrons will be divided between Grassy Vale, Cockshaw Plains, Ashford and Starpike, assuming nothing changes.”

It seemed a very cautious move just to protect yourself from the Dornish...the bannersmen of the Martell had not that much firepower available to them. Unless the father of Aegon’s betrothed had new ambitions concerning the Storm Sector after Connington routinely failed to make his main bannersmen obey his decrees. Yes, this was another alternative.

“Twenty-four still leaves us with one hundred and seventy-two of the biggest warships built in Westerosi shipyards, Aelyx,” reflected Adrian.

“And Lord Mace wants to keep a strong reserve under his thumb in the core systems of the Reach,” added the Heir of House Langward.

“How many?” This meeting was getting worse and worse and he could not wait to go to his bed.

“Two squadrons for Highgarden and two for Oldtown is the minimum he’s willing to concede.”

“He’s not serious!” the outburst had come from Theon. “The Lord Paramount of the Reach is building the biggest fleet in all Westeros history and he intends to sit on it doing nothing?”

“I don’t think he sees it like that...” laughed his friend from the Antlers System.

“But the result will be the same,” Jacaerys sighed as Theon was highlighting a map of the planets of the Reach Sector. “I can see the strategic necessity to keep a strong reserve at Highgarden, since the orbital defences are not as impressive as other systems like Oldtown. It’s the Reach capital after all, and where they are they can be easily rushed to the Western Sector if we need them.”

“Still, it is twenty-eight ships of the line we’re speaking about,” one battle-squadron in the Reach was seven ships of the line-strong, courtesy of millennia-old traditions and customs. One look at Theon was sufficient to tell he was not pleased at all. “If we remove them of our order of battle, the two main fleets will be operating with at best seventy-two ships of the line until the wave of new construction comes into service.”

“The Lannisters have far less than that and we’re going to bring the Crown Fleet in the River Sector the moment we’ve dealt with those accepting Western funds.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be that easy, but I am not the Admiral,” the blue eyes of Adrian were fixed on his large pile of data-slates in front of him. “But going back to the first source of annoyance, I don’t think we can afford to ignore the River Sector like the Prince wishes us to.”

The holographic image vanished, replacing the map of the Reach Sector by the River one. One click and a third of the Sector began glowing in malevolent lights.

“Do you want be to list all the Noble Houses hostile to us in this region?” asked rhetorically the Heir of House Buckwell. “Because it’s a long one.”

“Many are not allied with each other and hate each other as much as they hate us.” Theon had a point on this, though it was maybe a bit too optimistic. On the one hand, no one could deny the River Lords were indeed raised with tens of thousands ancient feuds and waged them against their close neighbours with a truly frightening passion. On the other hand, a rather large coalition had lasted long enough to fight for the Rebels during the Usurper’s Rebellion.

“The Twins, Charlton, Vypren, Seagard, Acorn Hall, Stone Hedge, Raventree Hall and Maidenpool...must I continue?” Enough negative nods were expressed to ensure this was not going to be necessary.

“Fine, you’ve made your point.” Theon smirked. “But you will have to explain to Aegon why you want to divert one of his two fleets to burn the Brackens and the Blackwoods.” The young man who was considered at court by many as a better choice than this Florent-bootlicker of Rodrik Harlaw was showing his irritating behaviour once again. And the headache in Jacaerys’ skull was not getting more pleasant.

“I will explain to him. He will understand.” Or his cousin would send him once again draft new plans but hopefully by that point he would feel better. “After all, we have less than one year and a half before the new capital build-up is complete. With over five hundred ships of the line we will be able to crush Tywin Lannister and his greedy spawn in a couple of months. We just need to avoid war until then.”

“Easier said than done,” grumbled Aelyx. “I’m sure this little shit of Joffrey is doing all he can to antagonise the Republic of Braavos against us...”

**Sparrow Secret Base, 01.08.300AAC, Appleton Harvest System**

The hall was ruined and lacked everything an aristocrat would have considered the minimum comfort to spend a night here: elaborate decoration, servants, water and electricity. Over eighty years ago, this had been the part of a large summer residence owned by an eccentric Knightly House but the family had made the fatal mistake of backing Daemon Blackfyre and had been annihilated shortly after the bloody conclusion of the First Rebellion.

Situated dozens of kilometres away from the important population centres, it was an excellent site to organise illegal meetings. The location had been looted and subjected to the attention of several gangs; there was nothing valuable or remarkable left here and the law enforcement patrols routinely ignored the calls coming from the rare villages in the nearby valleys.

Maybe if they had known this was one of the top-secret meetings where the senior leadership of the Seven Sparrows gathered for the first and last time this year, the Appleton forces would have been slightly more dutiful to investigate smuggling activities in this quadrant of the planet.

But they didn’t. Four men and three women were standing in an informal circle, planning for their next move and the chances were infinitesimal the agents of Highgarden were going to catch them any time soon. After all, for this unlikely scenario to happen, the Lords and Ladies of the Reach had to admit the very terrorist organisation which had struck King’s Landing was hiding on the planets they ruled.

“Phase One is complete,” declared the High Sparrow. Old and crooked with long grey hair, he was by a large margin the oldest of the participants. “As predicted, the attack has brought considerable attention on the heretical and corrupt practises of the capital.”

“I can’t say I enjoyed the collateral damage caused by our bombs,” declared the Maiden Sparrow. She was a young woman of noble appearance, and her looks were pretty much the antithesis of the High Sparrow.

“We had not the choice,” the voice of the Sparrow Warrior who had organised the final details of the operation was grim. “The monster sitting on the Iron Throne has tainted the higher ranks of our Faith with his heretical poison. The septons promised to the King of Westeros over two centuries ago we would not fight anymore with weapons on the battlefield, but the Targaryens have not respected their word. A terrible shock was necessary to remind our brethren drinking the dragon’s poison has its consequences.”

“I agree,” said the Crone Sparrow. “Every demonstration not including violence would have been swept under the carpet by the Master of Information. The Targaryens only listen when someone hit them hard and place a dagger to their throat.”

The Stanger made the appropriate sign with his fingers but didn’t speak. Under his black cloak, the man never opened his mouth.

“Is it time to begin Phase Two?” asked politely the Smith-Sparrow. Dressed in a curious garb, the man looked very much the part of a mad scientist. “The ships are ready and our brothers all have received their preliminary instructions.”

“In this case...I suppose we must give the orders.” There was authentic regret in the voice of the Mother Sparrow. “The window of opportunity will soon close as these pig-headed Lords begin to fight for scraps of power.”

“I suppose there’s no need to vote?” The High Sparrow received six nods of assent. “In this case, this is decided. Phase Two begins...let’s pray for the courageous souls about to give their life for the Seven.”

“For the Seven and the salvation of the Seven Sectors!”

**Northgate System, 02.08.300AAC**

The Northgate System was something best avoided mentioning when there were loyalists veterans of the Usurper’s War in the vicinity. In theory, it was a system firmly integrated in the River Sector. In theory, the Northerners had promised to give it back in 286AAC, a concession they had made when the Peace of Maidenpool was signed.

But since the King of Westeros Rhaegar the First had not respected his obligations, Winterfell had in return ‘forgot’ to return the stellar system, to accept the new Noble House appointed by the Iron Throne and to not station any military unit around the planets.

After much grumbling, the Small Council and the rest of Westeros had been forced to accept this ‘intolerable’ situation. All the while the broadcasts of the Master of Information insulted the Northerners and lamented endlessly about the issue of good and proper Riverlanders living under the terrifying rule of the barbarians.

Needless to say, Petyr Baelish and his predecessor had taken some liberties with the truth. Northgate’s inhabitants were not oppressed. Hardy and stubborn as it was proper for a planet where six out of eight seasons were dangerous for an average human, the men, women and children had rejoiced a lot after the Usurper’s Rebellion. House Shieldgate was extinct – the last member had perished at the hands of Lord Eddard Stark himself – and the taxes had significantly decreased after a Governor-General was appointed to replace the existing ruling structure.

For a decade, the citizens of Northgate were not on the receiving end of the tariffs and commercial warfare imposed by rapacious trade companies operating from Willow Wood or the Twins. The consequence had been a neat improvement in their quality of life. There were still a small number of loyalists protesting, of course. But overall the population was very satisfied of their ‘Dreaded Stark Overlords’, like Galactic Targaryen News enjoyed demonising them.

Propaganda aside, Northgate was not really important either to the North or the River Sector. The number of humans living in this stellar system was thirty-five million, the industry was limited and the military contribution it could offer to its owner was low.

It was not really defensible. The single asteroid belt was far away from any jump point and the single gas giant was generating no anomalies to destabilise modern sensors.

Yet this unimportant system was the first target the Targaryens would have to take if one day they wanted to crush the Northern Sector militarily and rush to Moat Cailin. As such, there was always a small Northern flotilla patrolling it. The goal of this space force was just an alarm warning, obviously. No one from Last Heart to White Harbor had any hope a few scout cruisers could fight a Crown-River fleet and live. That was why Twelfth Fleet was positioned where it was.

No, the role of this space picket was to give the alert and then shadow the big formation of their enemies which would come for their homes, beginning a new bloody civil war. It had been a boring duty for the better part of sixteen years. This morning was the exception to the rule.

“We have two Red Moon-class scout cruisers of the Willow Wood Fast Reaction Force and one Void Shark-class heavy cruiser from the King’s Landing Home Fleet,” said the Lieutenant in charge of the tactical section aboard the light cruiser *City of Snow*. “They are Crown warships and aren’t hiding it. Do we listen to their supplications or are we launching the missiles first?”

It was a belligerent declaration for a Lieutenant to make...unless one knew the young man in question had lost his two elder brothers in the war against the Mad Dragons.

“Let’s listen to them first,” the Captain replied. “I have no love for the dragon minions, but I imagine the Admiralty will want a solid reason to know why my ship has reopened the hostilities.”

A few chuckles were heard on the light cruiser’s bridge.

“I imagine that even Targaryens aren’t going to launch a sneak attack with three ships,” the Northern ship commander hailing from White Harbor mused. “And between us and the rest of the flotilla, we can largely take them handily if they want a fight. Open communications with them.”

The command was acknowledged and a few minutes were spent waiting for the answer. The City of Snow was far from the jump point, and with these distances communications were rather long to establish...

The wait was interrupted in a rather unexpected manner when the holographic image of a silver-haired young woman appeared on the flag bridge. She was a Targaryen, and while the North was late in receiving the holo-newspapers from the rest of Westeros, the Northgate flotilla received frequent updates on the potential players and the Royal Family. As a result, the Captain had a very good idea who their interlocutor was...as well as the fact there had never been any warning the Rapist had ever intended to accept a custody exchange.

“I’m afraid this situation has just jumped well over our pay grade...”