**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 3**

**Games of Doom**

*Under the pretext I am an elite player of the game, people love to say cyvasse is the best existing hobby for an aspiring tactician-strategist.*

*Fools.*

*Cyvasse is a game and it will stay that way as long as leaders have something to think between their ears. Do the players simulate the moral of each piece every time he wants to move one? Are injuries, tiredness and defective equipment taken into account? Are you able to choose the very terrain you are going to challenge your opponent?*

*Oh, I don’t doubt several of the ardent students will have developed counter-arguments by the time I’ve finished speaking. Cyvasse is teaching a tactician to be always two or three steps ahead of your opponent, they will say. With this game, you are learning the strengths and the weaknesses of every unit under your command.*

*I could of course counter by the simple fact the flaws of a battlecruiser are not written on its hull, but it would be missing the point.*

*Cyvasse is not a good game to simulate strategy because you are bound to a set of rules.*

*In a space battle, your enemy isn’t going patiently to wait for your move before striking again. When an army crosses a river, the formations waiting on the other side will in general not wait the troops are dry, well-fed and rested before assaulting them. Diplomacy and military operations are so intertwined that nine times out of ten it is extremely hard to see where one ends and the other starts.*

*King Daemon I Blackfyre forgot this lesson and paid the price for it. He was noble and a renowned warrior. He was a paragon of chivalry and courtesy. He was the Conqueror reborn and far more charismatic than the Targaryen pretender sitting on the Iron Throne.*

*None of this mattered when Bloodraven killed him on the blood-soaked plains of Redgrass Field in the Stokeworth System. Were the actions of Brynden Rivers, the Great Bastard of House Blackwood, completely dishonourable? Yes, they were. An army commander sneaking on an enemy position and using two hundred snipers to slay the enemy claimant and his two eldest sons was a ruthless and cruel action spitting on centuries of war traditions.*

*But at the end of the day, Daemon I was dead, Bloodraven was alive and the Blackfyre cause had to flee on the other side of the Narrow Void to survive.*

*I will not make Daemon’s mistake.*

*Life is not a game. We learn from each of our failures, but it is best to remember that war is an unforgiving companion and too often, the cold embrace of death comes with the defeat.*

*I will not be bound by rules men have invented to justify their weaknesses.*

*I am Queen Rhaenyra Blackfyre, and I am going to teach them to fear the Black Dragon once more*.

**Lord Gerold Grafton, 09.09.300AAC, Gulltown System**

Ignorant smallfolk may believe moving a fleet in a tight formation from Point A to Point B was a simple affair, but in reality it needed hours of practise and experienced personnel. When said fleet was under fire, fires its weapons and had to take evasive manoeuvres, the difficulty was multiplied by at least a factor of twenty. Many fleets had this experience and battle-training ingrained in the minds of their operators. The Gulltown fleet – no, the First Vale Loyalist Fleet – was not one of them. The flash of one more battlecruiser slamming in an escort warship was evidence enough of that.

“Stop the simulation,” Lord Gerold Grafton grunted, ignoring the urge pushing him to scream and tear his grey hair by hand. “Send back three out of four officers to rest. We won’t accomplish anything by exhausting them more.”

The Master of Gulltown didn’t add ‘well-done’ or any compliment for the simulation which had just been tested. He could very well accept excuses, but the performance of his fleet senior’s captains was a catastrophe.

“Prepare the after-action reports for the next debriefing in eight hours. I trust everyone will have learned valuable lessons how not to underestimate River warships.”

In reality, he believed nothing of the sort, but it was best to show himself generous and optimistic. The Seven knew he must obtain every little advantage available to beat the forces of Jon Arryn.

As the long rectangular bridge of the *Pride of Gulltown* emptied of officers, non-commissioned men and simple spacemen, Gerold watched the figures once again. He had under his command twelve ships of the line, nine armoured cruisers, twenty-four battlecruisers, forty-eight heavy cruisers, sixty-three light cruisers, eighty scout cruisers and fifty-two frigates, supported by dozens of carriers and over forty-two thousand starfighters.

By any galactic standard it was a standard force and one capable to give plenty of headaches to his former Lord Paramount.

“But you anticipated this, didn’t you?” He murmured to himself.

Jon Arryn had indeed prepared well the battlefield. House Grafton, House Lynderly, House Upcliff and House Waxley had never been authorised to conduct joint exercises together or invited to the great war games at the Gates of the Moon. House Hardyng, House Hersy and House Waynwood had been more trusted, but their forces and the number of crew and hulls they could supply were smaller and far less capable.

As such, truth forced Gerold to admit he had not a fleet under his command, but a disparate coalition of smaller navies each having their own customs, tactics and doctrine. What had happened to the River Sector by lack of central authority, the Old Falcon had inflicted it on the bannersmen he couldn’t trust.

A small part of Lord Grafton’s mind wanted to curse the Lord of the Eyrie, but in the end Jon Arryn had been right, no? He, Lord Gerold Grafton, had remained loyal to King Rhaegar and forsaken the oaths sworn to the father for his pathetic son.

In turn, this meant they couldn’t raced westwards with this fleet and stop the one-sided punishments the forces of House Redfort, Arryn, Breakstone, Belmore and the others gave to their allies’ home systems.

Or rather he could, but his fleet was absolutely not ready, and would probably smash itself apart trying to fight a conventional battle. The core of the Grafton fleet was ready; the four Honour of Gulltown-class ships of the line, the three Lord Protector-class armoured cruisers and the eight Harrier-class battlecruisers were an experienced and unified force.

But sending what amounted to a heavy battle-group by Vale doctrine at an enemy having three times your strength didn’t sound like the greatest idea of the century.

Gerold didn’t like the idea, but he had little choice but to accelerate the training of his fleet and play a delaying game in the mean time. His allies were thoroughly unhappy with this strategy, but after seeing the results of the simulations, all had been forced to admit handing an all-out attack would be tantamount to hand an arm and a leg to the enemy.

Hardyng Hill and Wickenden were going to burn – or already burning in the former case – but his minelayers and static forces were waiting at Newkeep, Ironoaks and Gull Tower. The problem, of course, came from the issue the Houses of the Sisters were now sending hesitant promises – in other words, they were beginning to have cold feet concerning the whole enterprise despite raising high and loud their voices in favour of Robin Arryn.

His sons entered the bridge, and Gerold forced himself to harbour a faint smile. He was proud of each of his sons, but Vincent and Gregor had successfully risen to the command of their ships of the line with little help from him. They were good and reliable officers, and he felt safer having them on the *Honour of Gulltown* and *Shield of Gulltown*, though he had been forced to give them a temporary promotion to Rear Admiral least the other Lords refused their commands by lack of seniority.

Unlike him, his children were not smiling when they came into view and they showed no will to improve the expression on their faces. Gerold sighed. What sort of problem had started behind his back?

Vincent did not waste any time with small talk.

“Robin Arryn should be debarked on the planet and never been given a space command for the rest of his life,” declared bluntly his surviving eldest son.

The Lord of the Gulltown System felt the shadow of a headache coming back.

“You know why we can’t do this, Vincent,” if King Rhaegar was reigning, things might be different, but several emissaries and reports of panicked merchants had informed him of the change of governance at King’s Landing. His spies were a bit uncertain about how strong the foundations of Viserys’ new regime were, but there was little doubt the loyalist alliance had just lost of most of its support in the Crown Sector. If they wanted ships of the line to support them now, they would have to bend the knee to Prince Viserys Targaryen...and pray for the new pretender was feeling generous enough to send a battle-fleet their way.

Gulltown and its allies now stood alone, cut off from reinforcements, at least until Crown Prince Aegon, no, *King* Aegon, retook the capital.

“Father, we know there are political imperatives and that the ‘Young Falcon’ is just a facade while you do the real work, but...men are beginning to whisper. It would be one thing if he stayed quietly in his corner and learned the duties of an officer like every young noble is supposed to do,” said Gregor.

“But he’s not doing this,” continued Vincent. “He’s walking on the bridge and the command sections of the *Spear of the East* at irregular hours like a golden peacock. He’s never separated from his mother and there are already plenty of rumours he never stopped suckling her tits. He is rude towards the officers who followed him by conviction and loyalty. He doesn’t show any respect to anyone who isn’t highborn and a Senior Captain. His turkey-mother indulges all his whims and tantrums.”

“Maybe in another Sector, people would tolerate him, but this is the Vale, Father, and Jon Arryn has not the reputation of a wastrel or a cruel man. We know for a fact they are plenty of influential people in the allied systems that are starting to whisper Jon Arryn was perfectly right to ban his son from the Eyrie’s succession...”

“Has it turned that bad in so little time?” His sons nodded gravely. “Fine. Give me a couple of days, and I will find Admiral Robin Arryn and his...mother...an important but ultimately completely useless title planet-side. He will keep the rank he gave himself, a nice palace to throw his tantrums until he becomes more reasonable, and our soldiers and crewmen will sleep better.”

This was the moment the alarms began to scream and sadly this time, Gerold knew it wasn’t a surprise simulation. He had not planned one for the next twelve hours...which meant an enemy force had translated inside Gulltown.

“So Lord Royce has decided to test the waters and see if we have sufficiently weakened our rear...” It was the logical assumption. Lord Yohn Royce was only a jump away, and by the vagary of alliances and star strategic alignment, he was cut off from his liege lord. And those who knew the Bronze Yohn knew he wasn’t the kind of man who was going to stay idle as war engulfed the Vale.

But when the black dots began to materialise on the tactical display, they didn’t come from the jump point of Runestone. No panicked reports came from the Lynderly picket to report they were fighting a Royce squadron and had hundreds of missiles incoming.

No, the dark dots were appearing on the outer edge of the system, four or five million kilometres away from the refineries of Galinar, second gas giant of the Gulltown System. Since there was absolutely no jump point so far away from the gravity well of the system’s star, this meant a deep space-translation.

“Contact Ser Uther Shett,” he was the knight defending this quadrant of his lordship. “I want to know who these intruders are.”

For several seconds, he prayed this was a just minor raid to test the defences of his home. Maybe the pretender Viserys had wanted to make a show of force with a few light units he could spare from Dragonstone and King’s Landing. But the black dots were multiplying and multiplying again, and it became obvious after half a minute this was no raiding force. This was an enemy fleet...and for the moment, the consoles had not recognised the energetic signatures of a single unit in their data-bases. Either the Dragonstone fleet had found a way to deceive his best monitoring stations’ sensors...or these ships didn’t belong to the Crown Navy. But if this was the case, who did they belonged to? This side of the Narrow Void, Gulltown, White Harbor, King’s Landing and Dragonstone were the only fleets of note to have a massive amount of commissioned Deep Space warships.

And then the mystery stopped to be one as the grim face of Ser Uther Shett appeared on one of the communication screens.

“We have a good visual on their flagship, my Lord. It is a super-battleship, and though it has been somewhat refitted since the last time, there isn’t any doubt. It is the *Bittersteel*, flagship of the Golden Company.”

“The *Bittersteel*?” He repeated like a talking bird. This was...what in the Seven Hells were they doing here? The Golden Company had been the spear tip of the Blackfyres Rebellions decades ago, but the descendants of the Great Bastards had died countless times and Maelys the Monstrous had perished against Barristan the Bold. The Blackfyre exiles were dead and long forgotten.

“Their fleet, while impressive, is inferior to ours, though as there are a lot of Essossi designs, we will have a slight disadvantage one-on-one due to their energy shields. But they have one super-battleship, six ships of the line, four armoured cruisers or equivalents, twenty battlecruisers, forty heavy cruisers and dozens of escorts and support ships,” affirmed the Shett knight. “They are moving rather slowly in direction of Galinar right now, but their acceleration is constantly rising and their transports are staying behind according to the latest reports.”

“Thank you, Ser Uther,” Gerold replied calmly. “Withdraw in our direction and continue to update your strength estimates.”

The heaviest unit the young man had under his command was a heavy cruiser; sending him against the Bittersteel would be not only completely useless, but would not improve spirits aboard the fleet or raise the opinion his spacemen had of him. No, he had to take time to regroup his dispersed units, stop all the exercises and minor overhauls and concentrate his fleet in a single formation. Then he was going to crush the Golden Company.

“Yes, my Lord.”

Still, what were they doing there? Had Jon Arryn somehow found a way to pay their ruinous wages? There was a reason these sellswords were called the *Golden* Company, and it was not because they were cheap and affordable. The problem with this theory was that Myr, Tyrosh or Lys could offer far better income and long-term resources than a single Westerosi Lord Paramount. No, Jon Arryn would not give these sellswords the right to plunder at will half of the Vale Sector...House Arryn had excellent reasons to distrust the Golden Company.

Abandoning this mystery for the time being, Gerold began to give new orders to his sons and the officers who around him were running back to their posts.

“Vincent, Gregor, please return to your commands and prepare your men for battle. Condition Red-One is in effect for the entire System. Captain Gater, pass the word every warship able to leave the shipyards in battle-ready conditions must do so. Rear-Admiral Waxley, the fleet will move to intercept the sellsword-fleet using Plan Halo. The carriers must stay one million kilometres behind and prepare for a half-deck strike. Once this is done...”

Close to seventy minutes passed, and slowly but surely, his fleet became a proper instrument of war. Of course, Plan Halo called for large security distances between the heart of his formation of ships of the line, armoured cruisers and battlecruisers. The light cruisers, scout cruisers and other lighter units were surrounding them in a corona of light. This guaranteed the disastrous simulations would not be repeated explosively in reality and that if the enemy fleet had somehow more units trying to sneak in the system, he would know it with minutes of advance.

“My Lord, a message from the enemy fleet...”

Well, this was not too early, the Master of Gulltown mused.

“Do you have the origin of the transmission?”

“No, my Lord, it is relayed in tight sequence between all their heavy ships...”

Interesting, but the commanders of the Golden Company were certainly on the *Bittersteel* anyway.

It was a super-battleship, it was conceived for fleet-command operations and it had the greatest offensive and defensive capabilities of the enemy fleet.

“Play the message on the tactical display and make sure there is no connection between their ships and ours,” he commanded. It was best to avoid any nasty surprise born in the minds of electronic warfare specialists.

“Yes, my Lord.”

Gerold had expected a man in golden armour to appear before him. The speaker may not be a grey-beard, but certainly a killer with ambition and greed in his eyes. There was a chance in three or four the sellsword was going to demand a large tribute or some monetary compensation to avoid the carnage and...

Instead, it was a young woman in an unknown black-silver uniform who appeared on the bridge of the *Pride of Gulltown*. For a second, Lord Gerold Grafton thought she was a Targaryen Princess...but if the woman had undoubtedly the purple eyes and the silver hairs of the Valyrians, it was not a visage which had ever been presented on the holo-news.

“My name is Rhaenyra Blackfyre,” declared without a trace of warmth the woman. “I have come to claim the Crown of the Seven Sectors. Your system will be the first to bend the knee and recognise my claim. Since I feel indulgent, I give you fifteen minutes to abandon your interception course, power down your weapons and surrender. If you don’t, I will show you no mercy. Each and every one of your men will be killed. Your families will be sold in slavery and all your possessions will be confiscated. Know that there will be no second chance; loyalty will be rewarded and resistance will be crushed in blood. The fifteen minutes begin now, think and make the correct choice. Rhaenyra Blackfyre, out.”

 There was a moment of silence then there was the first reaction.

“Father Above, what an arrogant bitch...”

There were a lot of snickering and noises of approval before Gerold told them to resume their duties. There was a battle incoming and a lot of preparations were not complete.

“Nice bluff,” said Vice-Admiral Lord Jasper Hardyng on the *Red Shield*. “But this poor girl can’t read a tactical display to save her life. It’s obvious she has miscalculated...”

Gerold toned down the rest of the speech. The Lord of Hardyng Hill had been a pain to cope with since the news Jon Arryn was going on a rampage had arrived to Gulltown, and it looked like the impending battle was not making him more cautious or reasonable.

“My Lord, the acceleration of the enemy is decreasing again...”

Why would they stop accelerating now? And then the Admiral commanding the First Vale Loyalist Fleet understood.

“Flare your sensors and begin to evade! They have positioned a minefield to-“

Then thousands of tiny dots began to appear and the Lord of Gulltown knew he had understood the Blackfyre’s strategy too late.

**Queen Rhaenyra Blackfyre, 09.09.300AAC, Gulltown System**

The Westerosi and Essossi Admirals loved to pretend they were different. The Westerosi enjoyed vilifying the other side of the Narrow Void, calling them a bunch of slavers, like the way they treated their serfs and their smallfolk was worthy of praise and sainthood. The Essossi liked pretending the Westerosi were barbarians because they had not been founded by Valyrian colonists.

In Rhaenyra’s opinion, men were men, and frankly once all the blusters and the hypocrisy were removed, you obtained a very similar social hierarchy, except one was based on trade while the other defined its rule on military strength.

Take the subject of minefields, for example. If a Westerosi or an Essossi fleet arrived in an enemy-held system, they were going to assume there were plenty of minefields around, and calculate their moves in consequence.

But in their home system?

Oh no, the home system was safe and secure. Changing the frequencies of their sensors didn’t require much effort, but she had studied six years of reports and noted there had only been two instances the authorities of Gulltown had ordered an extensive survey to ensure everything was where it was supposed to be.

As such, there had been no oversight when her minelayers masquerading as merchants had emplaced their deadly cargo one month ago.

Some might argue it was cheating. Obviously, she had the psychological profiles of Lord Gerold Grafton and most of the tactical data from the battles he had fought in his life.

But war was not a game, and Rhaenyra was here to conquer, not to play.

If the loyalists who had rebelled against Jon Arryn didn’t cheat, then they were clearly not trying hard enough to win.

“The Vale fleet is entering the minefield.”

“Thank you, Admiral Saan.”

The outcome was particularly devastating. The Vale fleet had understood too late what she intended to do to them – the message she had sent them may have angered them sufficiently – and in the shadow of Galinar, they had not noticed the minefield until they were entering it.

In one instant, hundreds of explosions lightened the system. The light cruisers and scout cruisers of the first ranks were blasted apart. They had no energy shielding, little armour and they were totally caught by surprise.

Rhaenyra’s fleet still was one and a half million kilometres away, so the details were a bit blurry, but it appeared over twenty light cruisers and twenty-five-plus scout cruisers had been transformed into balls of plasma.

Mere heartbeats later, the heavy cruisers and the battlecruisers arrived in the death zone. And in the darkness they began to die too. Some had managed to evade and change trajectory, but this kind of risky manoeuvres was dangerous. Two heavy cruisers collided, and were instantly wiped out from the face of the universe. Four chose to charge in the inferno, and while they survived, they were sporting hundreds of wounds and losing water, air and debris as they emerged from the minefield.

New stars were born as one battlecruiser and six heavy cruisers came apart.

But the screen, one might argue, had played perfectly its role. The scout cruisers and their escort cousins had suffered atrocious losses, but the armoured cruisers and ships of the line were almost intact when they passed through. One or two mines, the capital ships could endure and it looked some didn’t even suffer that.

“Remember me to spread our mines a bit more, next time,” she told to one of the young men serving in her staff. “The light and scout cruisers destroyed ten percent more than our average simulations.”

“Yes, Arch-Dominarch!”

As amusing as it was to use Westerosi use their warships as extremely costly minesweepers, the light units had never been the problem. It was the ships of the line she was here to neutralise permanently?

“What is now your plan, Arch-Dominarch?” demanded politely Salladhor Saan from the bridge of the *Valyrian*. “I must admit you got them with their pants down this time, and inflicted them considerable losses, but their carriers are intact and it looks like the Gulltown High Command is launching its entire complement of starfighters.”

The Lysene pirate-corsair raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“According to my scouts, they have close to...ah...forty-two thousand-plus starfighters. I hope you factored them into your plans because they will be firing their missiles in our decoy’s force in twenty-six minutes...”

“Admiral Saan,” Rhaenyra allowed herself a large smile. “What makes you think I laid *one* minefield?”

**Lord Gerold Grafton, 09.09.300AAC, Gulltown System**

The bridge crew of the Pride of Gulltown was staring at their consoles, screens and tactical displays in horror.

*By the Crone and the Maiden, what I am fighting against*?

Gerold chased this thought, but he could not forget it. Not when his great wave of starfighters had just been shattered when three ‘abandoned orbital installations’ on his right flank had just poured into the void over one million anti-fighter mines and missiles just as the pilots pushed their engines in attack mode.

The next ten seconds were just a one-sided butchery. Many inexperienced pilots jettisoned their missiles and other weapons in order to escape the torrent of death...a logical decision but a flawed one, as mines exploded when put in contact with the ordnance.

By chance and the simple fact a starfighter wave of this size was incredibly wide, the trap didn’t wipe out all his fighting strength...but they disappeared nonetheless by thousands.

“Our losses?” He managed to articulate.

“Preliminary reports...fourteen thousand mission-killed and more than five thousand severely damaged...and thousands have no longer anything to attack a single target.”

“Call them back,” exhaustion burdened his body, but he fought it and maintained his eyes on the black dots of the tactical display.

“My Lord, we have still seven or eight thousand starfighters mission-capable...”

“And they will have to fight disorganised and tired an unshaken wall of battle. You also forget we haven’t seen a single muzzle of their starfighters. Given the reputation of the Golden Company, I find extremely hard to believe they will have ordered their machines to stay at home.”

But it was completely galling to be surprised trap after trap like this...he was in his stellar system, damn it! What had the inspectors and the patrol ships doing these last months? They had assured him not a spy could whisper in someone’s ears without his guards hunting him, but obviously their promises had been a bit enthusiastic...for someone evidently had found a way to emplace millions of mines and nobody had found it before now!

“Tell the frigates behind us to begin an extensive sweep of the entire system!” His fists slammed on metal. “I have seen enough traps and ambushes for today...”

And then suddenly the black dots they were closing the distance with changed...

“DRONES! Those are third-generation drones!”

“Impossible! Their fleet must be...”

And one million and fifty thousand kilometres behind his fleet, new black dots appeared. The Blackfyre fleet was deactivating its furtive systems and firing on his defenceless carriers, who were currently trying to rearm and repair the survivors of the second trap...

The *Bittersteel* and six ships of the line charged at plasma range, and the carriers died by the dozens. At close range like this, the capital ships were at their strongest and the non-armoured starfighter-carriers were easy prey. Agony screams filled every frequency as their compartments and bridges were disintegrated. Hangar bays became infernos and entire companies try to reach the escape pods before the ships ceased to exist.

“Turn us around! Turn us around now!”

“Minefield! Minefield on 1-9-3!”

A hurricane of missiles arrived by the rear and the *Crested Goshawk* of Admiral Lord Jon Lynderly died.

The Deep Space ship of the line *Resistance* of Rear-Admiral Lord Benedict Upcliff was torn apart as a wound six hundred metres-long opened on its right flank and Gerold was sure a third of the crew had died in less than five seconds. The *Winged Chalice* of Lord Hersy was losing section after section and its engines flickered. The three Warden of the East-class armoured cruisers went nova. The *Chequered Wing* of Ser Damon Shett was vaporised when two scout cruisers didn’t manage to evade its involuntary ramming attempt.

The next minutes were just a desperate succession of awful decisions. The *Honour of Gulltown*, his son Vincent’s command died in the next twenty seconds. Light cruisers and scout cruisers died more and more, the heavy cruisers were shattered and two White-headed Hawk-class battlecruisers went silent as the fires and explosions aboard went out of control.

For a minute, he still believed they were going to escape the trap...and then the *Spear of the East*, Robin Arryn’s own flagship and one of the capital warships to show the least damaged by this point, broke formation and pushed its engine to full power.

It was not racing towards the enemy to engage. It was...it was running away.

“Tell the *Spear of the East* to come back into the formation!” the *Pride of Gulltown* trembled under the impacts of laser-head warheads.

“Admiral...they don’t answer...”

“I should have listened to my sons and sent you to the nursery, Robin Arryn...” He taped a general order declaring the coward traitor to all his surviving ships and went on to bark more desperate orders.

More warships were fleeing now, and who was he to say they wrong? They were in another minefield, the enemy fleet was arriving from behind and from the other flank, thousands of starfighters were coming to finish the job.

“Contact the *Shield of Gulltown*! Tell my son he is to take command of the rest of the fleet! My ship and the last heavy cruisers will cover their escape!”

“Acknowledged, my...”

On the screen, the *Death’s Candle* of Ser Edmund Waxley succumbed to a volley of missiles and the entire world rolled out of control. Up was down and down was up, the fires were everywhere...

When Gerold managed to look up to the display again, he saw blue dots fleeing...but there were so few of them...

His last warships were dying and as pain pierced his flesh and his bridge was transformed into a slaughterhouse, he saw the black dots engulfing the remnants of what had been six hours ago the First Vale Loyalist Fleet.

He had been constantly outmanoeuvred...

“I recognise my defeat...Blackfyre. I wonder...if the Old Falcon...can stop you...”

The missiles struck a last time and Gerold Grafton’s vision was filled with light.

**Ser Donnel Waynwood, 09.09.300AAC, Gull Tower System**

Donnel waited until he was in his cabin to cry. Morton was dead, and it had taken all he had in him to not break in front of his men. His eldest brother was dead, and he had not been able to do anything to avenge him.

The Rear-Admiral of the Vale fell on his bed, sobbing and crying. Morton was dead and several of his cousins had lost their lives, not to mention thousands of spacemen and officers from House Waynwood he had grown to consider friends.

Dead, all of them.

And if the *Fortitude* had not been a Deep Space ship of the line, slower than its conventional cousins, he certainly would have shared their fate. Of the twelve Vale ships of the line which had fought the Battle of Gulltown, only three had survived.

The *Pride of Gulltown*, the *Red Shield*, the *Winged Chalice*, the *Death’s Candle*, *the Resistance*, the *Second Rampart*, *the Crested Goshawk*...all of them were gone.

The *Shield of Gulltown* had somehow survived, though it was a ruin and it would not fight another battle this year...maybe not that year, for that matter. His own command, the *Fortitude* was damaged but still able to fight...and the *Spear of the East* was still running, having translated for the Ironoaks System with all celerity.

Of all the shocks they had received in the last hours, it had to be the worst. Being beaten like children by a girl five years younger than them was humiliating. Falling in uncountable traps while they were supposed to hold the system was a humiliation. But seeing the Lord you had sworn your vows flee like a coward and abandon you to the enemy? Yes, of all the blows he and his men had received today, this was the last straw.

With great difficulty, he stopped crying. Nine ships of the line, seven armoured cruisers, twenty battlecruisers, forty-five heavy cruisers, fifty-six light cruisers, seventy-one scout cruisers, forty frigates, two fleet carriers, twenty-six light carriers, sixty-two escort carriers and over forty thousand starfighters.

That was how much they had lost in a few hours of battle. They had lost Gulltown. They had lost everything. His brother, their honour, their reason to fight, their pride...everything.

Their cause was finished.

Even if the Blackfyre fleet didn’t come in pursuit in a few hours, Rear-Admiral Gregor Grafton and he had exactly two ships of the line, two armoured cruisers, four battlecruisers, three heavy cruisers, nine light cruisers, nine scout cruisers and twelve frigates with some dozen starfighters.

And even this enumeration wasn’t telling the truth. Most of these warships were eviscerated, torn apart, gutted and open to the void. Not a quarter of them would be able to crawl to their deaths if they met something more dangerous than a scout cruiser.

So many deaths...some logistic officers had begun to estimate the nightmarish body-count, but he knew already it was going to be awful. Most of the fleet was gone and there had been largely more than three hundred thousand men to crew all the warships lost...

It was not supposed to be like this. The Blackfyres were supposed to be ghosts, their name a faint memory to scare children...not...not that!

Maybe when he woke up, this frightening defeat would reveal to be nothing more than a nightmare...but in his heart he knew it wasn’t true.

\*\*\*\*

*After the Heresy of Fawnton, the absolute success of Operation Waterfall was a monumental catastrophe for the cause of King Aegon VI Targaryen. Losing a skirmish or two was unavoidable when a war was fought across hundreds of systems. Losing three major battles in less than ten days, however, was a propaganda nightmare.*

*King’s Landing had fallen to King Viserys, thus giving away the capital and the – theoretical – governance of the realm to another.*

*With Operation Cataclysm, the greatest force of Storm Loyalists was decimated and millions lost their lives. With the Battle of Gulltown, House Grafton and most of the Vale Noble Houses willing to accept the rule of the Red Dragon perished or submitted.*

*In ten days, King Rhaegar and King Aegon VI had lost the Crown, Storm and Vale Sectors, and all evidence pointed it would take years of war and trillions of investment to have a chance to reconquer them.*

*And yet these were the opening moves of the War of the Ten Warlords...*

Extract from How not to wage a galactic war, by Septon Mortis, 315AAC.

**Lord Eddard Stark, 10.09.300AAC, Winterfell System**

“Now, young Ladies...”

“And Princesses,” added Visenya in an amused tone.

“Now, young Princesses and Ladies, have you something to say in your defence? Smuggling dragons and direwolves aboard a Northern warship is a serious crime!”

Eddard wondered if the other Lords Paramount had to deal with such strange issues with their Heirs, children and relatives. For the Seven Sectors’ sake, he hoped it was not the case.

“Baela?”

Lyanna’s daughter showed a thoughtful face before finally settling on her final justification.

“Well, it is obviously Arya’s fault. My little cousin totally lacks discretion and smuggling skills.”

“Hey! That’s not true!” protested the accused party.

“Yes it is! By the Old Gods, the sergeants heard you at the other end of the super-battleship!”

“You can talk! They surprised your dragon begging for meat in the kitchens!”

Eddard did not put his head in his hands, sigh loudly or began to pray for a divine inspiration to strike him, but this was because he was the Lord of Winterfell and as the supreme commander of all the military forces, he had to behave like he was in control. The moral of his troops had to be kept high...no matter what sort of incidents his children, nieces and subordinates got up to.

“ENOUGH!” he shouted when it became clear Arya was finding new ridiculous excuses to amplify the chaos she had herself created. “Arya, I am really disappointed in you. You are supposed to study at the Winterfell Academy and learn to behave like a proud daughter of House Stark, not smuggle overweight animals on warships in preparation to leave for the frontlines! Visenya, Baela, your responsibility is to restrain her, not to support her. Since you obviously feel this was worth a good laugh, your next months will have a lot of chore duties and extra-punishments. I have also decided to change the location where you will experience the joys of boot camp. Since it is obvious you didn’t want to go to the Last Hearth System, perhaps the warm forests of House Mormont will be more to your taste.”

Of course, Baela had already done this once to gain Lieutenant rank, but as the supreme commander of the Northern military forces, it had been easy for him to approve the creation of the ‘Northern Dragon Corps’.

You had three tries to guess the names of the first two Corps’ recruits and the first two didn’t count.

“Err...is the main planet of the Bear Island System not plunged in an eternal neo-arctic climate?”

“Yes, yes...I believe it is.” Not to mention there were the Mormont women and men to...curb their eccentricities and teenage angst. Maege and her eldest daughters were needed at the Wall, of course, but some of her Generals should up to the job of training two mischievous dragon riders. And if not, well he would be far away from the cryo and pyrotechnics.

Fifteen minutes later of contestations, protests, shouts, howls and dragon screams, he was finally alone. Well, alone with Maester Luwin and a large direwolf trying his best to pretend he was an adorable part of the furniture.

“Please keep an eye on my daughter, Luwin...” the Lord of Winterfell said watching one of his preferred holo-videos of the stars and suns of the Northern Sector. Sometimes, he dearly wished he could just walk on an observation bridge and watch the galaxy by his own eyes...but security and pragmatism always won in the end. Assassins, failing equipment, unpredictable disasters and missiles had the habit of challenging the odds and striking at the worst possible moment. “She is so much like Lyanna, the strengths and the flaws...”

“Of course, my Lord,” The old man bent his head slightly, before curling his lips in a thin smile. “She is in a way a souvenir of a better time, is she not?”

“The times were not so dark before Harrenhal, this is true...or perhaps we were too innocent...our eyes weren’t open to what was wrong in this reality...”

Yes, better times and too often in the last decades Eddard had wished sometimes he could go back in the past to change something, anything, to prevent his brother, his sister and his father from dying in the Rebellion. But no one had ever been able to stop the clocks for a heartbeat, and these wishes were sand in his dreams. The North needed him and so he had hardened his heart and moved on.

War was now upon them, and the Others were not renowned for their generosity, their tendency to treat well their prisoners or give mercy to the defeated.

“Let’s go back to the figures and see if everything adds up a last time, Luwin. Like I said three days ago, we will go to the Wall with twenty-four ships of the line, forty-eight armoured cruisers and sixty battlecruisers for our capital ships. Between our Braavosi friends and our industrial output, we will have in our ammunition ships approximately fifty million fifth-generation missiles...”

**Queen Rhaenyra Blackfyre, 10.09.300AAC, Gulltown System**

Gulltown was hers.

Rhaenyra supposed she should feel delighted, but honestly, conquering the stellar system had been the easy part.

Now she had to rule it and lay the foundations of a new realm, and from the start she knew this was where most of the sovereign pre and post-Conquest had often failed. Just ask the opinion of Maegor the Cruel: a brute without rival on the battlefield but unable to utter an edict without angering tens of thousands smallfolk and highborn.

“My uncle will arrive tomorrow,” she announced to the high officers standing in what had been a reception hall for one of House Grafton’s many palaces. “And when he does, I will give him the control of the new Blackfyre Intelligence Services. He will also retain his title of Master of Whisperers.”

Several nods were made, not that the young woman had expected any protests. Coordinating the spies and information resources’ acquisitions was not the career-enhancing move most people dreamt about.

“Since they have refused my offers, I see no reason to be nice to House Grafton or any of their supporters. By royal order, they are declared traitors, all their possessions, money accounts, air-cars and other assets are thereby confiscated.”

“Your Grace, the Graftons are not extinct and they are other Houses...”

Rhaenyra glared at the courtier who was simpering and wasting her time. So were her admirals and captains.

“I explained to Lord Grafton exactly what terms I was going to impose on his House should he not surrender. He chose to fight. Now, Gulltown and all the Houses who chose to die arms in hand will suffer the consequences.”

“But your Grace, merciful policies and amnesties will go a long way to project a benevolent image...”

And the Westerosi nobility prided itself to adapt when times were hard and politic changes upset the political climate.

“The nobility of Gulltown seem under the amusing delusion I want to govern this kingdom with them by my side,” Rhaenyra answered with a disappointed expression. “Let me assure you this is totally untrue.”

The man became paler and paler, and his arms and hands trembled.

“Perhaps I could have given unfavourable terms if the upper classes of this system had proven valuable in military or economic affairs. But this isn’t the case. Your trade balance is largely in deficit, and your naval forces were shattered the moment I wanted to extinguish them. Your industry investments have been badly handled, and the lower social classes have been literally crushed by the weight of new and old taxes.”

Slowly, she stood for the crowd and the holo-cameras to see her in her black-silver uniform.

“The Noble House of Grafton, the Masterly Houses Arryn and Shett of Gulltown, the Knightly Houses of Koren, Mercer and Tyrnarrow...all of them fought twice, first against the Arryn forces and then against me. Both times they were crushed, and I am not as indulgent as your Lord Paramount. By my voice, all the Houses having supported Lord Grafton in his foolish endeavour are stripped of their titles, palaces, income, lands and will be enslaved before being sold on the other side of the Narrow Void to repay the debt they owed to their society. Twenty-eight great merchant houses which have helped them waste the wealth of Gulltown into their bottomless purses will share their fate.”

She took a pause, not so much to breathe largely but because she wanted those who listened to have her words really sink in their mind.

“Before this year is out, I want this system to become the peerless industrial powerhouse it should have become under the false dragon’s rule. Orbital foundries and factories will be re-administered by the Blackfyre Crown should their owners prove incompetent, cruel or corrupt. And to lead this effort, a new House will lead Gulltown to new heights. Now that the sons of House Grafton have fled with their tails between their legs, Captain-General Harry Strickland has graciously accepted my boon to become the new Lord of the Gulltown System.”

Her supporters and captains burst in applause, and she saw plenty of faces even in the junior ranks become more attentive and ambitious. Until now, they had not had any tangible evidence to be convinced, but now one of their own had been rewarded.

And Gulltown, with its seven billion and three hundred-plus million people, was not exactly a small and unimportant hub. House Strickland, once a mid-level Noble House of the Reach, had not been forgiven and had to flee on the other side of the Narrow Void each time a Rebellion ended in failure. Now their loyalty had been at last rewarded...and it let her use a capable administrator in a position he was best suited.

Naturally, a lot of courtiers and low-level local players were presenting sour visages at the end of her speech. Since they were here, they had one way or another escaped the large-scale purge which had begun the moment they had surrendered, but clearly it was not going to be good for their secret accounts, luxurious lodges at level 180 of Skyscraper Del Sol or the various vices they had entertained for the last couple of centuries.

Rhaenyra didn’t really care, as she marched out of the hall, escorted by four dozen of her best guards. Her main preoccupation was to lower the taxes of the working classes, convince the Vale army stationed on the planet to stand with her, improve the working conditions of the productive men and women...all ultimately to win this war.

If she had to enslave the parasites calling themselves nobles and sell them to the highest bidder at Pentos, Myr or Tyrosh, then she was going to do so and with great pleasure.

It was several hours later, as she had allowed herself a small rest in a small couch that Salladhor Saan arrived with a new list of people who had declared themselves her enemies.

“The main septs of Gulltown have declared you an abomination born of the darkest heresy...”

The list of perversions, heresies and demonic-worshipping she was accused of was really impressive. Rhaenyra stretched herself before giving her back her answer.

“They are calling for rebellion, aren’t they?”

“And they are attracting a lot of people...your stance on enslaving the nobles has made you really popular among the lower classes, I have no doubt about that, but the prim and proper merchants and their friends have fuelled a lot of gold to agitate their friends the septons...”

“And they hope threat of planet-scale insurrection will convince me to stop my reforms...”

If she had been a Seven-believer, it might have convinced her to soften her first royal orders. But she wasn’t, and the Faith had grown bloated, corrupt and uncaring since Maegor I. Now she was going to remind them their screams had consequences.

“Tell the Golden Company to encircle the septs and prepare for a few localised orbital strikes...let’s see if the Gods protect them when a heretic calls the wrath of the heavens upon them.”

Three hours later, the surviving septons and their money-backers were arrested, the smoke of the septs’ ruins giving a pointed warning the status quo tolerated by House Grafton was dead and gone.

Gulltown was hers...and the first reinforcements from Pentos and the other Free Planets were starting to translate in-system.

**Lady Alysanne Arryn, 11.09.300AAC, Newkeep System**

The reception hall of the *Azure Falcon* was usually full of life and laughter. It was not far from the super-battleship’s bridge, and since it had no pure military function, many officers, spacemen and guards used it to discuss their hobbies and good moments.

Not today. Today was special...in a lot of ways.

A miniature throne with a falcon throne had been installed at one end of the hall, and a long dark blue carpet was covering a third of the floor. On each side of it, three ranks of soldiers and spacemen of the Eyrie were waiting, equipped weapons in hand and battle-armours protecting their bodies from head to toe.

Alysanne too had been ordered to wear a battle-armour, though hers was customised and lighter – given her lack of experience, it was out of the question she fought in the frontlines. Her armour’s dorsal reactors were more powerful, on the other hand, and she could travel faster and higher in the skies. But as tempting as it was to recite her armour’s characteristics, she returned to watching the assembly.

There was no laughter, no chuckle or no small conversation. There was just a deadly silence of bad omen.

“Let him enter,” her father ordered, and the metallic doors opened silently.

And her brother entered.

When Alysanne had been informed Robin had betrayed everything the Arryn lineage stood for and fled with the harpy she was supposed to call ‘mother’, she had expected to never see him again in person. In the best scenario she had been able to think for, the next time Robin and she would talk, one would be the prisoner of the other and execution would be imminent for the defeated party. But there should have been months of war before this, maybe years if the civil war of the Vale was fought in a non-conclusive manner. Like everyone else, she had been caught with her mouth wide open when the *Spear of the East* had rushed in the blockade the loyal Vale Navy had weaved around the Hersy defences.

The time of reckoning had come, and Alysanne admitted she was terrified in a way because she didn’t know at all what her father was going to do. Was he going to forgive Robin and give him back his titles and status? It was extremely unlikely, and yet she dreaded this possibility. Or was the execution chamber waiting somewhere on the *Azure Falcon*? She had seen already so many people die at Hardyng Hill and Wickenden when the traitor garrisons were punished by mass assault and summary executions...

“Father,” one thing the guards and she had admitted when she had seen the traitor troops deliver their liege into custody, was that the boy she had once called ‘brother’ was presenting a pathetic appearance.

His blonde hairs were dishevelled, and his blue eyes were haggard but these were minor issues compared to the horrible state of his uniform. Robin had tried to put an Admiral uniform with all the regalia which came with it. Aside from the fact it was a rank which by all rights had never been granted to him by father or any figure of authority, Robin had not the charisma or the presence to wear it. It looked like he had tried to wear it like his favourite pyjamas, and made a mess of it. There was evidence he had often eaten or cried and used the expensive piece of cloth to clean what his mouth and his eyes couldn’t handle.

“By blood, you are my son,” recognised father after ten long seconds where Robin fidgeted and danced on one feet, neither having the courage nor the wits to realise he had to throw himself to the Lord’s feet and implore his pardon. “The DNA-testing unfortunately confirmed this.”

“Father...” to say Robin gave a good pleading expression was impossible to say. It was best to say he bleated like a sick sheep. Well, he had the sick part right at least, since more coughs followed. Alysanne wondered when it was the time her sibling had taken his medicine, before realising she didn’t care. The specialists from Lys that father had hired had healed her of this problem years ago, and while today she had still from time to time health problems, she could get away with one or two small tablet per fortnight. But their ‘mother’ had refused to let her ‘sweet Robin’ out of her sight or admit the cure would require a large commitment from her eldest...Alysanne shuddered at the idea that if she had been the eldest, it would have been hers to endure her mother’s ‘affections’.

“But by your acts, Robin Arryn, you have proved the greatest disgrace of this House in a hundred generations.”

“Father...”

“I can accept that a Lord wants to put his oaths to House Targaryen and the Iron Throne over those they swore to me. I don’t like it, I don’t understand how my people can think worshipping these arrogant spawns born of incest and genetic manipulations can be a good thing, and I don’t see the awe of licking their boots when they have lost their dragons more than one hundred and fifty years ago! But if like Lord Grafton and the others you had sworn your sword to a Targaryen for the conviction you were doing the right thing and helping to build a new Westeros, I could have accepted it. But it was not the case, wasn’t it?”

“I was forced...” even as it was obvious he was alone to defend his case, Robin never stopped looking around, like he was expecting their mother to barge in and save the day. Alas for him, this forlorn hope had no chance to happen. Then he looked like he had a crisis or a panic attack. “It was the Blackfyres, father! It was them the traitors! The butchers! It was them! Hang them! Hang the traitors!”

Judging by the dark looks, this outburst had given her eldest brother no friends. The Battle of Gulltown fought against the Golden Company was still a mysterious affair – the analysts had only the data-banks of the *Spear of the East* to create their reports and the warship had taken a massive beating – but given his role in the debacle, Robin should have avoided this point at all costs.

“You, my son, are a coward.” The affirmation was delivered bluntly and ruthlessly. “You have no redeeming qualities I can discern. When the time came to prove yourself, you abandoned those who supported you militarily, politically and financially. You forsook your oaths, your family and your *honour*.

“I didn’t know...mother...”

“Your mother is a foolish woman who believes compassion and love are insincere if they are not repeated from dawn to dusk. She is the very example why no young Heir or Heiress must be allowed to forget his or her House’s words. You remember them, my son? Family, Duty, and *Honour*. You abandoned me, and you were ready to support Grafton, Lynderly, Hersy and Hardyng against your sister, so I think I have all the evidence I need to believe family is unimportant to you. If you had a drop of duty in you, you would have chosen to die gallantly and redeem your sins at Gulltown. As for honour...it is obvious I utterly failed to teach you why honour is revered.”

“It was...It was not my fault!”

Alysanne’s positive emotions towards her brother were vanishing, and there had not been that many in the first place. Had Robin really become so...different while she was at Old Anchor or had she idealised him so much? This was not what a Vale Lady or Lord should stand for. But then, Robin was not behaving like a Lord. He was behaving like a spoiled brat and a boy half his age. He certainly didn’t sound like a sixteen name days young man destined to sit on the Falcon Throne.

“If you think some of the blame lies at your mother’s feet, then don’t worry, she is going to pay the price for her treachery. One hour ago, seven septons and seven maesters agreed that under the eyes of the Gods and the law, Lady Lysa Arryn born Tully had committed far too many crimes for appeasement to be possible. I repudiated her, and she is on his way to a Silent Sister convent in the Belmore System as we speak.”

Alysanne had never seen before the sheer expression of loathing on Robin’s face, and for a second she was tempted to take a step back...before remembering Robin was without armour, without weapon and she was probably stronger than him given his sick and tiny body.

It didn’t stop her brother to attempt launching himself at her father – a ridiculous move since he too wore a battle-armour – and one which was easily stopped by an officer tripping him before he had done five strides. The fall on the carpet was so ridiculous there were some coughs to hide expressions of amusement from the guards.

“I hate you! I hate you! Give me back my mother! She is...”

“Be silent!” But as Robin didn’t stop crying and dirtying the carpet, two guards had to force him to stand up and effectively bind him to stop this sad spectacle.

“I see I was right to make Alysanne my Heir. You don’t compare anywhere near a tenth of your sister’s skills, you refuse to accept your mother made you a mockery of what you could have been, and you are not worthy to command the loyalty of a single man, woman and child of the Vale Sector!”

“I am your son!”

“And this is why I bothered giving you this audience today, Robin Arryn, honourless coward. I thought to send you to the Wall, but Eddard Stark right now needs great officers and soldiers, not a child-man who is unable to lift a vibro-blade to defend himself. You have no respect for the Seven given how many oaths you broke despite swearing on their holy books, so the Faith is out. I can’t send you in exile, for as the Blackfyres have proved, claimants on the other side of the Narrow Void have an annoying tendency to come back at inopportune times.”

Alysanne couldn’t have believed someone could be so stupid, but obviously Robin proved her wrong as a smile returned on his face. Several guards were also sharing her opinion as their grip on their weapons tightened or altered somewhat their posture.

“I quite agree...”

“This leaves the Sky Cells.”

At last, Robin fell to his knees – the guards let him grovel and present himself like a supplicant per his wishes.

The Sky Cells was the name given to the infamous prison complex of House Arryn. They were also incredibly infamous across the Seven Sectors. As the Eyrie‘s lone planet was mostly high mountains culminating above eleven thousand meters of altitude, the population centres were mostly in orbital stations.

There were exceptions. The Eyrie Citadel was one, a spear of marble and the most brilliant and expensive construction marbles, built on an escarpment of the Lance, protected by cutting-edge technology developed by House Arryn or imported from the Free Cities. But the top of the Eyrie was at ‘only’ three thousand metres and most of the citadel was built on several levels from one thousand and five hundred to two thousand and five hundred metres.

The Sky Cells had been built on a mountain near the Eyrie Citadel, but the altitude was six thousand metres, not three thousand. Alysanne had been brought here twice by father; she was honest enough to know she had been rightly terrified by them. The cells were small, glacial...and empty. The Sky Cells were rarely occupied for long. House Arryn and all their bannersmen sent their worst criminals here, and though air masks and void suits were provided, most of the criminals chose the last exit offered to them after a few days: one side of the cell was opened to the sky and the immense precipice waiting below. The howling winds, the cold and the solitude rapidly drove the killers mad, according to the gaolers.

“Please Father, have mercy...”

“Mercy?” and for the first time father didn’t hide his rage. “Where was your ‘mercy’ when you left me your message you were going to come back with, and I quote you, ‘fire and blood’, that you would burn me alive in a wildfire pyre and you would let your sister be raped by a thousand men before sending her to her death?”

Alysanne looked at Robin...and he refused to meet her eyes. It was the moment something broke in her. Anger and loathing fought in her heart...and loathing won.

“Take him to the Sky Cells,” someone spoke and after a few heartbeats she realised the order had come from her. “Take him to the Sky Cells and chain him to the doors...I don’t want him to escape too quickly.”

“NO! NO! MOOOOTHHHHERRR! MOTHER SAVE ME! MOTHER!”

Despite his gesticulations and other struggles, two guards were more than sufficient to drag the monster - she refused to call him brother anymore – out of the reception hall...and guards and the other spectators cheered as Robin Arryn began his final journey back to the Eyrie System.

**Ser Gerion Lannister, 12.09.300AAC, Casterly Rock System**

After the realisation demons were very much real, the revelation dragons weren’t as extinct as everyone believed, that peace had absolutely no future in Westeros and the days without bloodshed were going to be counted on one hand with missing fingers, it was somewhat reassuring to see Tywin had kept Casterly Rock in Lannister colours for the last decade.

Red, gold, gold, red, gold and of course gold; his brother may have a lot of problems, but consistency with his decoration was not one of them.

Silently, Princess Shiera, Prince Daeron, Colonel Ayric Sarring, Sandor Clegane and he descended many stairs and lift until they were opened the large doors leading to a long corridor. It was a place Gerion had rarely visited before. The Alley of the Lost Kings was a large avenue two kilometres-long and thirty metres wide, but it was not the dimensions which were impressive. No, this honour belonged to the massive statues of past kings, carved in marble and other stones to be three times the size of the original. As the name implied, here were represented all the sovereigns of the Rock their descendants and bannersmen had been unable to return the body home to be buried into the entrails of the Rock.

King Tommen II Lannister was of course there. Gerion stopped his pace for a few seconds watching the last evidence his ancestor had truly reigned over Casterly Rock and his fists clenched. Tommen had travelled to Valyria in search for lore and explanations...and it might be argued he had found them. Only the legacy of the Freehold was mixed with madness, demons and abominations making the nightmares of men reasonable and sane.

“He looks noble,” said his grand-nephew Daeron. The young boy was contemplating hesitantly the real Brightroar in his hands and the stone copy Tommen’s statue was representing in its sheath.

“Statues are made to look noble and impressive,” Ayric Sarring murmured. Neither Daeron nor Shiera understood the deeper meaning of his words, but Gerion did. The Lannister soldiers who had followed Tommen in the madness of the Doom had looked anything but noble and all had met atrocious ends. The ruins of the Valyrian Freehold were not something you went to if you wanted glory and prestige.

It was a place of folly, where the arrogance of the dragonlords had been rewarded with horrors and demonic retribution.

It was a reminder of what Westeros could become if they failed to learn the lessons of the past.

Their walk didn’t end here. There were three more alleys and several empty courtrooms to cross before they finally arrived to their destination, though at first sight it didn’t seem to be any different than the previous rooms. Large lion banners of red and gold were there like they were everywhere else in the Lannister forts, palaces and redoubts.

And yet while the courtiers, sycophants, bannersmen of little importance were not there, the essential characters in the play to come watched them walk on the endless red carpet before bowing three times at regular intervals. Tywin, as was his habit, was seated on the large throne. Despite himself, Gerion felt a smile come to his lips. It was good to see that demons or no demons, war or no war, his brother had still kept his sense of self-importance enough to force his grand-nephew to stand with Kevan while he dominated the room.

This raised the interesting question if Tywin wanted to give a lesson of modesty to his grand-nephew the King, or this was the first evidence the relationships between the Western claimant and the Lord Paramount were not as rosy as they were described in the uncountable propaganda feeds he had been forced to listen to before landing.

“Brother,” it was incredibly satisfying to hear Tywin call him like this after so many years. “You look younger than I expected.”

“The Doom is a place where the laws of Gods and men have no power, brother. For you, it was seven years of peace. For my crew, it was seventy hours of madness and desperate fighting against the demons. At great price to our souls and our bodies, we managed to escape the Doom...but many, many Lannister soldiers lost their lives in this enterprise.”

“So you said in your messages,” Tywin didn’t look that convinced. To be fair, Gerion couldn’t blame on this one. “You insisted the Red Faith was a religion worshipping the monsters unleashed by the Valyrian madmen.”

“The evidence the authorities of Volantis were able to discover thanks to us tends to support this theory, yes.” Hearing no interruption, Gerion continued. “We don’t know exactly what the dragonlords did before the Doom engulfed the core of their empire, but it seems to have...distorted reality, space and time to create parodies of the creatures they worshipped. And like all their sorcery and ignoble acts, it is based on fire, blood and sacrifice.”

“This is deeply concerning,” Kevan was not frowning that way unless there was really something frightening at large. “Rhaegar and his friends had brought many Red Priests and Priestesses to King’s Landing in the last couple of years. We saw no reason to be worried, believing them charlatans, crooks and imposters, but if they really have unnatural abilities...”

“They will be tracked and killed,” declared Tywin with his typical decisiveness. “As they are heretics in every aspect which matters, it may even please the septons and the septas. Should any come out in support of Aegon in the Reach, we may have a weapon to fracture the unity of the Reach.”

Gerion nodded, knowing it was the best outcome he could hope for now. His surviving soldiers’ word was convincing, but unfortunately not sufficient for someone like his Lord Brother. And sadly, he could see the point Tywin hadn’t uttered in this conversation. The demons, as far as everyone knew, had only materialised inside the Doom for the last three hundred years. It wasn’t a short-term problem...and Gerion prayed it was going to stay that way.

“I’m told that you managed to recover Brightroar,” he had expected this remark since he had left Volantis...and the answer was one he had prepared since King’s Landing.

“I have decided to give it as a name day gift for my grand-nephew,” he brushed the hairs of Daeron, who blushed but didn’t let the Valyrian sword like he had done the first time. “You gave his eldest brother a crown, his eldest sister was granted a dragon by destiny...I decided this sword may be useful for him.”

It was to be honest, extremely satisfying for him to see Tywin try to think about a reason why he should be granted Brightroar instead of a young boy who had been pretty much ignored by everyone save by his sister from his birth, and fail. Demanding Brightroar from Gerion would have been simplicity itself: Gerion was sworn to Casterly Rock and the two brothers were not known to be close...plus Tywin loved his grudges and looking back in vindication at his efforts to raise the banner of House Lannister stronger than the others. It was another thing to demand it from the hands of a young Prince, who was for all intent and purposes the spare of the young King waiting next to Kevan.

“Yes, yes...we are all happy for my brother,” the impatience and the disinterest shown by Prince, no, King Joffrey implied he cared about Valyrian swords like Lords cared about their smallfolk. “What I want to know is how my sister managed to make her dragon egg hatch?”

The glare he sent to Goldwing wasn’t friendly at all. Fortunately, the aggressive little golden-scaled reptile was sleepy and didn’t seem concerned about doing anything save curling itself in the arms of his mistress.

“We don’t know how this egg decided to hatch,” he spoke. It had the advantage of being the truth. “Unlike Aegon V and his predecessors, we made no ritual, we poured no blood on the egg, and we certainly didn’t throw them into fires or incinerators to warm them.”

“It might be some lingering effect you brought with you from the Doom,” Kevan articulated his sentence with care.

This time it was Sandor Clegane who scowled in his boisterous and loud manner.

“Don’t think so, my Lord. There are many petrified eggs waiting at the capital, and we didn’t hear the other pretender affirm he had dragons of his own...”

“The effect might be limited in distance and intensity...”

“...or it is not linked to anything Gerion and his men did,” Gerion looked up at Tywin in surprise. Of all the people telling him it wasn’t his fault, he certainly didn’t think the Lord of Casterly Rock was one of them. “Rhaegar had grown increasingly erratic and willing to play with prophecies and signs in the last years. You certainly didn’t try any ritual, but it might be possible he did one in the Red Keep and this...this dragon is the unexpected result.”

“In this case, we need to retake the capital as soon as possible!” Tywin didn’t look pleased by Joffrey’s outburst. “If Viserys or anyone manages to hatch a legion of dragons...”

“Then they will get baby dragons...absolutely useless for the next couple of years,” countered the Master of the West. “The Conqueror won the Field of Fire with three mature beasts the size of our ships of the line...if the one in my grand-niece’s arms is any indication, the war may well be over before they grow a danger for a few thousand men, much less a space fleet.”

Joffrey tried to glare at his grandfather...and was forced to look at his expensive shoes before half a minute passed.

“Of course, it’s Tyrion the dragon expert of the family...where do you have sent my favourite nephew, brother?”

Judging by the constipated look Kevan sent him, the answer wasn’t going to be a likable one.

**Ser Jaime Lannister, 13.09.300AAC, Summerhall System**

Out of the entire Dornish delegation meeting in this expensive palace, Jaime figured he may well be the only one to have met the three Baratheon brothers at the critical moments of their lives. And once more time, he could not help but wonder how Steffon Baratheon had been able to sire three brothers who were so different.

Robert Baratheon, the Usurper, had not been hard to study. The man was the Warrior made flesh. Jaime knew that in the case of this man, the rumours his Terminator Armour had to be modified and reinforced for him were no exaggeration. Robert had lived for war, whether it was on the battlefield or to fuck five whores per night in his tent. *Ours is the Fury*, proclaimed the words of the Lords of Storm’s End, and Robert Baratheon had lived and died by them. The winner of Summerhall and the loser of the Trident had drunk seas of alcohol, probably sired dozens of bastards and fought many battles and left scars which would continue to make Westeros bleed for decades to come.

Renly Baratheon, the youngest, was by comparison a major disappointment. Jaime knew the man had been a hostage for a long time, but he had not thought one could show such a lavish devotion to Highgarden when during the Rebellion Tyrell troops had starved the Stormlanders into submission. Force was to admit, Renly was worthless. He was no leader of men, had no strategic or tactical skills, he was not courageous and his loyalty went to himself and perhaps the Tyrell pretty boy.

And then there was the cadet, Stannis. Jaime knew this one was one of the most dangerous men of the realm, and rightly so. Like the Lord of Winterfell, there was something in these cold blue eyes that was utterly frightening. Of course, this had been before Fawnton. Before the brother of Robert Baratheon punished in the most permanent of manners the Lords and soldiers who had dared following Connington during the last seventeen years.

His Lord Father had made Tarbeck Hall and Castamere a monument of corpses to show his bannersmen the times when House Lannister was laughed at for its weakness were over. Now the ruins of Fawnton and the drifting hulks all over the stellar system would proclaim the same truth for Stannis Baratheon, the newly acclaimed Warmaster. For a reason which escaped him, Stannis had refused a crown after the smoke cleared and the last red-white Loyalist battle-armours were crushed into past. Instead he had revived an ancient title of the Durrandon line.

If anything it had seemed to amuse Rhaenys a lot.

Jaime was on the back with the guards, staying silent, so his observation of the two commanders was indirect.

Rhaenys had chosen to come in her stylised white-yellow battle-armour and as usual was a vision of Dornish beauty. She was slender and thin, built for hit-and-run attacks and hiding her fangs under a veneer of elegance. The Dornish conception of what a subtle ruler should be. The crown she wore was small but shining with a lone diamond above her forehead.

Stannis Baratheon was very much the complete opposite. Clad in black battle-armour, the Black Stag was harbouring a grim expression. In fact, now that he thought about it, Jaime had never seen him smile in public. There were no jewels or gold ornamentation. There were empty sheaths, and Jaime knew that in times of war, the Baratheon command would have dozens of weapons to smash any enemy apart.

It was obvious how little his Queen and the Baratheon had in common...save from their hate of House Tyrell and House Targaryen. After ten minutes of discussion, the device which stopped anyone from listening to the conversation was switched off and Jaime Lannister heard the joyless tone of the Black Stag.

“Your terms are acceptable...for the moment,” and without ceremony, the Baratheon Lord made a curt nod before leaving the conference room, his escort following him on his heels.

“Well that was like trying to pull venom from a grumpy cobra,” remarked Rhaenys as she made a sign for him to seat next to her. “A third of the Storm fleet will attack in five days Grassy Vale and start the reaping of the Reach Sector. The rest will be busy dealing with Griffin’s Roost, Lonmouth and the last loyalist systems of the Storm Sector. We are authorised to use Harvest Hall and Wagstaff’s March for a period of ten years for a few billions. Nightsong is officially part of Dorne, and all my further conquests in the Reach Sector for the next three years will be recognised de facto by Storm’s End. Furthermore, House Baratheon and its bannersmen agree to commit seventy-five percent of their forces against Aegon before the next six months are over. Goals are still to determine, but I am hopeful we can let them set the north-western Reach planets aflame with glee.”

“He might betray you in the end,” warned Jaime. Stannis Baratheon was dutiful, that everyone had to agree. What Rhaegar, Jon Connington and their lackeys had forgotten to their sorrow was that this duty was to the Storm Sector and the men, women and children who regarded him as their liege.

“Don’t be ridiculous, my White Knight,” Rhaenys sipped her red wine before smiling and revealing her perfect white teeth. “Stannis will betray me. It is not a question of ‘if’ but ‘when’. He hates too much the Targaryens to do anything else...but since I am a Dornish-Targaryen, this just puts me at the bottom of his list.”

“This doesn’t seem to trouble you.”

“Fair is fair, my White Knight, I also intend to betray him eventually...”

The eyes of his Queen and lover fell on the stellar map of the Reach.

“But not this year. For now, we have beautiful roses to burn...”

**Ser Willas Tyrell, 13.09.300AAC, Highgarden System**

Weeks ago, deciding the deployments of the Reach fleets and armies had been a trivial task. It went without saying that this was no longer the case. For twelve days, Highgarden had been at war with Dorne and the magnificent grand fleet House Tyrell had sponsored was already facing large difficulties coping with the threats, declared or waiting in the shadows.

Willas reviewed the data-displays of his office one more time, but the figures didn’t change no matter how much he stared at it. The Reach had not lost a single planet so far and most of its military forces were intact – the only major loss had been the ship of the line *Golden Stag* at Fawnton, but the entire strategic picture they had been operating under for the last five-six years was only good for the dustbin now.

In theory, his father had still an overwhelming force at his disposal. Not counting the squadrons tied down patrolling and garrisoning the Iron Sector, the units in overhaul/maintenance or in repairs, House Tyrell and its bannersmen had available for deployment three super-battleships, one hundred and ninety-five ships of the line, twenty-seven fleet carriers, sixteen armoured cruisers, four hundred and twenty battlecruisers, seven hundred and ten heavy cruisers, three hundred and forty-five light carriers, five hundred and thirty-seven light cruisers, one thousand four hundred and forty-two scout cruisers, eight hundred and sixty eight escort carriers and over five hundred thousand starfighters. This was really impressive...until you considered most of their allies had just been wiped out as catastrophic reports after catastrophic reports continued to drown his office day after day.

The destruction of the new wave of capital warships at Westbrook and elsewhere had been bad enough, but in a way the Dornish had left the Reach logistical capacities intact and as long as Oldtown and Highgarden shipyards and training centres could churn new hulls and new armies, war could be waged to a successful conclusion.

The utter destruction waged on their allies in the neighbouring Sectors was a far more sinister problem. In all the scenarios he had studied before the hostilities erupted, Willas had see the Reach armed forces would rely on their allies to identify the weaknesses of the rebels, be they military, political or economic, and then use them to reorganise the insurrectionists systems’ governance as they wished.

Nowhere the strategists had written that it was necessary to subdue the totality of a Sector by sheer force and then maintaining peace by garrisoning millions of men per planet.

It was after all, what the Crown had ordered for the Iron Sector...and one had only to turn its head in Pyke’s direction to see how this *marvellous* strategy had worked. Thanks to his blood and connections, the eldest son of Lord Mace Tyrell knew that the announcements to the population and the trade circles everything was proceeding according to the plan were complete lies. The Iron Sector was permanently on the edge of rebellion – in the case of Great Wyk, it had long passed that point – and whatever benefits Axell Florent had managed to negotiate with Harlaw, the constant sabotage, terror attacks and low-level resistance at Pyke were costing the Reach far more than what they could extract or tax from it.

And the Iron Sector had only ten systems, eight of them inhabited.

Eight systems. Eight planets. And in ten years of occupation, the situation had progressed slowly from ‘bad’ to ‘awful’.

Once given this data, you didn’t need to be a genius to feel dread at the implication of garrisoning the Storm Sector. Thirty-three systems, no thirty-two after Fawnton and a pre-war population of twenty-eight billion. Granted some of them may be loyalists in the lot, but he was forced to remind himself the Ironborn had a population less than ten billion strong before Balon Greyjoy decided that obviously going to war against Westeros was an entire and well-measured strategy.

The thought of garrisoning so many systems filled with the brink with Stormlanders having every reason to hate House Tyrell and shed Reacher’s blood was enough to give him nightmares. Even with the rest of the realm behind them, Willas was not sure they could bring the Storm smallfolk back into compliance. Defeating the Storm Lords militarily, crushing their fleets and vaporising their armies, it was feasible. But for the life of him, he couldn’t see a way to occupy the Storm Sector which would not break the Reach in a matter of months. The contingent of troops would have to be enormous and he was likely conservative in his estimates. There was no way they would be able to push for more taxes when every spark had the potential to set off a huge explosion. Mending the wounds would be a work of generations and years, not of months...

Willas placed his head in hands. He had never described himself as a man inclined to despair, but the mountain of problems he had to deal with daily was giving him nausea.

If Stannis Baratheon and his treacherous bannersmen had been the only ones to raise their forces in rebellion, the strategic situation would be terrible, sure enough. But no one had imagined in his or her worst nightmares that the King would die and his brother Viserys take the capital in a rapid coup. Worse, the distance between Highgarden and King’s Landing meant that whatever reaction force they could send would have to fight whoever had emerged on top. And Willas was sadly certain that the supporters of the dead King would not be these winners.

Add Rhaenys Targaryen and Dorne into the mix, and the recipe was complete for a cataclysm of the ages. Willas was not going to tempt Fate by saying the situation couldn’t get worse – the West was observing a silence auguring nothing good and they had heard nothing from the Vale or the North – but in mere days the Reach’s allies had seen their positions collapse like a toy tower a child had kicked at the base.

The Crown Sector may be conquered anew if their offensive took back King’s Landing in one straight offensive. Willas had his doubts, but he could agree with the young Velaryon that Prince Viserys’ position had to be fragile and unrest and rebellions were everywhere.

On the other hand, Dorne was another disaster that in hindsight, they should have seen really coming for a while. The Dornish had been mocked and humiliated for so long, ridiculed in so many broadcasts, that few had refused to see them as a real threat. Now they were paying for it. Dorne had taken Nightsong, and only Loras’ desperate flight from Fawnton had prevented Leygood from throwing away a Reach squadron in the meat-grinder. For the moment, the two sides were waiting at Ashford and Harvest Hall, but this waiting game was not going to last.

Willas didn’t know how they were able to solve this fiasco. Conquering Dorne in ideal conditions had never been done. Aegon the Conqueror had failed and he had dragons. Daeron the Young Dragon failed and he had the entire realm behind him.

As the Storm Sector burned and the Lannisters certainly couldn’t be called allies anymore, it was not an understatement to say a war in Dornish-held systems was going to be as satisfying as enduring the pain from several broken bones.

“Too many fires,” he whispered as tens of thousands hostile lights surrounded the representations of the Loyalists units. “Too many fires and we haven’t a tenth of the time we need to extinguish them before the inferno spreads.”

“Well, it will have to wait,” said Garlan, arriving in one of his newest green-gold suits. “The marriage is going to begin soon and I think you don’t want to explain to our sister why you are late today.”

“Margaery would forgive me,” Willas replied and the sad part was the fact it was likely to be true. The ‘marriage day’ had lost more and more of its attractiveness for their sister as the ‘wild rumours’ and ‘baseless accusations’ about Crown Prince Aegon were revealing themselves firmly grounded in reality.

“Yes, she will...still best not to attract attention that way.”

Willas could only nod at this. Standing from his chair, he deactivated the tactical display and all his electronic devices. It didn’t look like he was going to find miraculous solutions today anyway. Readjusting his marriage attire, he closed the door on his way out and followed Garlan in one of the numerous corridors House Tyrell used as a short-cut and where most servants were forbidden to walk.

“Has there any been any modification from headquarters to the plan I was allowed to see this morning?” He asked as they left the corridor, locked it and walked through several rooms where hundreds of nobles and guests bowed at their approach.

“No, there isn’t. I think father intends to go with Plan Orchid,” his brother didn’t look happy and Willas did his best not to grimace. Plan Orchid was a new military plan conceived in haste – obviously most of the pre-war plans were useless now and had to be scrapped – and while Willas’ part in this series of operations mainly consisted in staying at Highgarden and commanding the reserve forces, Garlan was going to fight on the frontlines.

Alas, as the crowd grew denser as they descended great white marble stairs, saying more was impossible...showing dissension with their family at a moment like this was simply not done. Political opposition, which until the 2nd of this month had been more or less inexistent, was rearming and gaining ground once more.

Orchid was not his favourite plan. Smith and Warrior Above, Willas was not sure it was in his twenty most favourite plans. Alas, most of the ‘favourite’ options had been in a hypothetic dimension where one fucking Baratheon had not decided to massacre millions of soldiers and civilians to satisfy his bloodlust before someone drowned the bloodbath in god-forsaken demons. Nine-tenths of the war plans also didn’t take into account a committed – and hostile – Dorne. So Orchid was perhaps the best of the new propositions.

In raw terms, it was not a complex plan.

The First Crown Fleet, which was now by default all the loyalist units they could be sure which had not turned traitor, was going to be reinforced by two squadrons of ships of the line under Lord Mathis Rowan – the designation was Reach Seventh Fleet - and execute Operation Scarlet Revenge. They were going to travel by Lychester and Pemford and attack the Crown Sector, trying to take back the capital before Viserys solidified his grasp on the Iron Throne.

The middle prong of the counter-attack was Operation Rose Purity, and it was the one where Garlan and Loras were going to be assigned with father. Its main goal was to decisively defeat the rebel forces of Houses Martell and Baratheon. For this endeavour, the entire Grand Fleet of the Reach – renamed 1st Reach Fleet of the Loyalist Marches for the occasion – had been mustered and would depart in two days. On their way they would be reinforced by the Ashford detachment, giving it a formidable strength of two super-battleships, one hundred and twelve ships of the line close to two hundred and twenty battlecruisers and hundreds of smaller ships.

The Third Reach Fleet, under Baelor Hightower, was to cover the Northern Marches and prevent the Lannisters from invading while they were dealing with the rebels. For this task, four squadrons, twenty-eight ships of the line, had been dispatched. It had been a hard and painful to convince their grandfather the Old Man of Oldtown to reduce his naval strength – despite the fact Oldtown and its formidable fixed defences really didn’t need them that much. This was Operation Magnolia Bastion.

The Fourth Reach Fleet, under Lord Ambrose, had a more offensive purpose. It was to depart in a few days for Grassy Vale, and from then would attack the rebel Crown and Storm Systems beyond Wythers Fort, taking the Baratheon and Dragonstone forces in the rear while their new King and his Lord Father assaulted them from the front. This was Operation Jonquil Curtain, and twenty-one ships of the line had been assigned to this new command.

The Redwyne fleet was going to patrol the Sunset Void as the Ninth Fleet until its units from the Iron Sector were back under Operation Anemone and with ten ships of the line and most of the Deep Space assets the Reach could muster.

And that left the scraps and the units no one wanted...in other words, him. Fine, it might be a bit unfair, but it was the truth. Oh to be sure there were other commands and small flotilla which were deployed across the Sector, and unlike them he had the advantage of sitting at Highgarden; unlike them he would have the warships getting out of mothball and every damaged unit the fleet commanders would send his way once the real battles were fought. Still, he wasn’t able to cheer when his ‘Fourteenth Fleet’ was by all evidence a paper dragon with a meagre seven ships of the line, seven battlecruisers and a lone fleet carrier – if he had to bet, he would say the carrier had been forgotten somewhere in the bureaucratic process and the other Admirals had only remembered it was there when it had been added to his command.

A loud music brought him out of these war preparations and the last steps before he arrived next to the great doors of Highgarden’s palace were short and he had to take care not stepping on anyone’s toes.

“I don’t remember seeing so many people in one location...”

He had participated in the security preparations and had seen the numbers, of course. But seeing figures was one thing, and contemplating the reality was quite another.

“It’s like the entire Reach has come today...” answered Garlan with more than a touch of awe in his voice.

Willas was forced to approve. The traditional red carpet had been posed on the entire distance between Highgarden Castle and the Great Sept of their home planet, with arms men in their green parade uniforms on both sides to prevent spectators from causing a ruckus. They were extremely needed for this bright event. As far as he could see the avenue, the grounds and the gardens were back with people. Nobles and other upper-class Reachers were on every balcony of importance, and tens of thousands people were pressing in every direction. Hundreds, no thousands of banners were in the air.

For a few seconds, Willas wanted to stay there and enjoy the festivities anonymously...but the moment went on and he shook his head in amusement. If he tried such a thing, his mother and his grandmother would probably bury him alive and that was after Loras would have put his hands on him after being told he had abandoned their little sister. Though he had to shout more than once in an undignified manner to convince part of the court it was in their best interest to move aside.

Fortunately, Garlan had calculated the walk delays to perfection and both had the next best thing to five minutes before the first handmaidens of their sister made their apparition.

Finally, at long last, Margaery emerged from the palace and Willas winced as he hadn’t taken ear-muffs with him and the clamour from the crowd was thunderous. Nevertheless, he was forced to admit the acclamations were more than deserved.

Margaery was as beautiful as the Maiden Herself today. Her wedding gown was of the purest white, with little golden suns and roses as decorations. Hundreds of small diamonds had been inserted in her brown hairs. Relatively mascara or other cosmetics had been applied to her visage, with just flower-shaped gems in sapphires and rubies providing the bonus touch. An ivory-coloured necklace was around her neck, showing a large rose diamond to everyone who had eyes to see. The rest...well, Willas was not a specialist in dresses, wasn’t he? He was just going to admit the gown was splendid, long and if the crowd’s reaction was any indication, a few thousand men would be ready to kill their monarch for the right to wed Margaery in a few minutes.

The world then became millions of cheers and acclamations. Willas took his sister’s right hand, Garlan the left, and they walked down the two kilometres at a snail’s pace, the handmaidens of his sister watching over part of the white gown. More than once they paused to give Margaery a bit breathing time; his sister had by purpose chosen exquisite little white-golden slippers for her wedding’s walk, but the sheer weight of the robe, the corset and the rest of her attire were not exactly designed for participating in the Summer Games. In these circumstances, the problem he had with his bad leg since his starfighter accident wasn’t that big an hindrance: mechanical prosthesis and a generous amount of medicine made walking bearable for today, and the walk pace was so slow he could compensate with his good leg as much as he wanted.

There were even more people around the Great Sept than he had believed possible. The lines of septons and septas leading the procession before them disappeared every minute under the thousands of flowers thrown by the crowd. There were people everywhere and only the Tyrell guards allowed them to walk on the red carpet without being trampled by the cheering smallfolk. Willas in the next days wouldn’t be able to remember how they were able to climb the last steps and arrive before the holy doors, but holographic photos and videos were proof they did it and without tearing Margaery’s robe apart.

There was one detail to officialise before the ceremony, however.

Crown Prince Aegon, in a perfect doublet half-red, half-black, advanced from the opposite side, followed by Lord Velaryon and his supporters before bending the knee in front of the old white-bearded Starry Father, who had just arrived from Oldtown this morning.

The oaths were uttered, the ritual words were spoken and the prayers were shouted to the Seven Heavens.

“Under the eyes of the Seven Above, I place this crown on your head, Blood of the Conqueror,” decreed the Starry Father under so many thunderous applauses it was difficult to hear the exact discourse. “You came to us in peace but it is to war you depart. I charge you to be brave, just and faithful to the loyal, fierce and unyielding to the traitors. Rise Aegon VI Targaryen, King of Westeros, Lord of the Seven Sectors, Protector of the Realm, Defender of the Faith, Dragon of the Iron Throne!”

“RISE!”

“RISE!”

“THE RED DRAGON!”

“THE RED DRAGON!”

Aegon VI rose with a triumphant expression and Willas let out a small whisper. For better or for worse, they were now committed and he escorted his sister to their father waiting ten feet away to lead her to the altar. None of the other claimants were going to forget and forgive the support. The game of thrones had entered its decisive phase....

And now they had to win.

Any other outcome would see House Tyrell follow the Gardeners into the grave.

“All hail King Aegon, I suppose...”

**Lord Samwell Tarly, 14.09.300AAC, Highgarden System**

The Green Hand Restaurant had always had an infamous reputation for such a fine establishment. The food cooked to satisfy their clients had won more stars in living history than dozens of their challengers together. The decoration was impeccable, with more gold and silver than half of the Masterly Houses’ palaces at Horn Hill. The extra services it proposed next to the restaurant – including a very large aquatic centre and many children-oriented activities – were sufficient to content even the harshest critic.

But the Green Hand Restaurant had been originally founded by House Wiener, Masterly House sworn to the Gardener Kings and of a political faction which had often been in charge of the Reach treasury with their allies of House Peake. Just as the ashes of the Field of Fire were beginning to grow cold, House Wiener had been willing to continue the struggle, publically taking the view nothing good in the long term would come from bending the knee to Aegon the Conqueror.

Unfortunately for them, the Tyrell Steward had been of a very different opinion, and when time had come to demonstrate their loyalty, the newly established Lord Paramount had not hesitated a second getting rid of the line loudly calling to fight the dragons until their last breath. House Wiener had been attainted of its titles and the many existing branches had dispersed. One had founded this restaurant, which explained that no one bearing the name of Tyrell or any of their great supporter had dared passing the doors in three hundred years. And this, despite the fact, House Wiener and all those who had blood ties with them were long extinct. If what he had read in one of his books was correct, the last scion of this line had perished fighting for Daemon I in the First Blackfyre Rebellion. Of course, the Tyrells had probably enough brilliant chefs and hundreds of excellent master cook in their white towers to not resent the desire to visit a restaurant eighty kilometres away from the capital. Besides, the Queen of Thorns had spread her poisonous whispers about many establishments, and like a few hundred locations, the grandmother of Lord Mace Tyrell had let the Reach Lords know enjoying a period of rest in this black-listed establishment was sure to result in unpleasant consequences.

Today, it would be Sam’s sixteenth stay at the Green Hand.

This was the problem, with threats, he thought as the staff of the restaurant bowed when he entered and he made a small gesture of his hand to show all the protocols could be safely discarded. After hearing his Lord Paramount voice idiocies for four-plus hours, Sam was really in no mood for all the useless steps of the highborn protocols, not to mention his wife and his mother had largely insisted this annoyed the smallfolk more than it won their affection. He was rapidly escorted along several calm and resting rooms by smiling butlers in creamy and green uniforms.

What had he been thinking in the last minutes? Ah yes, the threats. House Tyrell and their main spy mistress were particularly fond of them when they were whispered in private and the shadows of secret alcoves. The problem was, financially and militarily, Highgarden had already given away so many contracts and incentives to Lords unfriendly to him personally most of their threats were losing potency.

But above else, most of the threats had been based on the basic implicit fact the alliance of House Tyrell and House Targaryen made Highgarden’s position unassailable. They had the biggest economic powerbase of Westeros, over three hundred ships of the line ready to throw at their enemies, allies – it would not be polite to call them lackeys according to mother – in House Connington, House Grafton, House Darry and so on.

Well, the last days had proven Olenna Tyrell’s claims of omniscience were perhaps...a bit exaggerated? It was obvious neither the dragons nor the roses had seen the Dornish sneak attacks coming before the bombs fell off. They had lost most of the Storm Sector, the capital, Dorne and perhaps most of the Crown Sector. Their military superiority had gone from ‘absolute’ to ‘first but everyone is catching up’ and anyone who could read a map knew the other Westerosi powerhouses were encircling the Reach, slowly but surely.

Ultimately, he was opened a small door and the butler let him enter the private swimming pool Asha had demanded for her personal use. The door closed, Asha came into view and Sam’s heart fluttered as he realised his wife two-pieces bathing suit was...really minimal.

He tried not to blush too hard...and utterly failed.

“Remove your clothes, Sam,” his wife ordered and this was a command he was more than ready to obey without much protestation. “I had an unpleasant conversation with my idiot of brother, and I want to practise more pleasant activities.”

“We have to hurry...” he said while getting rid of his uniform of Rear-Admiral as fast as he could. The muscled body of Asha was in front of him and the small pieces of black clothes didn’t hide anything from her beautiful body. “I have received new orders, I am to escort a convoy to the Iron Sector and convince Ser Axell Florent to part with most of his naval and army assets.”

“Why I am not surprised?” Asha scoffed before delivering a shot kiss on his lips. “The Roses have started to wake up from their decade-long dreams where they were the masters of the galaxy. Obviously, they must recall some of their deployments if they want to have a chance against the Lions.”

His wife placed his hands on her breasts and suddenly everything felt right in his universe.

“Don’t worry, your mother and I talked about it and how the Tyrells were going to offer you a poisoned cup for your first command, despite the fact you are obviously more a weapon-and-system developer than a front-line officer. I will go with you to Harlaw as your chief of staff.”

“Not that I object...” and he didn’t, really. In the few days they had spent together, Asha had proved a far better strategist and tactician than him. Honestly, he had never had much interest in studying how to massacre your enemies and transform their flagships in orbital debris. His passion was knowledge of the physic concepts, legends, reading itself...even today the prospect of bloodshed was one which was leaving him terribly uncomfortable. “But Sector laws and regulations are quite clear that no woman is authorised to wear the gold-green uniform of the Reach Navy.”

Asha gave him a mischievous grin.

“Then it is a good thing, my uncle the Lord of Harlaw gave me the honorific rank of Captain a couple of years ago, no?” Asha slowly caressed his left cheek with her long fingers. “Don’t worry, Sam. We have prepared for this with your Lady mother and your Generals at Horn Hill...and I can assure you my midnight-blue uniform is particularly skin-tight.”

The last affirmation had to make him redder than a red rose, he was sure of it.

“Your brother is not going to be happy,” he tried. Well him and the entirety of House Tyrell. He didn’t fancy himself politically astute, but the daughter of Balon Greyjoy returning to an Ironborn planet while the Heir of Pyke had for the moment not stepped a foot on Ironborn ground since the Rebellion was sure to create tensions. Not to mention that if the Reach had not in theory any authority over the recruitment of the Iron Sector personnel, it was a poorly kept secret House Tyrell, House Rowan, House Redwyne and House Hightower had never tolerated female soldiers or spacemen and supported their allies in the Sectors when they enforced similar edicts.

“My brother has his head so deep in his new King’s ass he is unable to see his devotion is pathetic, dangerous and unmerited. The Greats ‘Rhaegar I and Aegon VI’ have managed to lose at least three entire Sectors in less than a month. *Three*. Even the stupid reaver who sired me managed to at least burn Lannisport and won some victories before suffering large-scale disasters.

I don’t particularly want Pyke, and I don’t think my claim would be taken seriously as I have been away for too long. But I don’t want to die for nothing and this is exactly what supporting the Tyrells is synonymous with for this civil war.”

The kiss he was given this time was long and deep. All the annoyance he had felt from yesterday and today dissipated. Forgotten the humiliation he had been forced to endure as squadron commanders after squadron commanders were given prestigious commands while he was sent like an errand boy in an afterthought-fashion. Forgotten the emotionless eyes of the Sword of the Morning and the Bold Knight among others as they fixed him while he bent the knee and swore his loyalty to Aegon VI all the while the Noble Houses mocked him because he wasn’t the Knight of Flowers in looks.

But then, according to the rumours he had been able to listen to from Fawnton, Loras Tyrell had run away like a coward rather than die like the epitome of chivalry he had proclaimed himself to be.

Mother had told him to be himself and to listen to his wife, and that was what he was going to do...though all the strenuous exercise sessions she had planned for him were tiring and so hard.

He was so absorbed the kiss he shouted in surprise when Asha pushed him in the swimming pool but their lips immediately joined.

“We will ride and fight together,” growled Asha Tarly. “Now prove to me you can be a warrior!”

“Your desires are my orders, my Lady...”

And for the next hour war and politics were discarded and told to cause problems elsewhere.

\*\*\*\*

*The War of the Ten Warlords was incredible in uncountable aspects. The millions of casualties it caused. The number of factions which fought for total domination, vengeance, independence, or more esoteric purposes was without precedent. Worlds died and the damage to the orbital infrastructure in dozens of system was literally impossible to calculate.*

*But one point should have made millions of people cheer in relief. This civil war had not begun with an invasion of the River Sector, a punitive expedition from Royal Forces against an insurrection funded by the Lords of the Trident or a Blackfyre-aligned assembly on a planet nominally sworn to House Darry.*

*The Riverlanders had no royal claimant hiding on one of their planets. No Lord or Lady had recently married a descendant of the dragonlords and few could remember the names of the River-born highborn dynasties which had placed crowns upon their heads. Unlike the West or Dorne, this Sector hadn’t spent the last seventeen years persuading the others the seat of power had to be transferred to one of their great fortresses.*

*Unfortunately, the absence of a claimant didn’t mean peace. In fact, the very actions taken by House Targaryen after the Peace of Maidenpool had ensured war was more or less unavoidable. House Darry, which had risen to the rank of Lord Paramount, was not strong enough to rule the Sector, even with House Whent and their neighbours to support their forces. And with the Crown coffers unable to rebuild everything in the aftermath of the Usurper’s Rebellion, naturally the Lords had begun to turn elsewhere.*

*When Balon Greyjoy’s Rebellion was extinguished in fire and blood, it could be argue the River forces had long ceased to exist. Where in 282AAC House Tully had managed to impose a fragile coalition, there was nothing of the sort left in 291AAC. House Mallister and House Blackwood had refused to cooperate, pay any additional taxes or show to any important meetings, and their defiance had inspired others to find money and military support elsewhere. House Frey had long fallen in the influence sphere of House Lannister and House Bracken had not waited long before following them. The feuds were legion among the Sector. Official uniforms and ship designs became so numerous the spies were rapidly overwhelmed by the quantity of information they had to discover. Many stellar systems were impossible to patrol without causing an international incident.*

*Despite this, it can’t be argued life in the River Sector maintained a lifestyle the inhabitants of the Storm Sector would have found incredibly satisfying if they had been proposed it. The fact many fortress-worlds had resisted to the end and the heavy support for the Rebels had forced House Darry to treat all their theoretical bannersmen with kid’s gloves. As a result, the quarrels were mostly happening in space and in the congress meetings of the Lords. And as long as House Targaryen showed a visage of unity, the peace continued.*

*Lord Raymun Darry strategic dispersal of forces across the Sector recognised exactly how fractious and divided the Lords had become. While he personally had the 1st River Fleet under his command in his home system, the 4th Fleet was patrolling between Willow Wood and Haigh’s Fort, ready to block the way to any raiding flotilla from the Northern Sector. The 7th Fleet under Lord Hawick was concentrated at Saltpans. The 2nd Fleet had its mustering grounds at Riverrun. The 6th Fleet was the official name for the forces under Lord Emmon Frey and all those following the rule of the Twins. The 15th Fleet was at Seagard. And the list continued like this on and on.*

*Many high-ranking officers, of course, voiced their loud objections when this strategy was implemented. Obviously, most of the new ‘fleets’ were isolated squadrons and sometimes didn’t even achieve this strength qualification. It was an insult of the highest order, and demanding an Admiral to command one or two ships of the line instead of a dozen was not something giving them the envy to laugh.*

*There was no alternative, though. House Mallister and House Frey, for example, refused utterly the very idea to be included in the same fleet. The less said about the rivalry between House Blackwood and House Bracken, the better.*

*But as said before, this system of semi-tolerance and dispersing the military assets in tiny packets could only work as long as the main supporters of the Iron Throne spoke with one voice. The Vale and Storm Lords had little influence in the River Sector, but it was not true for House Lannister, House Targaryen and House Tyrell.*

*Worse, the fact Prince Viserys Targaryen made his move in the first days of the War of the Ten Warlords was tantamount to sound the clarion and proclaim House Targaryen was anything but united.*

*The Reach fleets could have prevented the massacres to follow. But Highgarden forces were looking elsewhere, and could not be committed to help House Darry when Fawnton’s ashes had not stopped burning, the Dornish were occupying Nightsong and the Lannisters were mustering their forces.*

*Ultimately, there were too many warlords and seventeen years of bad governance had given ill-considered ideas to many highborn. As the news of the first battles and declarations of war began to be considered truth on 15.09.300AAC, the first round of betrayals began.*

*At that point, King Aegon VI, King Viserys III and King Joffrey I were definitely contenders – Queen Rhaenys was too but received absolutely no support outside Dorne – the former rebels had received the support they wished from House Stark and House Arryn was absolutely not ready to intervene as the loyalist remnants fought with the energy of despair.*

*There were too many Kings, and for the divided River Sector, those who were unacceptable were indeed not the same depending on a Lord’s point of view. The King you had given your allegiance yesterday mattered little when they were other warlords around.*

*The result was as logical as it was dramatic.*

*The Sector was plunged into an inferno of war. And as the 6th River Fleet of Lord Emmon Frey declared for King Joffrey, First of the Name, a new tragedy was beginning at Riverrun...*

Extract of Prelude to the Great Cataclysm, by Barabo Durvyris, 350AAC.

**Lord Edmure Tully, 15.09.300AAC, Riverrun System**

As far as counterfeited documents went, it was almost an insult.

The false seal of House Darry was an ugly shade of yellow when it should have been brown. The writing was in a style the complete opposite of the elegant sentences their Lord Paramount took for granted. Lord Raymun Darry would never be caught dirtying an old-fashioned piece of paper with so many ink spots. Then again, the Lord of House Darry would never have made so many mistakes either.

Edmure couldn’t pretend be a master of Westerosi language, but Father Above, there were seventeen spelling mistakes and twenty grammar errors in eight sentences!

What were the other problems? There were so many he had difficulties to keep count...The red should be a neutral black, not the red-black the moron who had tried to write this had used. No, contrary to ridiculous rumours, House Darry was not writing their official messages in Targaryen colours. This was what House Connington was for.

There should have been a six-layered cryptogram at the top of the document for him and his security services to authenticate. By all rights, the message shouldn’t have been brought by a Butterwell Captain disguised as a Darry officer but by a true sworn sword of Lord Raymun.

Edmure could have continued like this for several minutes – an impressive feat as this was a small piece of old-fashioned paper after all – but it was better to stop and end this farce.

“Whoever wrote this deserves to be shot,” he declared trying to keep his calm. “I know several servants in my castle that can make better official fake documents in less than ten minutes.”

The visage of Ser Hugo Vance turned crimson and he lowered his gaze rather than facing his gaze.

“Let’s not be so hasty...” Edmure ignored the grumbling of Lord Butterwell with the ease of his long practise.

“This dishrag, and I do not use the word lightly, is an insult to counterfeiters and ignorant smugglers. If all of you want to remove me from the 2nd River Fleet’s supreme command, I would have expected all of you to behave like men and say it eye-to-eye like the men you are supposed to be.”

“Big words from the Floppy Fish,” chuckled Ser Ronald Vance before stopping when he saw Edmure’s expression.

“I don’t think someone who has gained the nickname ‘the Bad Dick’ in the whorehouses and pleasure establishments of the capital can afford laughing at other’s nicknames.”

He turned towards the other Admirals and commanders watching him in silence all around the room. Most avoided his eyes, and the few who didn’t were completely unrepentant.

“Let me guess...you are going to replace me with this great Vice-Admiral? Ser Ronald Vance, Heir of House Vance of Atranta, the man most strategists and tacticians from the Wall to Sunspear know for his inept tactical skills?”

“I had a command during the Greyjoy Rebellion, unlike you Tully!” barked the knight.

“And you lost it.” Thousands of men the Ironborn had massacred in ten minutes when Ronald had tried to land his troops in the middle of an anti-air Ironborn battery.

“Contrary to you, Ser Vance’s loyalty to King Aegon is not in doubt,” declared prudently Lord Clement Piper. Marq behind his father was disapproving but he didn’t open his voice to protest.

“Oh by the Seven...yes, I was friends with Prince Viserys! No, I had no idea he was preparing a coup against the Iron Throne!”

“So you said,” sniffed Lord Benjicot Chambers.

“Yes, I don’t think we can believe your assertions. House Tully has after all a rather curious habit to change loyalties when it benefits them...”

Edmure tried to see if some among the Generals and Admirals gathered in the conference room would declare for him, but apart from Karyl Vance and Marq Piper, everyone was looking like it was for the greater good he was removed from command. Had he made on them such a bad impression during these last years?

“There will be an investigation naturally,” swiftly assured him Lord Lyman Goodbrook, a young man who had never hidden his admiration for the Crown Prince and what he stood for. “But first we must win the battle against the Lannisters...”

“A battle against the Lannisters?” Edmure frowned. Surely his ears had stopped functioning correctly? “What about the Lannisters? Their fleets are all behind the Golden Tooth and Deep Den, so far as we know. They are out of our reach and to the best of my knowledge, they haven’t made a single hostile move...yet. Considering the political situation...”

“The instructions of the Crown Prince in case of war are to attack first and force the Lions to stay on the defensive,” reminded him in an overbearing tone Lord Deddings. Edmure looked at him with stupefaction. Was the man really serious?

“I’m aware of the King’s and the Crown Prince’s instructions which were sent last year,” the Lord of Riverrun tried to speak in measured words, trying not show his irritation or his shock. “But unless you have been sleeping in an asteroid away from the holo-news these past weeks, you may have realised the situation has suffered some minor setbacks.”

None of the 299AAC operational plans had mentioned Dorne. None either had said anything about another claimant seizing the capital and provoking a three-way civil war. And Edmure felt sadly certain there were more disturbing news from all over Westeros he hadn’t yet heard.

“With Dorne having proved completely hostile and the Crown Sector in the middle of a civil war, attacking the fortified Western systems is something we can’t afford...”

“We have a powerful fleet mustered here!”

Edmure rolled his eyes.

“Yes, and what are you going to do with the Freys? They have not hidden they are Lannister supporters! By the Smith, most of their fleet is second-hand Lannister hulls! What are we going to do if they attack us in the back if we are leading raids in the Western Sector?”

“This will not happen,” the smirk of Ronald Vance gave him the urge to punch him hard. “The Freys have to deal with the Mallisters first and keep an eye on the North.”

That was...right and wrong. Yes, the Freys weren’t allies of House Mallister. On the other hand, none of the persons in this room were allies of House Mallister or Blackwood. And they couldn’t count on House Bracken, when it came to it. Plus Vypren, Charlton and so many others...

“Can we count on House Tully to act and execute our new King’s orders?”

“And what are these orders?” Edmure Tully asked with a sinking feeling in his guts.

“Why, the conquest of the Golden Tooth, of course.”

Sweet Mother and Blessed Maiden, he wasn’t joking. He wasn’t joking!

“You are completely crazy, Ronald,” the words were out before he could control his mouth.

“This is Admiral Vance to you!” shouted Ellery, defending his cretin of eldest brother.

“Oh, my *Bad*,” Edmure retorted. “You are completely crazy, *Admiral Vance*. Have you seen the size of the defensive systems the Lannisters had at the Golden Tooth when you sent your command to the Greyjoy Rebellion? There are hundreds of forts, uncountable minefields, primary laser platforms, and dozens of asteroids serving as gigantic bays for their starfighters. And that doesn’t even count their mobile forces or the centuries-old defences of the inner system! You can’t believe you may take this system with less than twenty ships of the line!”

And in the unlikely scenario they won, the 2nd River Fleet was probably going to be gutted beyond any hope to redemption. It was assuredly a good way to begin a war which promised to be terribly destructive and nasty.

“These kind of talks...”

“...are completely legal since you committed treason the moment you imitated Lord Darry’s signature.”

“I have the support of every squadron commander aboard the 2nd fleet!”

“No, you don’t. You don’t have the warships of House Tully.”

“If you think about withdrawing your support...” threatened Lord Benjicot Chambers.

Edmure wondered why his Lord Father had estimated some of these men. Backstabbers and ignorant fools, prompt to stab you the moment they stabbed your back. Well, it ended today. He was not their Lord Paramount. He was not their friend. And he certainly didn’t want to be their ally if they thought assaulting the Golden Tooth with this fleet was a good idea.

“I am doing more than thinking about it,” Edmure spoke and the weight he had on his heart was lifted like it had never existed. “You, my Lords, are scum and if serving King Aegon VI involves fighting by your sides, I renounced my allegiance to the Red Dragon! Guards!”

Dozens of soldiers in dark blue battle-armours flooded the room and Edmure at last smiled as he saw the men he had once called his subordinates take livid faces.

“From this day henceforth, House Tully stands with King Viserys Targaryen III Targaryen, the Green Dragon! Since we have all shared the bread and salt, I give you and your fleets twelve hours to leave this system. Any warship and regiment who fails to leave after this deadline will receive a warning shot and a polite demand to surrender.”

“You will not get away with this!” barked Ronald Vance, the only one to struggle as he was dragged away by four soldiers in battle-armours, the rest of the Lords walking calmly away as they understood their rights had been guaranteed. “I am an Admiral of the Crown, I speak with the dragon’s voice...”

“Improve your skills in forgery, fraud!” Edmure replied.

Once everyone had departed, the Lord of Riverrun collapsed on his seat, tired and worried. For good or worse, he had chosen his side...now he had to live with it.

“Good luck trying to find a nice marriage now...” the red-haired highborn murmured.

**Ser Marq Piper, 16.12.300AAC, Wayfarer’s Rest System**

“Father, you have to stop this!”

His plea managed to raise an eyebrow on his father’s face. Not exactly the great support he had dreamt of.

“And what do you expect me to do, Marq?”

The Heir of Pinkmaiden was about to open his mouth and say ‘mend our differences with Edmure’ before remembering that if he someone listened to this conversation, this affirmation could be considered high treason. So his next words were more selectively chosen.

“Find a way to return Riverrun to our side before this is too late,” he told the Vice-Admiral who was also his father on the *Eternal Dancer*, some thousands kilometres away from his *Beautiful Lakeshore*.

“I’m afraid our initial attempts to reverse Edmure’s decision went...poorly.”

That was a way to describe it, yes. House Tully forces had not been slow in pointing their guns at the other units of 2nd Fleet. Maybe the loyalist warships could have won in the end. The defences of Riverrun were not as powerful as they had been in 283AAC, and the Tully naval forces had four ships of the line to oppose the ten of the Vance-Piper-Goodbrook large coalition.

Then again, with the Tully warships in the heart of their formation any victory would have been extremely costly and it was not impossible they would have lost the entire fleet.

“We have to assume Edmure will not come back to his senses,” said gently Lord Clement Piper. “I’m sorry my son, but he and Viserys are good friends and these last years he was more and more critical of the Crown Prince’s decisions, and now our King will not tolerate this defiance.”

Marq nodded but deep inside he thought everything was the fault of this imbecile of Ronald Vance. Edmure had not looked like a man ready to betray three days ago and he could have easily massacred them at anchor if he really wanted to offer a one-sided victory to the pretender. No, it was ‘the Bad’ who had forced his hand...and even his own father didn’t tell him what the Atranta Heir had offered for his support!

“We will attack in five hours Riverrun. We have not the choice. As long as our supply line is cut between Wayfarer’s Rest and High Heart, not only our logistical situation is extremely complicated, but we will have no life line for our operations in the Western Sector.”

Yes and the fact that House Smallwood had closed unilaterally the system of Acorn Hall wasn’t helping at all. Riverrun was just the last bottleneck to be slammed in their faces as Lords either went their own way or declared for a treacherous pretender.

“We are going to take losses,” he warned. Riverrun, even diminished, was not the kind of target easy to shatter. The Lannister fleet which had besieged it seventeen years ago had thirty ships of the line to do the job and a large siege train with millions of men...the 2nd River Fleet had ten ships of the line, one armoured cruiser, sixteen battlecruisers and one fleet carrier, their supply train was in the Goodbrook System and most of their armies were still dispersed all over the Sector as mobilisation continued.

“Better to suffer some losses now than to let House Tully the time to rebuild their strength. Give a few years to your former friend, and Riverrun will be nearly impossible to crack.”

Marq nodded again...and the opera-sounding alarms he had installed ten months ago began to blare. He turned his head...and just as he had feared, the jump point leading to the Golden Tooth System was darkening as dozens of enemy icons materialised in the Wayfarer’s Rest System.

The Lannisters had decided to join the game, at the worst moment possible.

**Brigadier Tyrion Lannister, 16.12.300AAC, Wayfarer’s Rest System**

Tyrion had expected many things once they translated in the Wayfarer’s Rest System. One of the most likely scenarios, he was reluctantly forced to admit, had been his own death in a spectacular fashion.

His Lord Father had not appreciated his support of Operation Vanguard’s variant, go figure. Nor had he really enjoyed Addam Marbrand attempt to divert a sizeable part of the Western navy from the planned offensives in the Reach Sector. The direct result had been his promotion to Brigadier and he was immediately sent to Fourth Fleet. Their orders were to capture the Wayfarer’s Rest System, demolish the River Second Fleet defending it...and do little else than garrisoning it. The word ‘exile’ or ‘banishment’ was never mentioned anywhere, but open a dictionary and Tyrion could almost see his own face next to the definitions.

So they were attacking the Vance possessions with twelve Victory-class ships of the line and twenty-four Indomitable-class battlecruisers with enough escorts and carriers to launch two thousand starfighters. While most of the hulls were new warships and had new missiles and the new ‘het-lasers’ – men for some reason called them ‘turbo-lasers’ – if the entire River Fleet had awaited them around the jump point with minefields and fortresses, things would have probably been interesting. The kinds of interesting which left the experts wonder how to organise funerals when your body was in a hundred parts over a distance of thirty light-minutes.

But extraordinarily, luck had been with them today. For a reason which escaped him, the 2nd River Fleet was concentrated around the Riverrun jump point and most of the fortresses supposed to defend the Western-River frontier had been in the process of repair and maintenance. There had been some space mines of courses, but dozens instead of thousands and they had been rapidly ridden of since they weren’t under fire.

Now the River Fleet was advancing to meet them. And what Tyrion saw didn’t make any sense.

“Ser Addam, are our tactical displays malfunctioning?” Tyrion asked for the record.

“No, they’re not,” the Vice-Admiral answered with a predatory smile. “The enemy commander is really dividing his forces in three sub-groups. I suppose he wants to strike us from three different vectors.”

The tone employed by the Heir of Ashemark told clearly what he thought of this ‘tactic’. Tyrion had to approve, and to be clear, he had not followed a course in space combat. What he knew from fleet engagements in the void, he knew it from his books. Of course, authors being authors, few writers agreed in general how an Admiral should fight one battle. But most retired commanders agreed on the point concentrating your firepower in a single location was the logical thing to implement. And if the enemy outnumbered you, this advice was more vital than ever.

“This is confirmed, Admiral,” announced the flag captain of the *Sword of the West* from his personal bridge. “Unless they have managed to screw with all the sensors of our scouts, the Riverlanders only have ten ships of the line, one fleet carrier, one armoured cruiser, sixteen battlecruisers, twenty-one light carriers, thirty-seven heavy cruisers, sixty-six light cruisers, seventy-five or seventy-six scout cruisers, and fifty-eight escort carriers. We have compared their emissions to our data-bases, and unless they have managed to make spectacular achievement in counter-electronic warfare, all the main protagonists are here. We have ninety-six percent of certainty that the flagships of both Houses Vance, House Piper, House Deddings, House Butterwell, House Chambers, House Perryn, and House Goodbrook are there.”

“Good, very good,” Addam thanked his flag captain and cut the communication before walking slowly to each of the sections and coming back to examine the tactical display. At the moment, the predatory triangular shapes of the Western warships were rushing to meet...well, Tyrion was not sure what he was looking at, to be honest. On the sensors, the groups of River warships were a mess. There were all sorts of designs in this whorehouse. Ovoid, spherical, rectangular; every class the River Sector could have bartered or built for their own was racing to meet them in a desperate attempt to fight before they reached the lone inhabitable planet of the system.

They were, of course, still divided in three large sub-groups. And the distance between each force was growing.

“They definitely appear to go for a Trident-type attack, Ser,” he commented to Addam Marbrand.

“Yes, they do,” acknowledged the Ashemark naval officer. “I can’t explain why the moron in charge of the 2nd River Fleet thinks this is a good idea, but I can suppose this is linked somewhat with the absence of the Tully warships.”

Tyrion nodded thoughtfully. If the Riverrun mobile forces were there, it would have given their enemies four more ships of the line, eight battlecruisers and enough starfighters to overwhelm their anti-fighter defences. As it was, they had a comfortable superiority in capital ships. Twelve against ten in ships of the line, and twenty-four battlecruisers against sixteen. And several of the River units, especially the battlecruisers, looked like they were refurbished hulls.

“The first sub-group on the left is including three Pelican-class ships of the line and one armoured cruiser, a Crocodile-class if I’m not mistaken. They have five Fall of Pyke-class battlecruisers, twelve Red Bloom-class heavy cruisers...call them Enemy One, they are ships of House Perryn, Goodbrook, Chambers and Deddings.”

“The second sub-group in the centre is the most powerful, with four Black Fortress-class ships of the line and six Offensive-class battlecruisers. Call them Enemy Two, there are Vances and Butterwell warships.”

“The third sub-group is the two Eternal Dancer-class of House Piper and the Vance of Wayfarer’s flagship the *Dance of Seasons*. Designate them Enemy Three, and be sure to take into account they have a lot of Mother of Guardians-class light cruiser for anti-fighter attacks.”

“Your orders, Admiral?” asked for the form a young Lieutenant.

“If they are stupid to let us fight them outnumbered and outgunned, I see no reason to disappoint them,” Addam Marbrand bared his teeth in satisfaction. “Full speed ahead, and launch the Aggressors. Concentrate everything we have on Enemy Two.”

What followed was a one-sided slaughter. The River forces were maintaining a very undisciplined formation, and while all three sub-groups instantly launched their starfighters to answer the Aggressors, their positioning implied all these River Sharks and Alligator engines would arrive in three large groups to fight the Western H-shaped starfighters.

As Marbrand’s command had some two thousand starfighters and each sub-group had something like seven hundred and eighty single-seat fighters, it didn’t take to be a genius to realise what was about to happen. Twelve ships of the line against four. Two thousand starfighters against seven hundred-plus. Twenty-four battlecruisers against six.

The Western and River warships launched as many missiles as they could in the void and the explosions illuminated the Wayfarer’s Rest System. In five minutes, the Lannister-sworn spacemen sent five salvoes, each two thousand missiles strong. The River Navy was far slower: three salvoes of three hundred missiles, and they had concentrated everything on the Victory ships of the line.

The outcome was nothing Tyrion had ever seen in his life. For ten minutes, thousands of laser-head missiles vaporised armour, durasteel, flesh, and compartments. For ten minutes, the terrible brightness signalling the fusion reactors of a warship had failed multiplied and multiplied until the screens and the displays were a vision of horror and desolation.

And then it was over. The Western ship of the line *Rock Shield* was nearly dead, the battlecruiser *Flame of the Ancients* was nothing but a wreck, and two heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, six scout cruisers and nearly two hundred starfighters were gone.

But there was nothing left of the central River sub-group. By the time, they had arrived to laser range, all the Western warships had to do was giving the last blow to the agonising enemies. Four ships of the line, the *Black Fortress*, the *River Victory*, the *Force of the Rest* and the *Plentiful Butter* had been disintegrated and the rest of their command was in a similar state of damage. Worse of all for the Riverlanders, it appeared the enemy commander had really been an idiot and placed itself in the central formation.

“Turn us against Enemy One, Captain” commanded Addam Marbrand. “Let’s see if they fare better now that they have seen what we did to their friends.”

They didn’t.

The combat was a bit more difficult as this time as they had just fought a battle and their opponents were fresh but the starfighters were coordinated by an incapable and once again, it was an ignoble butchery. The *Rock Shield* died though, and the *Gold Crown* would need months of reparations, the battlecruiser *Western Tradition* was going to be good for the scrap-yards once this battle was over. Three more heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, seven scout cruisers were lost, with three hundred more starfighters.

But compared to the inferno which had just engulfed the Riverlanders, these losses were small and insignificant.

“Enemy Three is trying to flee to the Riverrun jump point, Admiral!”

“I see them, Captain, Let our damaged units behind and form on an interception course.”

“We could let them go, Admiral.” Addam turned his head towards him with a disapproving look. “Spreading the news of the defeat they have just received may do more damage in the end than killing them to the last.”

The Vice-Admiral commanding the 4th Western Fleet considered his words for several seconds, before shaking his head negatively.

“No, I prefer the killing option. The River Lords are stupid, but they will need experienced crewmen if they want to come back for a rematch. The more we kill today, the less we have to fear a counter-attack on our new conquest.”

“As you wish, Admiral,” Tyrion knew he was really going to need a lot of drinks after this. Scratch that, a lot of bottles...

 “I don’t know who was in command today,” said seriously Addam Marbrand, “but I thank him for giving us such a splendid victory...”

**Lord Edmure Tully, 17.12.300AAC, Riverrun System**

“How could Ronald screw up so badly?” Edmure could not help but ask as he finished reading the first compilation of the losses on the data-slate Marq had handed him a couple of minutes ago.

It was bad.

No, ‘bad’ was something worthy of an understatement.

For all intent and purpose, the 2nd River Fleet had fought its first and last battle.

“He intended to surprise the Lannisters,” said Marq in a broken-hearted voice. “He thought by attacking them from every direction he would break them apart...”

“He was clumsy, arrogant and stupid,” emphasis on the ‘was’. The *Black Fortress* had been the second ship of the line to die in the massacre which followed. “Everyone knows you don’t try to divide your forces in front of a superior enemy.”

Obviously, this basic tactical lesson had somehow failed to arrive to Vice-Admiral Ser Ronald Vance’s head. And he had paid the price.

“I must ask...do you think I have a chance to recapture the system if I am rapidly reinforced?”

Not that he had reinforcements lying in wait. His allegiance to King Viserys had made sure the closest loyal fleets for him were near Saltpans. That said, the loyalists of Aegon weren’t exactly closer; the first fleet was at Darry...

“No Edmure, I don’t think so...” Marq bit his lower lip before continuing. “We thinned a bit the light units of the Lannisters at the end, I think they lost somewhere around six heavy cruisers, ten light cruisers, and twenty scout cruisers plus six hundred starfighters. The problem is that we left practically intact their entire battle-line. They must have two ships of the line and two battlecruisers out of the game, and we...”

The voice of the Piper Heir broke. The losses of the 2nd River Fleet were awful, and there was no other way to describe them. They had lost eight ships of the line, one armoured cruiser, twelve battlecruisers, thirty-one heavy cruisers, fifty-seven light cruisers, fifty-three scout cruisers, one fleet carrier, twenty-one light carriers and seven escort carriers. One ship of the line – the *Eternal Dancer* – two battlecruisers and four heavy cruisers had also been captured along a few light units when they had been battered to complete impotence. This had been the fate of Lord Clement, Marq’s father. He was now a prisoner of war in Lannister’s hands...a fate which was almost preferable to the rest of the command Ronald Vance had led into disaster.

Ronald Vance had bribed, blackmailed and forged badly a document supposedly coming from Lord Darry.

The price he and his House had paid for this was going to be felt for an entire generation. The quasi-totality of House Vance of Atranta and its military forces present on the battlefield had perished. Ser Ronald and his younger brothers Ser Hugo and Ser Ellery – respectively in command of the ship of the line *River Victory* and the battlecruiser *Great Raid* – had died with their flagships. If Edmure remembered well, it meant that the fourth son of the elderly Lord Vance, Kirth, was now the new Heir of Atranta.

The other Noble Houses were similarly decimated. Lord Simon Butterwell had not survived when the *Plentiful Butter* broke in half. Lord Victor Perryn and the *Joyous Lark* would never go back home. Lord Elmont Deddings had screamed in agony on the command frequency when his bridge on the *Air Jungle* was engulfed in a cataclysmic explosion. Even Karyl, who he had loved like a brother, was dead, killed by the destruction of the *Force of the Rest*. His father, Lord Markus Vance had died aboard the *Dance of the Seasons*. So many deaths...Edmure didn’t know if a single male member of the senior Vance lines had escaped the carnage. Ser Dafyn Vance and his battlecruiser had not, from all evidence, and since his two sons had served in his staff...

 It had to be young Liane who was the new Lady of Wayfarer’s Rest, and she like her sisters were in the hands of the Lannisters. And he had not the power to change that. The warships which had fled back to Riverrun in all haste were battered and heavily damaged, and the Lannister Fleet which had forced Wayfarer’s Rest to surrender was incredibly more powerful than his isolated forces. Not to mention this was the only thing he had to defend the Riverrun System in a mobile manner, so if he tried to engage the fucking Lions and lost, Riverrun would be occupied by the enemy again.

“I have prepared some special quarters for you and your senior commanders,” comfortable rooms which were to become their cells, in other words. Marq was his friend...but he had chosen to fight for King Aegon VI and now Edmure served King Viserys III. “We will discuss this battle more tomorrow...”

He had barely the time to see something coming at him from the edge of his vision before he was punched hard in the jaw. So unexpected was the blow he fell from the great seat of the Riverrun Lords. He immediately tried to scream and tell his guards to shoot down the unknown attacker, but they weren’t moving. Why weren’t they moving? A new blow from another direction forced him to his knees just in front of the seat and Edmure suddenly realised several of his guards had fallen dead...and the rest were cheering.

“Betrayed by my own men...” he had just the time to spit before one of his own soldiers seized him by the throat casually and forced him to stand up.

“You told us you had a plan to rebuild Riverrun!” growled the Riverrun Captain. “You told us you were going to make sure Lord Hoster was not in vain!”

“Wait a minute...you are not...you are those soldiers who went with my uncle north...” His eyes widened. Oh by the Seven, they had used ancient protocols to infiltrate the system, if they had ever left it in the first place.

“And now we are returned, nephew,” said loudly Brynden Tully, removing his white-blue helmet. Edmure saw the old battle-armour painted in colours no one but his uncle had dared wearing since the Usurper’s Rebellion: on the left, the grey and the white, on the right, the blue and the red insignia of House Tully, with a large black trout on the chest. A trout with for him was presently a very threatening face...

Hundreds of soldiers poured in the hall and Edmure realised that even if a lot of these soldiers were those who had departed after the Greyjoy Rebellion to serve the Starks, there were hundreds of familiar faces he saw every week.

“How...how did you...”

“A little advise, nephew,” to his shame, his uncle’s voice was more disappointed than angered. “When you want to have loyal soldiers, you don’t pay them late, and once you have chosen a side, you stick to it. Otherwise, it gives the impression you don’t care about them and you have about as much honour as this dead vermin of Walder Frey.”

On each side, a Tully armoured soldier was now preventing him from collapsing or doing anything which could be constituted threatening.

“Fine, uncle,” it was obvious his uncle had won without any resistance. And why would he? He had been a famous knight long before Edmure was born. “You have come to take the Lordship of Riverrun, I take it. Obviously it wasn’t enough to lose a rebellion the first time...” he was forced to abandon this little speech as he saw several men-at-arms ready to strike him. Fortunately, the raised hand of his uncle stopped them in their tracks. He had to try another attack angle.

“Forgive me, uncle, but I don’t think this is going to work. You may send me to the Wall and take the Lordship of Riverrun, but you have to face the truth: you are old and unmarried. When you die, this will be the end of the Tully name and I don’t think you will enjoy the succession struggle which will be fought on this very planet...”

Brynden watched him attentively for the next best thing to a minute before snorting.

“The Targaryens have really brainwashed you well, boy.” Edmure felt the red come to his cheeks as thousands of men roared in laughter. “But your logic is flawed. It is true that you will go to the Wall with your last supporters and the men who survived the Battle of Wayfarer’s Rest. That much you have correctly guessed. But you will go with me fighting the Great Enemy. I owe that much my defunct brother...and since I have no child and no desire to sire one, I won’t be the next Lord of Riverrun.”

Edmure blinked, trying to assimilate the revelations from his Blackfish of uncle. The rage he felt at the idea of freezing his balls off in the frigid fortifications of the Night’s Watch were mixed with incomprehension. Why had Brynden come back if not for the Lordship? Why return his guards and all his subjects against the incumbent Lord if not to replace him? They were the only two men to carry the Tully name...

A couple of minutes later, the ranks of the guards, spacemen, highborn and armed smallfolk and Edmure watched as a young woman with deep red hair and magnificent blue eyes came to stand in front of the Tully seat. Edmure’s blood froze. The newcomer was the very picture of a young Catelyn Tully...if Cat had ever worn a Northern battle-armour and exercised harshly. It had to be one of her daughters he had refused to see over a decade ago...

“The people of the Riverrun will not accept a faithless Lady!” he hissed to his uncle. “The River Sector won’t accept a heretic born and sworn to the Starks...”

“We will see, won’t we?”

“RIVERLANDERS!” The shout from the Stark woman forced an instant silence among the entire assembly. “Seventeen years ago, we fought to topple a cruel man for his throne! We failed, though treachery, betrayal and the bottomless pits of greed called House Tyrell and Lannister forced us to seek peace terms. But it was seventeen years ago. Today, the West and the South are ready to murder each other, the dragons are in the middle of a civil war and Dorne has joined the fray against them.

Where are the Behemoths everyone was so frightened to fight? Destroyed or so badly damaged it will be a miracle if they can muster ten of them in two decades. Where are their claimants? They are dispersed, weak and hate each other more than we loathe them. Where is their support? It has passed away beyond the horizon, never to return once the smallfolk and everyone who had eyes to see knew our accusations were true. Where are their fleets? They are busy crushing insurrection or fighting dozens of little wars across Westeros.”

There must be tens of thousands people now listening and yet not a murmur could be heard.

“And so I call for war,” the red-haired Stark said raising her hand in the air. “A war which will reshape the galaxy as it should have been. A war to remove House Targaryen from the abject symbol of submission they forged with their dragons. A war to avenge my grandfathers, Lord Hoster Tully and Lord Rickard Stark. A war to reveal the True Gods and not the imposture the Andals forced you to worship. By my orders and my hand, the Rapist lies slain and his realm is tearing itself apart.

I don’t promise you easy triumphs. I don’t promise you immense fleets and huge armies. I don’t promise you each and every one of you will see the eve of the new dawn. But I promise you to fight for justice, humanity and against the monsters who want to bring us in the abysses with them.

I am Lady Sansa, second-born of Lord Eddard Stark and Lady Catelyn Tully. Will you follow me? Will you follow the cause of my father once more?”

Thousands of blades, rifles and other weapons were drawn in defiance and raised in the air. And words which had not echoed for more than three hundred years were screamed by the Riverlanders in the great hall of Riverrun.

“THE KING IN THE NORTH!”

“THE KING IN THE NORTH!”

“THE KING IN THE NORTH!”

**Lord Gylbert Farwynd, 17.12.300AAC, Lonely Light System**

Gylbert had been alone for nearly ten years.

At least, he thought this was ten years. He had not maintained a precise count to say the truth. He had not seen the interest at first, and given that it was difficult in winter to distinguish the night from the day, his attempts once he had wanted to, well...they had been useless.

Many people would have mocked him, of this he had no doubt. He, a Lord of a so-called Noble House, alone, without a single sworn axe in the middle of nowhere, no worse than the middle of nowhere: somewhere in the ice fields of the Polar Ocean.

But then, most people were stupid. And nobles, especially nobles of the Great Houses, were even stupider.

Gylbert had chosen this living. He had chosen this manner to repent from his actions in the Greyjoy Rebellion.

Unlike so many youngsters, reavers and grey beards, he had been skilled and lucky enough to survive the Battle of the Arbor where the Iron Fleet had met its end. The months following this dreadful battle had been nightmarish. The *Lone Wind* had been terribly damaged and it had taken all the strength and the energy of his men to drag the wreck his warship had become to the Lonely Light.

Alas, they had not been time to rest when they had arrived in his home system. Mere hours after their arrival, a Loyalist Fleet had materialised and with shot-down engines, escape had not been possible.

And so Gylbert had given his last orders. His men could try a last stand or follow him in the uninhabited continents of the Lonely Light, endure the fury of the world and wait for their revenge to come.

Out of a hundred-plus men left, half had chosen death against the enemy fleet. The others had taken the escape pods and descended from the stars, vanishing in the hellish landscape even the Ironborn people had never managed to tame.

Oath had been given. They would not try to go back to civilisation. The small population of the Lonely Light was twenty-five million inhabitants, and if resistance was offered, Gylbert knew the capital and the other major city of this world would burn in mere seconds.

No, instead he had offered the Greenlanders who had come to occupy his world a tempting target: the Lord of the Lonely Light, alone, without guards, armies, tanks or machines.

They had taken the bait at first. By hundreds, the red-white armours had tried to track him.

They had died. The Lonely Light was a lethal environment with a battle-armour and a perfect knowledge of the terrain, fauna and flora. Temperatures could be cold like the void in the ice fields and warm like the sun as new volcanoes exploded under your feet. The great predators and herbivores who survived here were prompt to crush you if you deranged them. Two-thirds of the leaves and the flowers could cause your death if you didn’t prepare them adequately beforehand.

Some caches transported in great secret to locations only known to the Farwynd main family had allowed him to survive all these years. The Greenlanders, on the other hand, had not thrived under these latitudes. After a near-entire regiment was wiped out by a collapsing cliff when they tried once more time to pursue him – an action which had also resulted in an air transport sundering thanks to a violent gale – Gylbert Farwynd had been totally alone....as far as humans were concerned.

He turned his head to look at his most recent pursuer crawling on an iceberg. The gigantic Boreal Otter he had nicknamed Victarion was following him recently for the last ten sun dawns. Honestly, he was really amused by the persistence of the old monster. He had tickled the twelve meters-long monster with his electro-harpoon several times, but the old male was coming back every time. It had to be incredibly hungry...or stubborn and dumb like the former Lord Captain.

As he considered if it was necessary to make the otter his next prey, the light blinded him.

For a couple of heartbeats he thought this was an orbital strike and the greenlanders had finally found him...but the light was coming the ocean, not the sky.

It was a sort of ball of light...and Gylbert remembered the old words given from Lord Farwynd to Lord Farwynd. This was a beacon of light. No, this was the Beacon of Light.

It was the reason why House Farwynd had named the system the Lonely Light. It was the reason the first Ironborn had come to a planet which tried to kill them more than it supported them.

“And you will know the Night returns, for the Beacon is the last warning...” he murmured reverently the ancient oath. “Stir your armies, and prepare to sail once more, for the Enemies are at the gates...”

Victarion the Otter chose this moment to plunge back into the glacial depths. Smart Animal.

“We are not ready. Why now God? We are not ready...”

The beacon rose and rose more quickly. According to the legends of his House, the unnatural phenomenon would create a tiny lighthouse once it reached orbit.

“Rage, warriors, against the dying of the light...”

**Author’s note**: I promised an update for Christmas, didn’t I? It won’t be said I don’t take my promises seriously...

Oh, and a little omake to finish this year in a war-like manner:

**The Age of Peace is over.**

**Westeros is in flames. The prayers for prosperity and tolerance are in ruins. Hundreds of thousands lives have been extinguished.**

**King Rhaegar Targaryen is dead.**

**His eldest daughter Rhaenys has launched a terrible series of sneak attacks over the Reach and Storm Sectors. Once upon a time, House Martell was the shield and the spear of the Targaryen but these times are over. The Dorne Princedom in its totality has rebelled and the Targaryens are going to rue their years of provocations and humiliations.**

**Now Westeros is divided.**

**Many Lords remain loyal to Crown Prince Aegon, Rhaegar’s Chosen Heir, but dozens of others are bending the knee to his half-brother Joffrey or his uncle Viserys. With armadas of ships of the line and billions of soldiers in magnificent battle-armours, victory is uncertain for every side.**

**Worlds are burning. At Fawnton, Warmaster Stannis Baratheon dealt a vicious blow and wiped out the Legion of Storm Loyalists. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins and fanatics lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering on a hundred planets.**

**All must choose a side or die.**

**Aegon musters the Grand Reach Fleet, King’s Landing itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Iron Throne, King Viserys waits for his wayward nephew to return.**

**But the Targaryen claimants have forgotten the true enemy is not human. A galaxy away, the Great Enemy is back. The Others are returned, a primordial force of ice and void which desires nothing more than wipe out humanity.**

**The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel daughter of the Dark Gods. Eternal Servitude and Damnation await all should the Wall fall and the war be lost.**

**The Age of prosperity and hope has ended.**

**The Second Long Night has begun.**

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

TV Tropes Page: / pmwiki/ / Fanfic/ LetTheGalaxyBurn

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

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

Hope everyone enjoys the Battle of Gulltown and the first battle in the River Sector.

Merry Christmas, spend nice holidays and continue to read!