**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 2**

**Cataclysm**

*Humanity had grown incredibly arrogant over the last millennium.*

*For all the cheap holo-series presenting the valiant soldiers in battle-armours in desperate fights against improbable genetic monstrosities, the reality was somewhat underwhelming. Whatever few non-human intelligent species humanity had met thorough history were in all cases completely outmatched by the firepower the mighty fleets mankind could bring to a battle. In the best of cases for the non-humans, their planets were forced to sign accords reducing them to a protectorate of the nation having discovered them and they were forbidden for all eternity to leave their home star system. In the worst of cases...well, many of the ancient Great Powers of this galaxy had dirty secrets and this one was one more added to the list.*

*If a bard asked an Admiral or a General whether the human race’s expansion across the galaxy could be considered endangered, said man or woman was going to be soon under very heavy pressure to find another job. For all the damage done by the Doom of Valyria, the population levels in the Westeros and Essos Quadrants had increased considerably in the last centuries. When Aegon the Conqueror was crowned King of the Seven Sectors, the population of his realm had slightly been under one hundred and twenty billion. The Dance of Dragons killed hundreds of millions and ended an era of prosperity one hundred-plus years later, but the succeeding wars didn’t kill half of this body count. The Blackfyre Rebellions were fought without dragons and except the First, were largely restricted to one or two Sectors. The Last Blackfyre Rebellion, which saw Maelys the Monstrous slain, didn’t reach the planets under the Iron Throne’s rule and cost the realm about eighty-six million warriors. It was a price the Targaryen dynasty could easily afford to pay and the losses of this war ended by Ser Barristan ‘the Bold’ Selmy were nearly forgotten two decades later.*

*The Usurper’s War, contrary to what some Loyalist commanders tried to pretend given the benefit of hindsight, didn’t break this tendency. Close to four hundred and twelve million men, women and children perished in the great conflict to end King Aerys’ reign and depose his crown on King Rhaegar Targaryen’s head. Since by 284AAC the Westerosi population levels had largely grown over three hundred billion, the Seven Sectors had largely the ability to absorb these losses without a heartbeat of pause.*

*No, it was the Greyjoy Rebellion which was the real game-changer. In less than a year, the ill-conceived uprising imagined by Balon Greyjoy caused approximately seven hundred and ninety-eight million deaths. For the first time in centuries, the civilian population found itself in the middle of the inferno caused by a great war, and the casualties were horrendous. The Iron Sector never recovered before the War of the Ten Warlords erupted and made many peace issues completely irrelevant.*

*Now the Iron Sector was small and the atrocities committed post-war could be ignored by the Paramount and Noble Houses. Many Lords and Ladies indeed practised interesting selective policies, publically mourning the cost of occupation while sending the worst sellsword companies on planets which were simply reduced to rubble after years of fighting.*

*When it came down to it, the majority of the factions now vying for absolute domination over Westeros gave relatively little thought to the post-war future of Westeros, pointedly missing entirely the point there were people on certain planets which had excellent reasons to drown their planets into oceans of blood.*

*By 02.09.300AAC and the opening of Operation Midnight, the Seven Sectors had a population estimated to three hundred and fifty-eight billion people. This was a population number which would never be seen again this century. In three days, the Dornish bombs and the Behemoth clashes killed seven million subjects of the Iron Throne.*

*And the worst was yet to come.*

*Unknown to all, humanity was going to be reminded soon the very signification of the word ‘cataclysm’...*

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

“*Hear my words. You treat the White Walkers like they are mortal opponents. They aren’t. Fighting this enemy is like trying to kill an elemental force of destruction, one which hates you on such a scale your own emotions are literally nothing compared to it. The beings you call the Others want us all dead. Don’t bother trying to open negotiations or learn their language. These are human methods, and you don’t fight humans. You fight a cataclysm of untold scale, and unless you win, the galaxy will fall into the cold embrace of death*.” King-Beyond-the-Wall Mance Rayder, 301AAC.

**Ygritte of the Crimson Squadron, 05.09.300AAC, Kroc’s Star System**

A decade ago, the Kroc Station and the green planet it orbited had been one of the most prosperous fixed bastions built by the Free Folk. The star system was at a crossroad of no less than six jump points, each of them individually valuable, and best of all things, it had an inhabitable world. As a result, the clans had continuously tried to fight for it before a King-Beyond-the-Wall – whose name had long been lost – had declared this star system neutral ground for all the clans. The new clan of the Kroc had been created to watch over the station and the planet, store food and spare parts and eventually sell them to those who had the means to barter them.

In the last generations, Kroc’s Station and the world it defended had been one of the most secure places on the hundreds of systems the clans used for their own purposes. The station had been defended by over four hundred missile launchers, seven hundred laser batteries and three hundred plasma weapons. Scores and scores of offensive satellites were waiting the order to pulverise any Free Folk captain stupid enough to violate the neutrality of the grounds. There were vast minefields ready to be activated in case the procedures were violated too. If this wasn’t enough, Kroc’s Station had its own mobile fleet and it was formidable: an ancient Ark, nine Barges, hundreds of smaller scouts and as many starfighters as they needed to defeat any raiding party.

Ygritte knew that even the biggest clans would have bled heavily to get past the missiles and the mines. No matter who your name was, Thenn, Giantsbane, Rayder, Lord of Bones or another title, the clan of the Kroc would have been able to teach a very painful lesson to the idiotic leader willing to take by force the supplies they guarded.

It had been a decade ago. Against the White Walkers and their dreaded weapons, Kroc’s Station was just a death trap. So had concluded the King, and there had been no one among the clan leaders to say he was wrong.

The problem was that there were not enough ships for everyone. The population of Kroc and Kroc’s station had grown considerably despite the riots and mini-wars always happening when Free Folk lived together in high numbers. Ygritte had seen the numbers and at first hadn’t believed them: the Kroc captains had told there were near sixty million souls living on the station or the planet. Yes, the King’s fleet had hundreds of millions in its kilometres-long hulls, but it was the alliance of hundreds of clans, not a single system.

The Kroc clan had been able to gather four big Arks and three more Barges somehow, in addition to the hundreds of ships they had already promised to the Queen.

It wasn’t enough. By all rights, there were ten million or so Free Folk left on Kroc’s station and below.

It was why Ygritte and the rest of Crimson Squadron were here. Each local day which passed was a day letting two or three ships finish its return to active status and jump towards the Fist of the First Men System, two jumps away from here. Each ship escaping meant more souls saved from the damned embrace of the Enemy.

And in the mean time, a four centuries-old foundry had churned starfighters like they were pebbles. The majority of the best pilots were with the fleet, but the Kroc had roused his people and the Free Folk were not kneelers. In days they had understood that in this war, there were no sides: if you had a heartbeat, you were prey for the White Walkers and then it was your choice how to spend the last days of your life. You could end your last days waiting for the sky to burn blue, or you could take arms. The local population had come by the thousands to their training grounds and the volunteers even now hadn’t stopped.

The difficulties of the spare parts and the engines were demoralising, forcing them to resort to more and more desperate improvisation. There were never enough mechanics. The fuel tankers were prioritising the ships fleeing towards the Fist. The pilots were totally and utterly inexperienced, with at most thirty hours in the simulators and ten hours in real life.

Somehow, it would have to be enough. Kroc’s Station had to be defended and the Free Folk were not going to abandon their brothers and sisters to the Enemy. Ygritte knew of two barge-carriers who were staying behind near the jump point for them and the survivors.

The hangars were more crowded than in her wildest nightmares as she tried to return to her starfighter’s bay. Despite the warriors, despite the iron demands of the Kroc, panic was spreading everywhere and people who had not accepted their role in the last defence of the star system were panicking. The young woman didn’t blame them. Free Folk were humans, and if someone told her he didn’t fear the White Walkers, Ygritte was going to cut his dick and launch it into an incinerator.

“Has the problem with the thrusters of this fighter been solved?” She asked to a mechanic as one of the units supposed to be under her command was still under repair.

“Yes, Crimson Archer, we will need...”

The alarms began to blare at this moment and it was the alarms everyone had been dreading for nearly seventy days.

Ygritte didn’t wait for any answer and she ran until she arrived to the old tactical display. Several shadowy blue dots had appeared and there were too many for it to be a probe or a raid.

“Talk to me, Urur.”

“They came out of the darkness second ago, Crimson Archer. We already count three scores of Tyrant-class cruisers and eleven, no twelve, Carrion-class battleships. They arrive on a two-zero-zero intercept course at six hundred thousand kilometres. We have less than five hours to...”

Ygritte knew she was paling and whatever she could do at the moment was not vomit. Five hours might seem a lot: but to get out the Free Folk slow transports and evade pursuit afterwards they had to go now or they would be easy target for the White Walker artillerists.

As for the opposition, they were well and truly fucked, and not in the good kind. The King had said she could give the monsters a serious bleeding given the numbers she had available, but the Walkers were legion today. The cruisers the Free Folk called Tyrant were already raw murder: able to massacre entire clans in hours. Compared to the Carrion-class, they were just small jokes. These monsters were dagger-like and wielded more firepower in one hull than hundred of Arks combined together.

“Tell the Kroc he must launch at once everything ready. What can’t take off right now must be abandoned.”

Ygritte already hated herself for this, but there was no other choice. Transports which could get away were winning over those which couldn’t.

“Update the last data and give to all commands the orders to expedite fight preparations. All starfighters are to launch in one hour.”

The rest was just desperate decision after desperate decision. When she finally jumped in her starfighter’s cockpit, for the first time in her life she found no joy.

Ten million.

This was the number of Free Folk they hadn’t be able to evacuate in time and it hurt more than she could have imagined a year ago.

Ten million.

And given the approach and the firepower of the Walkers, neither Crimson Squadron nor anything they had could stop the demons coming for them.

“Launch!” And in a fraction of second, the old but sturdy steam catapults sent her in the void. By instinct, her fingers adjusted the last course on the console. And her starfighter answered like the perfect weapon it was. Stolen hundreds of years ago from the crows, Ygritte didn’t know its first name and she didn’t care. For all Free Folk, the oblong hull with two ‘wings’ capable to bear the laser cannons and two missiles was called the Hunter.

“This is Crimson Archer, form on me,” she ordered on all frequencies. “Ignore the Tyrants, priority targets are the Carrions.”

This was contrary to her experience: the Tyrants were the best anti-starfighter killers in this galaxy. Unfortunately, killing them in this battle would serve no purpose. The battleships were the real threat.

The starfighters activating their engines and rising with her towards the Enemy was a magnificent torrent of light. Dozens pilots missed their first manoeuvres and went completely off-course, a problem which would put them minutes away from the main formation. But there were tens of thousands following her. Kroc’s station crunch-suppliers had told her they would be able to give close to two hundred thousand starfighters and so far they hadn’t disappointed. Now if only the fifty pilots of Crimson Squadron weren’t the only experimented pilots in this wave...

The next update was worse. There were now seventy-eight Tyrants, nearly four scores of them, and fifteen Carrions. And since the monsters’ furtive systems outclassed them by five levels, the young female warrior knew they were only seeing what the enemy wanted to see. Kroc’s station began to launch missiles and activate the minefields in the outer system, but the demons contemptuously ignored the shots.

“Crimson Archer, there is something weird on my sensors...”

“It’s true! There’s a gravitic anomaly we’ve just detected behind the Carrions...”

“Shadow Squadron, illuminate the zone!”

The two hundred-plus starfighters carrying advanced versions of the H-47B sensor emitted at full power and suddenly another Walker warship materialised on their consoles’ screens.

Screams of incredulity were on every frequency. The Enemy’s Carrion-class was longer and more dangerous than the kneeler’s ‘ships of the line’. These battleships were thin blades coursing with unfathomable blue energy and unlike the Tyrants, no one could honestly remember the time when a Carrion battleship had been destroyed by human forces.

The colossus they were currently a million kilometres away dwarfed the Carrions like an adult towers over a small child.

The dimensions and the acceleration it sustained were flatly impossible. No kneeler’s ‘Admiral’ had ever been able to build such a large warship. Even the Arks, which were modified colonisation ships were dominated by this newcomer.

Ten kilometres long. About a kilometre wide and three kilometres high.

In spite of the distance, the Free Folk sensors could see the flanks bristling with blue-energy, the unnatural turrets pivoting to track her squadron and the formidable tech-sorcery protecting top and bottom of the impossibly-long hull.

And if this thing was not dangerous enough, the entire hull seemed to serve as a support for a terrifying cannon.

No, not ‘a cannon’. THE Cannon. Ygritte estimated it had to be five or six kilometres long and the maw opening was larger than a lot of cruisers. Deep inside at this moment, she knew Kroc’s station and everything in this system were not the reason this moving fortress had been built.

There was only one target the Enemy could consider threatening enough to invest years of effort in this super-battleship. And it had never belonged to the Free Folk.

The Wall.

“Designate new contact...Star Killer.”

For an odd reason, the very name seemed right for such an absurdly dangerous weapon.

“Crimson, Shadow, Killer, Destruction, Unity, Orange and Freedom squadrons will create an opening by striking the lead Carrion battleship. All remaining squadrons, break through the formation and inflict the maximum of damage you can!”

Kroc’s station unleashed the defences which had stayed silent for centuries, and an ocean of destruction raced to meet the White Walkers, two hundred thousand starfighters on their heels. Roars of hate and defiance were screamed on every frequency. Whatever discipline and order had existed vanished and the Free Folk intercepted the Enemy formation.

It was a massive slaughter, but for the first time Tyrant-class cruisers began to die in explosion of blue nova. One, two, three and then Crimson Squadron launched its missile in the teeth of the gigantic Carrion battleship. At this distance, they couldn’t miss it...and they didn’t. Over six thousand missiles were shot in sprint mode and at this acceleration speed, even the supernatural reaction times of Walkers’ commanders was not enough. The blue energy shattered hundreds of projectiles and wiped out Destruction and Unity squadrons with a single volley, but when Ygritte and the survivors broke through, the Carrion battleship was wracked by series of explosions.

And then three seconds later there was a new star in the system, whose brilliance overwhelmed all sensors.

“Yes!”

A sound of pure, unbridled passion roared in her ears and Ygritte joined her voice to theirs. They had lost hundreds of starfighters, but the White Walkers had just paid dearly for the first time of the war.

Then the rest of the assault force collided with the fourteen remaining battleships and losses skyrocketed to numbers she never had thought possible. Six more Tyrants and one Carrion were vaporised but over ninety thousand starfighters were wiped out from this galaxy. Added to the rest of the losses, over half of the starfighters were already dead, and then two Carrions began to fire with their main batteries at maximum power.

For a second, there was just a stunned silence. Of the near forty thousand starfighters which had been able to break through, there were only flaming debris as the biggest parts to proof they had once existed.

The last wave attacked the super-battleship, but the monstrous warship’s blue energy screen swallowed missiles and lasers like they were nothing and its counter-attack destroyed the Free Folk pilots with terrifying ease.

“Gods...”

They were breaking off now. She hadn’t given a single command, but there wasn’t simply anything to do. Of the two hundred thousand pilots she had led to this battle, maybe three thousand had escaped the White Walkers’ batteries. There was no way they could do significant damage during a single wave.

“Crimson Archer, the energy levels around the Star Killer, they are...”

It was one of the six survivors of her squadron who had tried to speak to her, but the warning came too late. And it wasn’t like they could have done anything.

The great cannon of the super-battleship fired.

At first, it looked like a thin blue lightning...then the small blue line became a raging inferno of blue energy. They were not the targets, of course. Why would the demons waste their time and their energy on a heavily battered force?

It was like the end of all things and Kroc’s Station was on its path. The young commander of the Free Folk squadron gripped her console in fear but at this moment sensors were showing the same horrifying reality her own eyes were able to discern.

The station which had been their base and their refuge for the last fortnights vanished forever in an explosion making those of the preceding fight tame. The defences, the minefields, the satellites... everything in orbit was exploding or convulsing in blue flames.

And then the planet itself began to freeze. In the first minutes it was like a white wound was hurting the planet but soon it was evident the five-second shot had been sufficient to provoke a new ice age to the sole inhabited planet of the system.

The civilian frequencies were screeching as tens of thousands Free Folk screamed in terror. Ygritte switched back to the squadron’s communications seconds after, unable to listen to this tragedy.

Ten million lives they had failed to save.

“Crimson Hunter, give us a new course for the jump point.”

“It’s not your fault, Crimson Archer.”

“I...No, but...” What else could she say to her wingmen?

“Hunter is right, Archer.”

“We need to get back to the fleet,” Ygritte said after taking a big breath. “The King needs to be informed the White Walkers have that thing to kill the Free Folk...”

**Euron Greyjoy, 05.09.300AAC, Nightfort System**

The aether around the Eye of the Woe was not pleasant to study. This was a lesson Euron had learned the hard way when he had joined the Night’s Watch after this little clusterfuck at Pyke.

It had never been the case wherever he went in the Iron Sector and many of the locations he had visited in his reaving days, so the Crow’s Eye had supposed the method the Others had used to create this unnatural breach had also screwed the aether in a major way.

It was like someone had tried to play a symphony with a music instrument as badly as possible, while being accompanied by a thousand singers having no idea to cooperate properly with a band of animals doing their own cacophony in the background.

To say it would be pleasant to hear would be like to say men loved it when they were forced to drink their piss instead of facing insubordination charges. He was certainly not going to make a song of it with the violin he had recently acquired from a Crown bard exiled for some chicanery to this god-forsaken planet.

Coupled with the fact he tired far faster than in his young years with this damned heavy black armour, and Euron wasn’t really paying attention to what happened on the magical side of things at every hour of the day. He had to supervise the renovations of the Nightfort infrastructure and watch over a bunch of criminals. Said men believed they were big boys because they had killed one or two men, raped their first woman and tried to take over a gang at King’s Landing or one in another Westerosi mega-city.

It was a pleasure to explain to them – in music – why they were insignificant ants in front of his sublime greatness. Yes, he was a bit injured but he at least had tried to become a God – notice the majuscule – and millions had perished under his command.

These common thieves, murderers and rapists were just apprentices in front of the Great Master, crime-wise. But frankly, it was a long and unsavoury chore to make them recognise this evidence.

Sometimes, Euron thought the Conqueror had cast a spell to diminish magically the intelligence of those who opposed his line and by a strange hazard of destiny, born-greenseers were immune to it.

 “It would certainly explain why Balon’s reavers were so stupid...” He muttered, the sound of his voice resonating in a sinister manner outside his mouth.

He felt it shortly after. The aether was in turmoil. A storm of screams was singing more loudly than the tumult created by the Eye of Woe. Wincing at the idea of the headache he was going to experience tomorrow, he tried to sense the origin of the new uninspiring music...and was rewarded by an enormous flash of blue, the greatest cannon blast he had ever seen in his life, a planet freezing to death...and iris-less blue eyes fixing him with absolute malevolence.

Euron didn’t wait to see if the creature could harm him and cut the flow of magic faster than precaution dictated. He felt pain in his mouth and every part of his body, but it was better than the alternative.

It took him a quarter of an hour to stop shouting insults after the vision stopped.

“This is really not good,” he rasped after he had finished venting his rage on the skull of one of his deceased subordinates. “Shit!”

The Others were coming faster and apparently they had created their equivalent of a galactic battering ram to storm the protections of the Wall. And by the chorus of screams he had heard, the barbarian wildlings had just been used for the field test of the new weapon.

Euron Greyjoy was a master strategist, but in this case even Balon would have been able to guess their ultimate goal.

“Squire!” He barked. Footsteps echoed in the distance and after a delay which was unpunctual and un-artistic, a young man entered his personal quarters. It was not his last squire, and the Crow’s Eye was pretty sure he had not killed the current incumbent of the post.

A suspicion more than justified by the dirty dots on the black uniform of the newcomer.

“Where is my squire?”

“I’m afraid he fell badly in the stairs...” Euron fixed the arrogant youngster for several seconds. The pale eyes, the arrogant posture and the twitching forced him to conclude he had a rapist, a murderer, a liar, a moron and a sadist all in the same body facing him.

Perfect.

In two steps, Euron closed the distance before striking the young man between the legs with his right fist. As the recruit screamed, he seized him by an ear and slammed him against the wall. Exploiting the moment of shock, he seized an ancient obsidian dagger and cut the other ear of this wretch. He cauterised the wound two seconds after, it wouldn’t do at all for the black brother to die from blood loss.

“Congratulations, vermin,” Euron affirmed conversationally. “You are my new squire. Try to kill someone else without my word and by the next dawn, you will be a eunuch abandoned on the ice fields and I will make you fight a direbear naked. Your name?”

“Ramsay...Ramsay Snow.”

Ah yes, the bastard pretending to be the illegitimate child of Lord Roose Bolton. Since his ‘father’ had never recognised him and he was given the chance between the black and the rope after his crimes were discovered, the troops of the Night’s Watch really didn’t care one way or another. The fact he had been sent to the Nightfort garrison told volumes however on his behaviour.

“Well, Ramsay Snow it is your lucky day,” Euron cheerfully proclaimed as best as his armour metallic carcass allowed him. “I am not going to kill you...today. Now run to Section 11 and tell them I want a courier to be prepared for Castle Black. I have an important message to deliver to tell the Lord Commander.”

Euron moved his gaze away and was displeased. Now his quarters were in a disorderly state.

“And when your worthless fleshbag has fulfilled my command, come back here and clean this mess.”

“I am not your servant.”

Euron sighed and trampled the left hand of Ramsay Snow, delighting in the noise of the broken bones.

“You are whatever I want you to be, fleshbag. Now run, before I decide to send you to open your belly and organise an auction for your organs...”

**Melisandre of Asshai, 05.09.300AAC, Pommingham System**

Melisandre of Asshai, Red Voice of R’hllor, had regretted several times in the last years the necessity to use King Rhaegar Targaryen and his allies to accomplish the will of her God. Yes, the King and the group of ‘magicians’ and ‘prophecy experts’ had been easy to dupe. Thanks to them and their narrow-minded views, she and her High Priestesses had been able to create the foundations of a true worship in Westeros, praise the Lord of Light.

That didn’t mean she wouldn’t have preferred to work with other Lords and Ladies. Jon Connington, obviously, had proved more and more difficult to handle and in the last couple of years Melisandre had to dedicate nearly fifty Priests and Priestesses to the thankless duty of keeping an eye on this buffoon.

But if the Lord of Griffin’s Roost had been one of the largest problems, the court of King’s Landing had been full of lesser ones. It was not because they represented a danger for her plans. Indeed, the majority had not a clue how many men and women she had successfully convinced to embrace the light of R’hllor. These nobles and their lackeys were just so busy in their conspiracies that they attacked politically, economically or by force everything they desired. And it had proved inconvenient more than once.

By the nature of their worship, men and women loyal to the Lord of Life and Light were far less willing to plunge their hands in this sea of corruption and treachery. Melisandre had lost more new recruits and agents than she was ready to admit in private save with her High Priestesses.

It was a challenge the will of R’hllor had told her to overcome and so she had, though the circumstances had long pained her. There were many benevolent souls in the Crown Sector, but the unbelievers at the top were not among them.

Fortunately, many of them were no longer dirtying the name of mankind in this galaxy. Unfortunately, her visions in the flames had made clear the high idiots of the council had proven as useless as she had feared.

Melisandre had fully expected the capital to be lost to Rhaegar and his Crown Prince in the first days of war. But the speed and the scope of the defeat Prince Viserys had just handed to the loyalist forces was just exceptional. Not because the King’s youngest brother had made particularly brilliant plans; Melisandre was no military expert but the actions of the new Green King had looked rushed and improvised on the field. His opponents had clearly been stupid, easily manipulated and utterly unable to do the jobs they were paid for. The Spider had also proved a nuisance, though for this one she was ready to admit she had underestimated the eunuch.

But by the flames of judgement, the reality remained: the capital was lost and her priesthood was forced to go underground. While the losses could and would be recovered, praise R’hllor, this was a complication and would cause delays elsewhere.

Melisandre closed her eyes before withdrawing her hands from the flames. Today, she really felt her real age, and not the looks of the young woman she presented to this galaxy. A shook of her head, and two servants bowed before ritually dressing her in the red clothes of the Red Voice.

Fluidly, she stood before walking out of her quarters on the *Lord of Light*, her personal starship built in the secret holy shipyards of Volantis. As the Seven Sectors were plunged into the purifying inferno of war, she had chosen it to be her temporary headquarters as well as her transport to Highgarden.

The corridors and the plazas she walked through were beautiful, decorated in red runes and flame-like decorations. Loud songs of devotion were sung at every moment, praising R’hllor for his guidance and the salvation of their souls.

“May the Lord of Light shine on your path, Red Voice...”

“R’hllor is with you my child...”

Melisandre stopped over eighty times before arriving to her destination, but she didn’t mind. Whether they wanted reassurance, voice their support, debate a theology point or address a request, the will of the children of R’hllor was welcome. The heretical ‘Faith of the Seven’ and its gluttonous septons had cut itself off from the very people it pretended to elevate the souls to the heavens. Worshipping R’hllor was completely opposed to these vices and material corruption. Faith and love in the Lord of the Light was the most important duty of a Red Priestess and Red Priest. It didn’t matter if you were the daughter of a septa, a prostitute, a slave, a merchant or a noble. R’hllor accepted everyone, and it was the Lord of Light Himself who decided the women and men having the greatest skill to speak more than others. Melisandre herself was only Red Voice because R’hllor willed it. Should the Only True God decide her service was best done by lesser actions, Melisandre would accept and another Red Voice rise in her place.

The room she was admitted was guarded by several Red Templars, recently arrived from Volantis at the direct order of the High Priest.

Three Priests and three Priestesses bowed as she marched in and Melisandre smiled to them before ordering the door to close. She had absolute faith in the souls of everyone aboard the Lord of Light, but unfortunately there were certain precautions to take for their ‘visitors’.

“How fared your efforts, Priestess Laya?”

“Red Voice, on your command we attempted to retrieve the souls of the unbelievers lost in the coup of King’s Landing. As you had predicted, many of the attempts suffered...heavy complications and had to be terminated. But in the end, we managed to recover the two primes subjects.”

“Excellent,” Melisandre knew that to ingratiate herself with the new King, these new pieces. “Is it too soon to reawaken them for the binding rituals?”

“A few hours, Red Voice,” promised the white-haired Priestess.

Melisandre of Asshai could have returned to her quarters and wait, but exceptionally she decided to observe the procedures herself this time. The transformed room was a marvel of R’hllor: great cables, and columns of fluids coursing with red energy. There were sigils and symbols of devotion to R’hllor supplemented the scientific goods discreetly bought in the Free Cities. It had been relatively difficult, as was every genetic-production and cloning facility, but combined with the power of the True God, it gave them an unmatched strength...provided you worshipped the Lord of Light and Life.

Recovering souls if you were an unbeliever was considerably more difficult.

Difficult but not impossible.

The two red matrices emptied slowly of the life liquid and the connections were switched off one by one. Then the two human bodies were slowly expelled from the glassy chrysalis where they had been conceived.

Both males had visages of absolute stupefaction when they opened their eyes and met her. Melisandre savoured their emotions of shock and disbelief. By their limited understanding, what had just been accomplished was just miraculous...and it was not their non-existent Seven who were responsible for their resurrection.

“Rise, Ser Barristan Selmy, Ser Arthur Dayne. Your part in this war is not yet over.”

**King Viserys III Targaryen, 05.09.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

The trumpets clamoured twenty-three times before falling silent and the herald’s announcement thundered over the silent hall.

“Hail King Viserys Targaryen, the Third of his Name, King of Westeros, Lord of the Seven Sectors, King of the Andals, Rhoynar and First Men, Protector of the Realm, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Summerhall, Lord Protector of Dragonstone, Shield of the Narrow Void, Royal Admiral and Master of King’s Landing!”

“ALL HAIL!”

Viserys sat on the throne, never stopping his observation of the assembly in front of him. To his satisfaction, faces of approval and satisfaction were everywhere. Evidently, his decision to move the official crowning in a smaller and more convivial hall was a good choice.

He had decided only five hours ago he was not going to sit on the Iron Throne. His new seat was smaller and had only three steps. It had several rubies and you weren’t at risk to bleed on the thousands of blades.

But it wasn’t why he had done it.

The Iron Throne, as much as no one had admitted in public for the last century, was a symbol of overwhelming power, made possible by oceans of blood and the fire of dragons. It was the proclamation House Targaryen could reign over the Seven Sectors because they were able to massacre on their own any troublesome bannersmen, separately or together.

The last wars had proved the days of the Conquest were long gone. House Targaryen’s dragons were dead and they reigned over Westeros as long as they had a sufficient number of Lords Paramount content with their laws. Pretending anything else was just the dreams of a drug addict.

Viserys had thus decided that his first days had to bring new traditions. Clearly, if he didn’t establish them now, in a few moons the weight of past precedents, political infighting and necessity was going to block everything and prevent him from showing he was different from his brother and his father. It would not be proclaimed on the holo-news in such terms, but Viserys needed to strike the metal of the Crown Sector politics before it became cold and inflexible again.

And so Viserys sat on his new throne as the new ceremony was expedited in record time. Lasting four hours, it had to be the shortest coronation of any King ever done. It was also a model of austerity. Viserys obviously didn’t agree with many of the Starks and Baratheons policies, but in this case he had shamelessly copied their tactics. All his officers, army, navy or marines, had come in their war uniforms. The guards were in pristine battle-armours. The administrators had been instructed to answer their summons in excellent clothes but ones the smallfolk could wear in extraordinary clothes. The hundreds of green dragon banners on black fields were modest and not accompanied by emeralds and onyx gemstones.

It was in many ways powder for the eyes. It was also vitally important. Viserys was sadly extremely aware his hold on the capital and the rest of the Crown Sector was fragile – an understatement, if there ever was one. It was why the last hour was spent giving amnesties to the defeated and mutinied troops. Neither his father nor his eldest brother had ordered one in the last two decades, and a merciful series of edict would prove he could be reasonable. Lords and their Houses rarely fought to the end when the enemy had no intentions to annihilate them.

“While the Crown has heard awful rumours about the actions of several other members of House Targaryen, I am prepared to extend amnesties to the Princes and Princes currently massing their forces in foreign Sectors. Should Crown Prince Aegon, Princess Rhaenys, Prince Joffrey, Princess Visenya, Princess Shiera, Prince Daeron and Princess Baela accept the new Royal authority, their holdings and properties in the Crown Sector won’t be forfeited and their lines attainted.”

Several of his officers had pressed him to summon all the wayward Royals to King’s Landing, but given the precedent offered by the Usurper’s Rebellion, he had renounced. Instead he was forcing his nephews and nieces to declare their betrayal themselves. Granted, it was something they would probably do anyway. The Prince of Summerhall was not sure if the North was ever considering crowning a dragon; it was far more likely than they were going to rebel and install the Starks as King in the North again. Winterfell was the exception, alas. If the Admiral of Dragonstone had to bet, his diplomatic couriers sent to Highgarden, Sunspear and Casterly Rock were going to meet on their way announcing the crowning of new Kings and a Queen.

“The realm is in danger, but we will not despair! House Targaryen has ruled the Seven Sectors for three hundred years, and we will not let anarchist elements destroy the lights of civilisation our ancestors paid with their tears and blood!”

The torrent of applause was impressive and after several other bombastic announcements, the crowd progressively left the new throne room. The high commanders and the key members of his new rule stayed, forming several little groups ten metres away before him.

“I suppose we best begin with the situation in the Crown Sector. Lord Ardrian, you are now the High Admiral of the Crown Navy and the Master of Ships. What is the situation in the Crown Sector?”

“I think the short answer is...complicated, your Grace,” replied the old man, who had temporarily smiled as his loyalty was rewarded. “In the last hours, our first counter-offensive has forced the surrender of the Bywater Rest, Stokeworth and Driftmark Systems with minimal losses. In the first two cases, the victory was made faster than our most optimistic predictions thanks to certain factors we weren’t aware of. The Masterly House of Edgerton was loyal to Prince Joffrey, but was convinced to side with us as soon as he heard the fate of the capital. I’m afraid Lord Manly Stokeworth preferred to die rather than serve your Majesty. The rest of his family is in our custody.

At Bywater Rest, things were even more confusing. The Masterly House of Farring declared for your cause, my King, but the Knightly Houses led by House Follard went to Prince Joffrey. This created a three-way fighting and we were forced to defeat them decisively by orbital strike. The Noble House of Bywater and the Knightly House of Follard have to be considered extinct, unless they’re other survivors sent to the Reach I am not aware of.”

“And Driftmark?”

“The support of House Sunglass and House Rambton proved primordial in subduing the Velaryon units. The last members of the sea horses are our prisoners and the shipyards were captured intact.”

“Good, very good,” and unconsciously most Lords and commanders relaxed. With these systems in their hands, the survival of the coup for the next weeks was all but assured. If another faction wanted to take the throne, they would have to bring a massive amount of firepower to the Crown Sector. It was a costly endeavour, and one which was going to take time.

“Our squadrons are as we speak moving on the Langward, Cressey and Chelsted Systems. Given the low level of coordination and the inexistent preparations made by the Admiral and Generals the former Council left in charge, simulations give us odds of seventy percent to capture the entire Crown Sector. Afterwards we will have to make a long pause to overhaul and repair the existing hulls.”

Viserys nodded. So far they had been lucky, but when this round of conquests was over, the Crown Navy and Army would have to be ready for the next battles, and given its current state, he didn’t fancy its chances against the rest of Westeros.

“Lord Guncer Sunglass?”

“Yes, your Grace?” The Rear-Admiral bent the knee.

“For your loyal service, the Masterly House of Sunglass is to become the Noble House of Sunglass, Masters of the Driftmark System, Lords of the Cosmic Tides and sixty percent of the possessions and the privileges owned by the attainted House Velaryon are yours by law. Rise Lord Guncer, Admiral of the Crown Navy.”

It was not the end of the nominations he gave on this session, far from it. Perwyn Frey was elevated Lord Perwyn Rosby of Rosby by his mother’s lineage, and was given the very indigestible title of Master of Logistics. Lord Baelor Staunton, who had managed to rally roughly seventy-eight percent of the Sector’s armies, was named Crown Marshal and Master of Armies, in replacement of the useless seat of ‘Master of Arms’. Ser Justin Massey was confirmed as a General and commanded to restore the ten Behemoths left to active duty as fast as possible. Lord Farring and Lord Edgerton, while not present today, were given the temporary governing rights of the star systems they had helped him seize.

“We will convene a new war council in forty-eight hours and decide to confirm or stop the next offensives. Ser Sal, please give us your best intelligence on the civil situation.”

The man he had chosen to serve as the interim Master of Laws took a few steps in the direction of the throne before largely bowing. Unlike most, the black-haired knight known as Ser Sal Blackrock had not been born noble and it was his deeds during the Greyjoy Rebellion – he had been able to capture several towns on Old Wyk with little to no damage. But he had proven capable in his enforcement of the law and was fairly popular.

“Your Grace, we are in a perilous situation. The betrayal of the Master of Whisperers has crippled our intelligence and security systems. I will need months to restore them to a fraction of what they were. The same is true for the entire Sector, and for every planet the problems are multiplied for we can’t be sure of if the allegiance of the local authorities to your cause is genuine or faked. I’m afraid that for the next weeks, we will be force to use a lot of stop-gap measures if we want to limit the civil disorder.”

“Name three you intend to promulgate in the next forty-eight hours,” Viserys prepared himself for bad news and he wasn’t disappointed.

“We will have to put back hundreds of thousands mutineer Goldcloaks into service and use them to soak up the casualties in the slums and the urban areas. All the religious fanatics we captured are to be presented in front of a judge and executed before they cause more trouble. The officers and former administrators who refuse to swear allegiance to you must be imprisoned or exiled before they can present themselves as martyrs.”

Viserys gritted his teeth for an instant, wondering if the alternative was not more reasonable...but in the end there was no choice.

“Do it. I want the official edicts ready to be signed before sunset.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

The King on the not-Iron Throne emitted a low groan of exhaustion as Sal Blackrock rushed out of the hall in a hurry. Unfortunately, the day was going to be long and he had several other bad news, pardon several more advisors to listen to.

“Your Grace, for the present time, we are in firmly in control of Galactic Targaryen News and the personnel we have hired for this task is gaining a large public to our cause,” announced Ser Varon Darkwood, the new Master of Information. “Our efforts to purge the scandalous corruption plaguing the capital system are popular, and each hour gives us the opportunity to reveal new treacheries from House Buckwell, House Langward, House Velaryon and several other factions. Per your directives, implacable measures have also been taken against slaver rings we tolerated for far too long in our core systems. I’m afraid though we are just cleaning the surface of this pit of illegality and darkness.”

So far, so good...well, it was not good, because he would have to replace thousands of men who were utterly incapable to stay honest, but at least this was a progress. He was sure that the anti-corruption efforts were going to continue until his dying day, no matter how many days or years he would spend on the throne before this date. The sins and crimes had sunk too deep in the essence of the capital culture and economy. The last King to have made real efforts on this front was Aegon V, but none of his successors had been particularly interested in following his example.

“The economic situation,” Viserys III Targaryen demanded.

Rylian Telmar began his report. Former owner of a merchant company ruined by the avidity of House Velaryon, the brown-haired man and his iconic large beard was the only person in the hall not to have a knighthood title. And for good reason: he had refused all his attempts in the last five years. Rylian considered a honour to be one of the ‘smallfolk’ and refused to leave their ranks – though his personal fortune made him a wealthy millionaire.

“The economic situation is a disaster, your Grace. Your brother’s rule had no oversight whatsoever upon the transstellar companies, the big investors and of course the Noble Houses. Most of the fields and figures we have are so false my analysts have laughter attacks when they read them. Taxes were diverted to various ‘secret projects’ for decades and the administration is a maze of contradictions and inefficient procedures. I don’t think anyone realised, and I include my predecessor Master of Coin Lantion Lannister among them, how bad the situation was. We are running a deficit the size of the black hole and the western suburbs of King’s Landing have been razed, generating a crisis among the insurance companies. The coup has forced us to close the Stock Exchange and I don’t think we will be able to reopen it before ten days. The shares of several industry powerhouses are selling under the cloak at a hundredth of their official prices.

For all intent and purposes, your Grace, we are bankrupt and our system is running on negative numbers every second we speak.”

“Solutions?”

“First we have to default every debt we can politically afford to. House Tyrell, House Redwyne and all the banking institutions of the Reach have loaned billions and trillions to the Iron Throne. I say your Majesty has taken the right step. Let’s keep the Iron Throne as a museum heirloom, and we reject the reimbursement proposals of our enemies.”

“The Lannisters, the Martells, the Vale?”

“The latter two factions did not loan to us, and in the case of House Grafton, it was the Crown giving money to them, not the contrary. I have taken the liberty to cut all subsidies the moment I took my post. The Lannisters...well, King Rhaegar and his Council loaned less money in recent years, but there are long-term loans of trillions of dragons and only their interests have been paid...barely.”

Hearing this, it was somewhat a miracle the Seven Sectors had not collapsed economically a decade ago. There was a temptation after that to abdicate and let Aegon and Mace Tyrell handle this mess – they would not be able to erase the debts with a single signature, their own backers would never tolerate it.

“Give me your first emergency scenario,” he braced himself for more disgusting and yet necessary measures.

“We default on the debts of the entire Reach bankers, investors and House, save House Hightower and its allies per your will. We cancel the subsidies to the Storm, Vale and River allies your deceased brother. We declare the debts owed to House Lannister null and void, I’m sure our bards can find several high precedents in history to justify this. We abandon the garrison forces of the Iron Sector. We inflict monumental financial penalties on the corrupt, the slavers and the traitors. We empty the coffers, raid the possessions of Langward, Buckwell and all other attainted lines. We have to force the ascension of the enw High Septon which will erase the billions we owe to the Faith.”

“Will it be enough?” He darkly asked. Rylian and his large brown beard had indeed announced he intended to bring the next best thing to an economic apocalypse to King’s Landing and neighbouring systems.

“No, your Majesty, it will not.” Rylian Telmar took a great inspiration. “I will be able to save about two thousand trillions dragons that way and it will give me time to save something from the field of ruins we took ownership. But make no mistake, the economy has just been exsanguinated by two decades of ill-management and unbridled military rearmament. We can’t default the Essossi debts we have, the risk of them sending raiding squadrons on our planets is too great. The Great Stock Exchanges may well crash in a definite manner if we try to reopen them. And...”

“And on top of that, we’re on the eve of another war. Do your duty, Master of Coin.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

The next couple of hours saw more advisors arrive and then rush away to implement the foundations of the next purges and new royal edicts. The Crown Intelligence Agency and the Secret Police were officially disbanded, not his most difficult decision as the loyal had been decimated and the disloyal had disappeared or were now actively operating against his forces.

The Kingsguard was hereby disbanded; its white cloaks had been soiled and tarnished and he didn’t trust them anymore. Barristan Selmy had killed six million Kingslanders in the Behemoth’s Fall because he refused to stand down and Preston Greenfield had certainly decided to follow Prince Joffrey instead of his legal orders. The less said about the rest, the better. For now, Viserys’ security would be assured by the 15th ‘Hellguard’ Dragonstone Line Regiment, one of the elite formations he had constantly nurtured and protected since his ascension at Admiral of the star system.

One by one the supplicants and the councillors left, and to his dismay the day was nearly over. He was tired, he wanted to get drunk after listening to this litany of bad news and he had the awful certainty it could have been much, much worse than the semi-nightmare he was facing at the moment.

“Kingship suits you, husband.”

Like a shadow, his wife had arrived. She was beautiful, as usual. Lynesse Hightower had been born from a lesser family of Oldtown and her mother had essentially climbed the ladder to Lord Hightower’s bed by her seduction skills. Lynesse had golden hairs, pure blue eyes and today she had chosen a gold-white dress from a famous Lysene dressmaker to emphasize her assets.

“I thought I told you to be here for the official coronation.”

Lynesse snorted in her usual suave manner.

“You wanted to make the coronation a small and discreet affair. I don’t do small and discreet.” Long nails caressed his cheek before her faint rosy lips turned into a vicious smirk.

“You have created a hurricane among the ladies of court, husband. I saw thousands of ladies trying to be admitted in my parlour, begging for the liberation of their husbands, lovers, cousins, bothers and so on. They also wanted their money back, by the way.”

“I hope they didn’t disturb too much Rhaella,” his daughter was two years old, and far more precious to him than any of these court turkeys.

“You don’t have to worry on this point, she was far more worried about her next meal...” Lynesse expression was maternal for a few seconds. It didn’t last. “I went to the Maidenvault and spoke to Cersei Lannister. I wanted to see her face when she learned I had replaced her as Queen.”

“How did she take it?” asked Viserys, moderately interested. The Queen – well, former Queen now – had been all but imprisoned for a decade and though her hate for Rhaegar was anything but a secret, the rest of her activities and habits were.

The daughter of Lord Tywin Lannister also represented a sizeable headache. He couldn’t release her, the West would take it as a weakness admission, but leaving her here would made him no better than his brother. Another problem without an easy way out.

“She cried of joy and invited her handmaidens to empty near ten bottles of Red Arbor before I left.” Lynesse took great pleasure to make a short rendition of the scene, rising fake toasts after fake toasts at the death of the King. “I don’t think we need to be very concerned she will torment you for not finding the assassins of her husband.”

Tank the Gods, because the killers had evaded pursuit – not that it was a legendary escape, given the level of disorganisation and the rates of desertion during the last hours the Red Keep resisted. They had only the mangled corpse of Rhaegar, his genitals mutilated, sectioned and forced into his mouth after his teeth were removed one by one. And on the wall next to what remained of his body, the assassins had painted in his blood the message ‘THE NORTH NEVER FORGETS’.

The Stark soldiers could vicious sneaky buggers when they were sufficiently warmed up, apparently.

“I supposed it amused you for a few hours.” Lynesse didn’t smell like wine, so she must have not partaken in this ‘celebration’.

“Yes, it did. Afterwards I was busy taking many servants in my service and throwing out those who were too long in the employ of Varys and the other former Masters.”

“I was not aware Varys’ spies were so easily discovered,” the Seven knew their lives would be far simpler if it they were...

“Oh they are presenting you like they are fine and upstanding servants, but they are too muscled, too swift, too intelligent and they have that look in their gaze when you asked them something...” his wife made a negative hiss. “And while they talk alright, many of them don’t do well in practical things like choosing dresses, combing their hairs or seeing a ruby is a fake.”

Varys’ agents were betrayed by their lack of fashion knowledge. What had this galaxy gone to?

“And now?”

Lynesse pouted, her impressive blue eyes shining like sapphires under the light of the crystal chandeliers.

“Now I’m bored...my King has no time for me...”

“I have a bankrupt realm to rule you know...”but Lynesse climbed the steps of the throne, and placed one of her fingers over his mouth.

“If you work from dawn to dusk my poor dragon, you will not last a year on this throne.”

“What is your suggestion, my Queen?”

In a move that should have been impossible with more traditional robes, Lynesse opened a series of laces to her back and slowly the cloth she wore fell to her feet, revealing she wore nothing underneath. Viserys felt suddenly very glad he had dismissed the guards ten minutes ago.

“I approve your choice to abandon the Iron Throne. It is too dangerous...”purred the youngest daughter of Lord Hightower. “Now let’s test your new seat. I am your Queen and I want to feel like one!”

For the first time of the day, Viserys was the one to obey. And it was pleasurable, he had to admit.