**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 niece 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.”

“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 was needed on 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 were 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 can people 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 convinction 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 those are your mother’s, 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 nee 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 infamous of course 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 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 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 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, 14.09.300AAC, Highgarden System**

Lord Samwell Tarly, 15.09.300AAC, Highgarden System