**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 9**

**Blood of Westeros**

*In public imagination, the Battle of the Field of Fire remained was one of the greatest victories ever won by the Targaryen dynasty. It was a one-sided triumph, but what made it the more important at the time was the opponents who had been crushed by their dragons. The Lannister armies and fleets were utterly routed, their King escaping death by sheer dumb luck. And the Gardener dynasty, a line which had led Highgarden since times immemorial, ended in a single day.*

*All of this was known and had become part of the history books. And yet at the fires of reason and unity flickered and died, the lessons of the past had been forgotten. Lord Mace Tyrell had promised the hand of his daughter to the then Crown Prince, tying the destiny of his House with the Targaryens.*

*The Tyrells were in a decade elevated far above the Noble Houses, even higher than the other Lords Paramount and Wardens of the realm. It went without saying that it was a catastrophe on all fronts. Highgarden drained the coffers of the Storm Houses to fill its own, demolished the foreign trade of Dorne, and subjugated many River and Vale mega-corporations. If in the short-term it gave the former Gardener stewards a huge influence and an era of prosperity, this was at the price of much hatred in the neighbouring Sectors. When the time came to draw the vibro-swords and launch the warships, the Warden of the South would have to defend the Reach and the Targaryen interests.*

*Lord Mace Tyrell had acknowledged this somewhat after the Greyjoy Rebellion, but his solutions were incredibly flawed. The first and most obvious was of course to build a gigantic fleet. In the mind of the Lord of Highgarden’s mind, it didn’t matter how good Stark, Lannister, Arryn or Baratheon capital warships were; if the Reach was able to outnumber them two or three-to-one in every battle, victory was all but assured anyway.*

*This was an edict which was going to torment Highgarden and most of the Reach Sector years after the Harvest Graveyard and the capture of the Lord Paramount. To afford the building of hundreds of ships of the line, cutbacks had to be made somewhere. For all its wealth, the Reach Sector was not running on an unlimited budget – there were already massive clues the River and Storm Sectors were about to explode financially in 299AAC.*

*It was the fixed defences which paid the price at first. As the Reach-Targaryen plans and doctrine emphasized offensive on every front in an aggressive manner, it wasn’t hard for the grand strategists to justify these measures. Besides, fortresses, orbital stations controlling thousands of missiles platforms, extensive minefields controlled by the latest fire-control systems in existence...all of those military investments were expensive. And for the better part of the Usurper’s and Greyjoy Rebellions the majority had stayed idle and had not fired a single shot in anger – with the exception of the Arbor and the Shield sub-Sector of course. The fortresses and the costly systemic infrastructure were repurposed or scrapped in many systems. The Reach core worlds were not defenceless, but many ancient bastions like Old Oak, Ashford, Honeyholt or Bitterbridge began to rely exclusively on mobile assets to defend their region of space.*

*But by 298AAC the Reach fleet had become so large and the needs it imposed in manpower and equipment requirements were so high it wasn’t enough. The Reach fleet needed more men to be kept at a state of readiness. And the bannersmen of Lord Tyrell obeyed their liege. Dozens of fortresses were put into mothball. Half-trained recruits were ordered to don uniform. The production of surplus machine parts suffered. Agricultural quotas began to stagnate, despite the excellent weather and the absence of any conflict.*

*These problems were all waiting patiently to bite the fingers of the Reach administration when the Harvest Graveyard happened. In one battle, it was like a black hole had swallowed over fifteen years of ruinous military programs. The numerical superiority over the Dornish and the Lannisters was missing in action: House Tyrell could barely afford to fight a peer opponent on equal terms, and after losing another fleet at King’s Landing, these goals had to be decreased further.*

*The Tyrells had now their Field of Fire, and the Reach would never be the same again. A total victory before the end of the year was now outright lunacy. And without fixed defences, dozens of systems were now lying defenceless to any enemy. From Westbrook to Leygood Fields for example, the only systems able to give some pause to a determined opponent were Lyberr and Inchfield. The rest? They were wide open to the enemy.*

*The Targaryen-Tyrell block had lost all its allies and was now threatened everywhere. The Crown Sector was burning; its most important planets were lost to Viserys Targaryen or reduced to continent-sized fields of rubble. The Reach smallfolk were watching astonished the rose banners as they were trampled in the dust and foreign soldiers occupied the seats of power of their absent Lords.*

*The Reach, assailed from every direction, was forced to abandon ground. Regent Willas Tyrell started to call back all their surviving mobile forces to Highgarden. For despite the collapse of the stock exchanges, the riots which followed the new conscription demands, the disastrous state of the finances, the growing discontent of all societal classes and the refusal of many corporations to pay extraordinary taxes, Tywin Lannister and his main fleet had to be stopped at all costs.*

*House Tyrell was going to play its survival in their home system, and while they knew a defeat was the end, by no means would a victory erase the legion of problems waiting to drag the Reach into the abyss of war...*

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

**Lord Samwell Tarly, 15.10.300AAC, Harlaw System**

“You have three options. The first is to go to Pyke and fight Victarion Greyjoy there. The second to wait here at Harlaw until Victarion Greyjoy has finished ravaging Pyke and the other star systems of the Iron Sector and decides to come here. The third is to take your starships and your people, and to flee this Sector...no, to flee Westeros and never come back.”

“We are not cowards,” a Redwyne representative bearing the insignia of a Rear-Admiral growled.

The look the Lannister officer who had presented himself as Ayric Sarring could be best described as ‘dark glare’.

“Of course not,” the sarcasm and the venom were unmistakeable. “I suppose you are also going to tell me you were one of the first soldiers to land in the Greyjoy cities during the Fall of Pyke.”

His interlocutor’s face became an interesting combination of red and violet.

“I am a naval officer!”

“Then where was your squadron when Saltcliffe called for help? Where were the Reach forces when Great Wyk was burning?”

The bannersman and relative of Lord Paxter tightened his fist but didn’t open his mouth. Perhaps he knew, like everyone around the table, that his actions were perfectly unjustifiable for any impartial board of inquiry.

“The threat the remnant of the Iron Sector faces today is so massive that there is plenty of reasons to be afraid,” the red-armoured officer returned to the previous order like the interruption had only comforted his negative opinion of the assembly. “Victarion Greyjoy is dabbling in sorcery and other fell powers, bringing hundreds of thousands of animated corpses under his pirate’s banner. We are already greatly fortunate the ex-Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet is an extremely poor strategist and tactician. In the hands of someone competent, the Tyroshi fleet could have assailed the eight inhabited systems of the region and removed all resistance before we had a clue he was back. It is also clear there are no reinforcements on their way to save us.”

Sam couldn’t object to any of these affirmations. The ‘strategy’ of Victarion Greyjoy, assuming there was something left of the man inside the monster after years of atrocities, was not efficient at all. In fact, if the squadrons of the Iron Sector had been coordinated, it was entirely possible a great blow could have already been delivered to the ‘Iron King’.

As for the reinforcements issue, the Western-born man was right too. The rare couriers sent Highgarden insisted on a general recall of all loyal Reach forces back to Highgarden or Oldtown. This was hardly the moves of a strategist who was going to move heaven and earth to defend the Iron Sector. The Lannisters, who were next door, were busy attacking their neighbours, and this included the Reach. The rest of the regular Sector fleets were too far away to take the risk of sending new fleets, assuming their warships still existed in the first place.

“And what do you intend to do about it?” Asha asked brazenly. “It’s obvious the second option isn’t an option at all. Letting my dear uncle devour Pyke will give him an unending army of damned. The Fall of Pyke killed millions of Ironborn a decade ago. If the planet falls, all the fallen will rise in his service. And the third proposal isn’t much better. You may be able to evacuate your forces back to the Western or the Reach Sector, but there aren’t a tenth of the starships necessary to truly evacuate Harlaw.”

Ayric Sarring raised an eyebrow.

“You are definitely different than the other Greyjoy I’ve met before,” the veteran soldier admitted.

“I was unaware you had an encounter with Victarion Greyjoy during your adventures in the East.”

“I didn’t. But I met the Crow’s Eye during the Fall of Pyke. It was not a pleasant experience...for both of us.”

That Sam could very well believe.

“Euron Greyjoy was a madman but at least he wasn’t a willing servant of the monsters of ice and death. Victarion Greyjoy, on the other hand, seems to have fallen under their sway. I don’t know if it was willingly or unwillingly, and I don’t particularly care. All that matters at this moment is the threat he represents for the entire galaxy. The more dead and pirates he gathers under his banner, the more planets he is going to transform into empty graveyards. He must be eliminated before more planets are destroyed.”

“Good luck with that,” one of the senior survivors of the Lonely Light snarled. “The Tyroshi fleet has advantages we lack and we don’t have the time to let his poor maintenance and his lack of supplies turn into a huge weakening factor.”

“I know,” replied levelly Ayric Sarring. “This is why I was speaking of eliminating Victarion Greyjoy without giving him the opportunity to engage into a protracted battle. The moment his fleet of damnation arrives at Pyke, the combined fleet throws him a barrage at long distance and a boarding elite team assaults the flagship. Whatever information we’ve been able to gather confirms the dead-raising energy is emanating from the command ship of Victarion Greyjoy. We find Victarion Greyjoy, we kill him and we destroy the origin of these fell powers.”

“An excellent plan, Colonel!” One of the Lannister men, one who would really, really need some facial surgery to heal his heavily burned face approved-growled.

“It is madness,” Lord Rodrik Harlaw countered with a sad smile. “While I admit the philosophy of cutting the head of the monster is tempting, I don’t think you imagine the difficulty of the enterprise. The design of the Tyroshi ships will not allow you to infiltrate the command sphere which is the heart of the warship. You will have to land on the outer sections, and these are undoubtedly packed with thousands of undead. Assuming you manage to fight your way through an army of these abominations, the rest of the Ironborn and pirate crew is sure to fight to the death and beyond to protect Victarion. The chances of success are...infinitesimal.”

Another of the Lannister soldiers barked in laughter.

“Bah, we have fought worse...”

The worst part, Sam realised with dismay, was that his companions nodded. Merciful Seven, they weren’t joking...

“I will only take volunteers with me for this mission.” The Colonel announced. “Owners of Valyrian blades are all welcome, though. The abilities of these blades are extremely potent against these abominations.”

Oh, dear. Sam didn’t like at all the smile Asha had on her lips when she turned her head towards him...

**Regent of the Reach Willas Tyrell, 16.10.300AAC, Highgarden System**

The holographic representation in other times would have filled his heart with delight and a certain sense of satisfaction, for it showed his home system.

The three planets of Highgarden Prime, Gardenia and Red Floral were like jewels in the void. The multitude of shipyards, orbital habitats, mining exploitations and starships proved beyond doubt the power and the influence of House Tyrell.

The main problem with this idyllic view was the massive fleet encircling Red Floral, the most exposed world of the system to an attack by the Dustonburry jump point. Six months ago, there would have been no conceivable reason for these hundreds of warships to be there.

Now, however, their deployment was not only prudent, it was absolutely necessary and below the numbers Willas and the inhabitants of Red Floral truly wanted. Because as much as fifty-plus ships one the line, one hundred battlecruisers, nine fleet carriers and hundreds of heavy and light cruisers sounded, the Lannisters had an even bigger fleet waiting one mere jump point away.

The Reach was on the defensive, and the battle to come was going to decide for decades to come whether they were still a faction worth remembering in the Game of Thrones or merely the failure of a kingdom.

“Before we speak of the battle proper,” Willas started, “I understand Admiral Hightower has more unpleasant news for us.”

“I have indeed, Lord Regent,” Baelor Hightower made a step forwards and replaced the holographic star of Highgarden by a map of the Reach Sector, and immediately focused it on Cider Hall. “The Dornish have taken Pommingham and are preparing for a double assault against Ser Garlan. I suppose we can’t forego the proclamations of bravery and defiance, and tell the ugly truth: the remnants of the Grand Fleet haven’t the strength to stop a double-pronged assault spearheaded by these hellishly-effective starfighters and ion-armed battlecruisers.”

“This is defeatism!” Arthur Ambrose, Lord of Ambrose and Admiral protested loudly.

“No, it is the painful and awful truth,” General Branston Cuy declared bitterly. “Almost every heavy unit of Admiral Garlan Tyrell will need months of reparations to be considered battle-worthy again. As it stands, most of the opposition which convinced the Dornish to not try their chance storming the system consists in fixed defences: forts, starfighter bays, minefields and missile platforms. But the quantities available to Cider Hall are enough to protect from a one-front offensive. There isn’t enough for two.”

“But...”the Lord of the Ambrose System turned his head quickly to watch everyone in the command assembly. “But if we abandon Cider Hall, it will be Ambrose’s turn to be on the frontlines!”

“We all must do sacrifices,” a Tyrell General Willas didn’t remember the name affirmed.

“And Ambrose is far more defensible than Cider Hall now.” The Hightower Admiral pointed out.

“I’m not too comfortable with this strategy, Admiral,” Willas voiced his opinion. “To begin with, despite the best efforts of our workers and spacemen I am quite well aware we have not yet evacuated a single percent of the industrial effort the Cider Hall System is providing the Reach’s war and civilian economy. Not including the military potential of the warships and divisions my brother saved from the Graveyard, the Fossoway domains are a first-tier system of over four billion souls. Should we lose it, the effect will be...economically and military unpleasant.”

Willas had wanted to say ‘catastrophic’, but even here in the heart of the Tyrell headquarters, there were things best left unsaid. Because as realistic as his sentences would be, certain nobles were sure to desert if they acknowledged the war was lost and their best option was to cut a deal with Tywin Lannister.

Unfortunately, it didn’t change the situation. The Reach had suffered a series of disasters that would have utterly destroyed any other part of the Seven Sectors. For the moment, Highgarden had been able to withstand the hurricane. But the eldest son of the now loathed Mace Tyrell feared the cracks were already there waiting to swallow them whole. The coming months were going to be very, very bad, whether they managed to repel the Lannisters or not.

“The Dornish have now Ashford, Cockshaw Plains and Pommingham in their possession, Lords and Sers. This is respectively two billion and eight hundred million, three hundred and thirty million, and nine hundred and twenty million of our subjects who are right now living under enemy occupation.”

This was four billion Reachers neither House Tyrell nor any loyal Lord could count on, and the Reach in the first place had ‘only’ one hundred and seven billion inhabitants.

And they had lost more systems, Willas knew. Old Oak, captured by the Lannisters, had three billion one hundred and sixty-eight million. Longtable had surrendered to Stannis Baratheon and this was a wealthy system of two billion one hundred and ten million men and women. Grassy Vale, Dustonburry, Dunn...the list was lengthening and since the communications with the eastern Sector were thoroughly cut, the Admiral of the Fourteenth Fleet presided what was in effect the most calamitous period of defeats bar none ever experienced by the Reach in the last five hundred years. Yes, they were beating the Field of Fire without trying.

“I understand, Lord Regent,” Baelor Hightower looked sympathetic, but he didn’t refute his previous assessment. “But we can’t allow our forces to suffer a second terminal defeat. I will grant you the chances of victory if we make a firm last stand at Harvest Hall aren’t zero. But if we lose Cider Hall and every warship and asset we have in the system right now, this war is over. It doesn’t matter if we win without losing a single warship against Tywin Lannister; the gates of the Ambrose System will be wide open and in three or four days it will be the turn of the Dornish to threaten Highgarden.”

“But if we choose to let Cider Hall fall with only a delaying action of scout cruisers and starfighters, Starpike and House Peake are going to find themselves in the same situation,” Lord Ambrose objected. “And the supply line to keep them in the fight is far, far longer.”

Willas winced. This was definitely a good point. And to complicate the issues already present, the loyalty of Lord and Lady Peake was not considered absolute. The system of Starpike falling under a double attack would be disastrous, but would undoubtedly cost a lot of ships and men to Dorne. If House Peake turned its cloak and rallied the cause of Rhaenys Targaryen on the other hand, the Dornish battlecruisers would capture everything until Horn Hill.

“Can we afford to take these risks, Admirals?”

“Yes,” Baelor Hightower answered without the shadow of a hesitation. “I will be clear. If the Dornish fleet attacks in strength the Cider Hall System, we will lose it. No ‘buts’, ‘ifs’ or ‘we are loyal servants of the King’. The only fleet that could stop the Dornish blow is needed here to stop Tywin Lannister. So in the end, it is a choice between Cider Hall and Highgarden.”

As much as he enjoyed the company of House Fossoway boys and girls, Willas wasn’t going to suggest they sacrificed the capital system of the Reach. Not because it was his home, though the Regent would be lying if he said this didn’t factor in his mind.

Ultimately though, losing Highgarden was tantamount to lose the war in one afternoon. The economy, the military effort, the interstellar trade, and the alliances of the Game...everything was vacillating or outright burning. It didn’t matter who were the culprits and how many errors had led to this dark day. If they lost control of Highgarden, it was all over.

“I understand.” And he would make sure to write it explicitly and in bright letters he really, really hated it. “What about the fleet of Tywin Lannister?”

“We have recalled all the assets here to deal with the Westerners, but we are still outnumbered in every tonnage category save the starfighters.” There were many whispers and curses following this announcement. “The fleet stationed in the Dustonburry is reinforced and resupplied. And their plans don’t need to be complicated in order to achieve victory over us.”

The Redwyne Rear-Admiral who had spoken shook his head in apology.

“I’m sorry, Lord Regent, but if we execute Plan Gardener, Plan Shield or Plan Thorn, there will be nothing left of the Third, Fourth and Fourteenth Fleets by the time the battle ends.”

“Is it really that bad?” asked another General.

“It is certainly not good,” Willas said as the system of Highgarden reappeared on the holographic display, “since the Lannisters have added their ‘het-lasers’ to their ships of the line, our range of strategic options is drastically limited. We must either stay at maximum missile range and bombard them into submission, or accelerate deep into their envelope and shatter them at short laser range. The former will take days, and we will probably lose forty or fifty percent of the system’s infrastructure. The latter will be decisive, but we have no good counter to the two super-battleships. Are there additional plans and stratagems we might use?”

They were to his satisfaction, and a lot of them included requisitioning untested experimental equipment or civilian-grade materials. But promising or not, there weren’t many things which made him think they could stop cold a fleet of sixty ships of the line before it destroyed the priceless orbital infrastructure of the planets and the entire star system.

That was the moment his sister chose to intervene.

“You’re doing it wrong, my Lords.”

“My Queen,” Baelor Hightower said after a small inclination of the head, “I do not doubt our plans are not satisfactory to your ears, but to beat the large fleet Tywin Lannister has invaded the Reach with, we need to accept losses will be extremely high.”

Margaery gave their cousin a thin smile, and at this moment she looked like the Maiden in her long green-black robe.

“This is certainly true, Admiral Hightower. But you still want to destroy the Lannister fleet.”

“Yes, of course....this is the only way the Reach will be saved from...” Baelor’s eyes widened almost comically as thought about something. Willas didn’t see...

“We don’t need to destroy sixty ships of the line to destroy this invasion, my Lords.” His sister told the assembly. “We need to kill Tywin Lannister. The Old Lion is the strategist, the financier, the supreme commander, and the chief Lord Paramount of the Gold Dragon. Remove him, and the bannersmen of the Western Sector are leaderless.”

“This is dishonourable!” a Rowan officer barked like reflex. “We are the paragons of knighthood and nobility! We do not try to murder enemy leadership...”

Willas closed his eyes for a second before reopening them and giving a quick order.

“Remove this man from this room. Unless you’ve lived deaf and blind for the last two months, chivalry is long dead and now we must survive the storm. Admiral Hightower, on the basis of your last two battles with the Lions, is the physical elimination of the enemy leadership possible?”

“It will certainly be easier than to destroy the entire Lannister battle-line,” the Oldtown commander said after fifteen seconds of reflexion. “But if we decide to follow such a radical course, we will need to make major alterations to the existing plans...”

**Lord Eddard Stark, 16.10.300AAC, Castle Black System**

Five hours of studying the numbers had led him to a very conclusion. And it was not a pleasant one.

“This war is going to be a long and difficult one.”

Jeor Mormont on the other side of the desk shrugged.

“If we had two or three fleets of twenty ships of the line, I’m sure our forces could counter-attack and teach another painful lesson to the abominations. But since these fleets are not available...”

Eddard returned a thin smile, but deep inside he wasn’t as confident as he wanted this statement was true. The Northern navy had been in an excellent defensive position when the Others had emerged from the Eye with their genocidal armada, and despite all the preparations, the monsters had cost them a price in blood, metal and war resources which was way above any pre-Rebellion’s estimation.

“The point remains largely academic, I’m afraid. As you just said, we don’t have any fleet to counter-attack to counter-attack right now. Most of the Winterfell, Dreadfort, Karstark or Manderly squadrons will need three to four months to be considered operational again. Braavos’ ‘advisors’ have at last tentatively accepted to send a real expeditionary force, but I don’t know how long it will take for their political masters to give the orders of mobilisation. And Jon Arryn has the Blackfyre threat to deal with in his own backyard before sailing to help us.”

The absence of the Vale warships was in many ways the most galling. Northerners and Valemen had been natural allies for the two decades, and between their two secure powerbases, they should have been able to secure half of the River Sector with incredible ease, especially as neither the Tyrells nor the Lannisters wanted to send their battle-fleets there.

Reality, once again, was far more disappointing than the pre-war plans had imagined. By the latest reports, Davos Seaworth was busy finishing the sieges of several systems between the Twins and Riverrun. House Vypren had surrendered, but House Wayn and Shawney were still resisting. And with the Twelfth Fleet fighting west of the Green Rift, there was no one to attack east of it. The Ryger fleet based at Willow Wood was thus intact and was the biggest obstacle between Northgate and the Bloody Gate Systems.

The supplies of the new missiles were not infinite. Over four million had been stored in the bases of Moat Cailin, but the resistance of the Frey-aligned Houses had forced his forces and those of Jason Mallister to use a lot of them, and contrary what the rumours said, he wasn’t able to grow missiles on trees and click his fingers to magically refuel the tankers.

“In my opinion, it will be better to rely on the Valemen than the Braavosi,” the Old Bear affirmed. “The Northerners and Valemen have fought side by side many times in the last couple of decades, and the defiance of young Waymar will ensure the falcon banners will be greeted like trusted allies by every Wall defender. I can’t say in all confidence the same can be said about the Braavosi. Their experts have been really useful, but most of their cannon fodder included butcher-sellswords, not reliable soldiers.”

“I agree. And there’s another point to consider. The Vale is already mobilised for war. Should the Blackfyre threat be removed, the deployment of the Vale forces to the Wall could be expedited in two months.”

“Whereas the Braavosi fleet remained on a peace budget a fortnight ago,” the former Lord of Bear Island finished. “Yes, the Vale would arrive faster. And their motivation would be greater. Rebels or not, this time no one can object we aren’t doing our duty defending the Seven Sectors from a host of horrors and abominations.”

This was the truth. And yet it changed nothing in the end. The forces which followed Red, Gold or Green dragons weren’t likely to see reason until they saw an Other with their own eyes, and by this point it would certainly be too late.

“It seems I will have to write new orders for my southern commanders...again.”

It didn’t please Eddard, but there was no denying the war against the ice monsters was an absolute priority. The Others may have less than ten of their Carrion battleships on the other side of the Eye right now, but there were plenty of new types of cruisers and raiders. This was either their second echelon in deployment or a totally new faction of Others arriving on the frontlines, and he needed to find reinforcements or lessen the commitments of his forces on every front which was not the Wall.

The sieges of Wayn and Shawney would be left to Lord Mallister and the Riverrun light units. Davos Seaworth would have to subdue Terrick and Willow Wood. And Lord Manderly was needed to subdue the Three Sisters, since the idiotic Lords living there seemed to have some difficulties with the concept of loyalty.

Gods, he needed some rest. Maybe after the end of the repair-supply interviews, he would be able to return to his bed.

“The last Braavosi envoy was mostly insistent to gain an audience between you and several powerful politicians of the sea planet. The name of Princess Daenerys Targaryen may have also been uttered in whispers under the table.”

The Lord of Winterfell didn’t often to curse his decision to make trade agreements with the Braavosi. But today he was almost tempted to.

“I will meet him tomorrow. If we can divert a few of their carriers to deal with the Blackfyre girl, talking to them might solidify our strategic situation.”

Though a few decades of politics had told him the Essossi were rarely that obliging. Most of the Free Planets magisters and high dignitaries were interested in one thing and one thing only: profit. This love for profit could take multiple aspects: money, ore, luxury goods, high-level technology, participation in lucrative enterprises...but in the end, one always could link it with the profit word.

The Braavosi didn’t like the Targaryens and everything reminding them of the slavery empire that was the Freehold. But they wouldn’t go to war if there was no advantage for them to, and at the moment Eddard had to be realistic: the Wall may be a galaxy-threatening event, but it held, and there was little wealth sending millions of men this way.

“I will have to travel to Karhold and the Dreadfort anyway to receive the oaths of Domeric Bolton and Harrion Karstark. I suppose hosting a council of war with our gallant ‘benefactors’ might not be so bad if we limit it to two or three days...”

**Queen Rhaenys Targaryen, 17.10.300AAC, Ashford System**

“Well, well...it looks like someone on the Reach side had a crisis of intelligence.”

Speaking like this of any enemy leadership should have been incredibly arrogant on her part. But where the Tyrells and their bannersmen were discussed in this war, it really wasn’t.

“They can’t always decide to do the stupidest thing when there’s a choice,” Arianne said after sipping the Red Arbor wine in her cup. “It’s a pity, though.”

“Oh, absolutely,” she had intended to slam two-thirds of the Dornish fleet under Ynys Yronwood, the Fowler Twins and some of her most aggressive commanders by the Pommingham jump point. Given the spatial coordinates of the Cider Hall two inhabited planets and the relative distance between the Ashford, Pommingham, and Ambrose jump points, all conditions had been fulfilled for an unprecedented encirclement of the Reach forces and the capture of trillions of dragon in orbital infrastructure, fuel refineries, warship construction, agricultural engines and civilian starships. In other words inflict the equivalent of a second Graveyard to the Reach, and neutralise hundreds of thousands soldiers and sailors. “But the fact they have at last started to send some of their most valuable assets away from Cider Hall won’t save them totally. Even our most frenetic evacuation plans in Dorne take weeks to be fully implemented, and you and I both know Dorne has most motivations to study the problem.”

“You have a good point,” her cousin and confident told her. “Since they have begun to tow away the damaged warships and a lot of mobile shipyards, those in all likelihood are going to escape us. But our offensive is going to roll into Cider Hall in five and a half hours. Everything able of interstellar travel may be able to flee when they see the first missiles fly, but most of the system infrastructure certainly won’t.”

“The special forces are ready?”

“Obara has given them their briefings, though I don’t expect problems on that front,” the de facto Princess of Dorne smirked. “Their precious Seven know they haven’t given us much concern until now.”

“Let’s be careful and avoid overconfidence.”

“Yes, mother,” Rhaenys chuckled as they sipped their wine and watched the stars from her private quarters.

Like Arianne – and most of her senior commanders, honestly – had said, the performance of the Reach forces to resist the assault of their infiltration and boarding teams was less than stellar. In fact, it was an understatement of the highest order. The Reach security and the defence procedures of its military forces were utterly incompetent, and should a Dornish Commander of One Thousand be presented in front of a court-martial with the charges the average Reach Colonel was accused of, there was no doubt a firing squad would be convened within the week.

Rhaenys and every Dornish flag officer had thought they would obtain a lot of information about the Reach Sector when they broke the defence of the Marches. They had not expected to get *everything*. Well, maybe not everything. Some command centres had the reflex to erase or blow up their data-servers before surrendering. Many warships’ commanding officers were throwing informatics viruses into the machines’ systems seconds before they were officially prisoners of war. But these acts were few and far between. Of the three Reach systems Dorne had conquered, ninety-eight percent of the civilian and infrastructure was intact and already churned resources for the Dornish machine of war. Some lines had even been repurposed to produce specific Dornish ammunition and machines under the gaze of Sunspear’s overseers.

“I am extremely satisfied, of course.” Rhaenys said, likely for the hundredth time. “We have more than a month of advance on our schedule, and the losses of the enemy are already over two hundred percent our most optimistic assumptions.”

This was in fact more and more a recurring problem since Operation Midnight had been executed and her forces had pulled the trigger upon House Caron’s defenders. For the next best thing to an entire decade, Dornish commanders had played tens of thousands simulations, played uncountable war games, and studied extensively their potential opponents, all in order to have the most accurate and complete holo-picture of the Reach that military intelligence could possibly have.

And unfortunately, these analysts had seen their immense work collapse in the first weeks of war. The assumptions they had based themselves upon had proved useless, because they had been based on Reach top-secret figures, and the Tyrells had spent seventeen years auto-congratulating their ego.

“No matter who wins this war,” Arianne said with non-disguised satisfaction, “House Tyrell isn’t going to be in charge for much longer.”

Rhaenys raised a sardonic eyebrow.

“You want to see the Tyrells and the Lannisters cripple each other without our forces raising a finger.”

“Because you don’t?” the Queen supported by House Martell saluted mockingly, conceding the point. “If the Tyrells and the Lannisters slaughter each other and both lose two-thirds of our battle-line, we will have our own chance to cut through the remnants of the Reach and end the cause of the spoiled brat here and there! Highgarden is the last bastion of resistance! If it falls, the banners of the Red Dragon won’t be worth their price in toilet paper!”

“That’s a very enthusiastic speech, Ari. And yes, it may happen like this...in a perfect world. I don’t think we can count on it.”

“There are only three possibilities, Rhae. Either the Tyrells win the battle to come, or the Lannisters win, or nobody wins because the two fleets have slaughtered each other. First is the worst case for us, but the roses will suffer losses winning the battle. If Tywin Lannister takes Highgarden, he will have to garrison it and force many other planets to submit on his flanks. Since his methods of governance are the iron fist and not much else, the Old Lion is going to make quite a few cities burn to crush rebellions and armed uprising. And the third is the best from our perspective, allowing us to take systems after systems without interference.”

Rhaenys wanted to say her sister in all but blood was too optimistic, but for the moment the facts in the real galaxy were supporting this view. The Reach Sector was disintegrating. The fleet of her mad brother had gone somewhere in direction of King’s Landing, and if the competence of Mace was any indication, he was going to bleed and cripple it in short order. There was a last Red fleet under Lord Redwyne, but it was a Deep Space one and it was covering the Arbor and Oldtown. Besides, she had one of his twin sons as her hostage – and the other had been lost when his flagship disintegrated at the Harvest Graveyard.

It had many ingredients to increase the instability of the Reach...and then there was this evacuation of Cider Hall. It was a bit unsatisfying on the military side of things, but from a political eye, oh the possibilities...

“I know we are listening to the Reach communications all along the frontlines.” And if the fact the Reach had not yet considered the fact their communications were utterly compromised after the mountain of functional codes which had arrived on her lap wasn’t an indicator of their imbecilic attitude, Rhaenys didn’t know what was. “Have there been any indications they announced it to Lords who aren’t in bed with House Fossoway?”

“No, they aren’t. In fact, no Fossoway spokesman has come forwards on Galactic Targaryen News to make it official.” Arianne bared her teeth. “I think they are trying to evacuate the nobility and their most valuable cash reserves and resources before panic fully spreads. Why? You think we should inform the smallfolk and watch the fireworks?”

“I...I didn’t think about that aspect.” Rhaenys frowned. “No, we won’t do this right now. In the middle of a battle, the Fossoway forces will be dispersed and unable to stop riots and insurrections. It could easily create a climate of chaos and societal collapse. I prefer to take this system reasonably intact. We will ‘inform’ our new subjects of their perfidious lords’ betrayals when we are in charge. That should pretty much kill the credibility of the Tyrells and their allies for decades at Cider Hall, not to mention make any attempt of reconquest a nightmare.”

“I will pass the orders,” Arianne replied. “But if this wasn’t your goal...”

“Starpike. They haven’t informed Starpike and Lord and Lady Peake can rightly consider this manoeuvre a betrayal of Highgarden, especially as they haven’t been informed of this strategic decision.”

Until now, the negotiations conducted in secret by the intermediary of non-recognised diplomats had been limited by design. Not because the inhabitants of Starpike had a well of deep and unconditional love for Mace Tyrell. After several decades of the Tyrells forcing them to swallow insult after insult, their patience was very much exhausted. But Lord Peake and his young wife very much wanted to be on the winner’s side when the peace treaty would be signed. It was out of the question they would be sold as bargaining ships to an irate Tyrell when they became inconvenient pawns.

The Dornish Queen approved their prudence, though a more conciliatory attitude would have made things far easier. But ultimately, this was going to cause even more problems for Highgarden if House Peake turned its cloak now.

“Yes, I admit they are going to love hearing they have been thrown on the path of the super-battleship,” her cousin giggled and her eyes shone with glee. “And by a splendid coincidence, a large percentage of their fixed defences has been moved to the Nightsong jump point. As such, the very thing that has convinced the Tyrells to retreat to Ambrose has now a chance to happen to House Peake...but they haven’t been sent the same orders.”

Rhaenys nodded. Of course, there were many rational decisions why a sane commander wouldn’t have ordered that for Starpike. She could think of at least three. The disruption of available hulls: with the catastrophic blows on the civilian shipping lines inflicted by the conflict, it was unlikely there were a sufficient amount of starships to move a system’s invaluable infrastructure. Dark Dell: it was the system behind Starpike and was less defended, as it had none of the improved defences built by House Peake. Morale: the political earthquake of having lost Cider Hall without putting a real fight was going to be bad enough, but doing it a second time would be tantamount to admit the Reach couldn’t defend its own systems.

Not that they could, of course. The Harvest Graveyard and Mace Tyrell’s belief that warships were more important than adequate fixed defences had done an excellent job ruining the Reach before the first stellar system fell.

“What systems will be targeted assuming the negotiations are successful?

“Three. Dark Dell, Varner Plains and Hutcheson Hill. Advancing further would be dangerous and unproductive.” It would also put a considerable strain on their logistics. As it was, the offensive was already going to run out of energy soon. They had entire conquered planets to garrison and administer, millions of prisoners of war to interrogate and decide the fate of, and an entire antiquated society to break. And it wasn’t like they could go further anyway. Horn Hill was several times more defended than Starpike, and Rhaenys left attacking Highgarden to the Lannisters.

“Good. Do you think Lord Peake will mind if I invite myself in their marital bed? The new Lady Peake is truly *ravishing* with her skin-tight dresses...”

Rhaenys was really happy she wasn’t drinking anything at the moment Arianne had said that, because otherwise there would have been plenty of wine soiling the carpet...

**King Joffrey Targaryen, 19.10.300AAC, Highgarden System**

Being part of the vanguard when you invaded a capital system and a major fleet was sure to wait for you was not exactly a safe position.

Still, when the tactical display updated and showed the size of the debris field his flagship had translated into, Joffrey couldn’t help but gape with his mouth wide open.

That was a lot of debris.

At the speed they were moving, there was no hope to look for details, but sadly they didn’t to have them. The terribly low number of scout cruisers, light cruisers and anti-mines starships who had advanced first into the Highgarden system was evidence enough the way had been cleared at a terrible cost.

“How many ships did we lose, Lancel?” Joffrey asked as the first echelon of the Lannister fleet shifted in an aggressive but conventional formation.

“We have not the definite numbers, but the four heavy cruisers and the six light cruisers commanding the assault have all perished, your Grace. Preliminary figures are estimating we lost two-third of the starships used to clear the minefields. The scout cruisers’ losses are...considerable. We think between forty and forty-five are gone, and over twenty are severely damaged.”

Joffrey tried to show a confident face, but he doubted his attempt was very convincing. This was an appalling rate of losses for fifteen minutes of battle, especially as the enemy fleet had declined to engage around their arrival point. A part of him was whispering this was an ugly but necessary cost to remove the threat of House Tyrell forever.

The other part of him snidely remarked at this rhythm, the smallfolk and the Noble Houses of the Western Sector were going to be very, very unhappy at his grandfather. Thousands of deaths had been lost in a vain attempt to surprise the defenders...and all of this for nothing. The massive Reach fleet was standing between them and Red Floral, but far out of range of the longest ranged missile.

“It appears they intend to fight a conventional fleet-to-fleet battle after all,” Joffrey said in a low voice.

“That doesn’t sound...particularly good for them, your Grace.” Lancel declared carefully.

Joffrey chuckled before deciding the situation could very well tolerate some bluntness.

“It is folly for them to adopt this sort of fleet tactics, you mean.” The young King studied the battlefield for several seconds before speaking again. “By staying on the defensive like this, they will be able to launch limited and devastating counter-attacks like they did at Dustonburry. The Reacher Admiral in charge that way has two choices he can switch between at any moment: long-range bombardment or combat at short laser range.”

“But we aren’t at Dustonburry, your Grace,” Lancel replied.

“Indeed we aren’t. And the Tyrells can’t afford to lose this system. It would be like House Lannister being dispossessed of Casterly Rock, and if our spies and information networks are saying the truth, their morale must be shot to the Seven Hells now. You can’t lose battle after battle and hope the population will stay happy and confident in the future.”

The green-eyed Targaryen stopped there. King he may be de jure, but the level of critics he could level at the Master of Casterly Rock wasn’t infinite.

All the while they continued their conversation, a wave of two hundred starfighters which had stayed cold and silent lit their reactors and launched a suicidal charge against several escort carriers. The distant was so short and the neutron charges so powerful that there was no warning before an immense flash of blue-white lit the star system and thirty escort carriers disappeared forever.

“Two hundred starfighters for six hundred of ours...” And the ‘trade’ was worse than that, because they had also lost all the carriers’ crews with it. “I sincerely hope the Tyrells and their bannersmen have not based all their tactics and battle-doctrine on a fight of attrition.”

This worried him, and not just because he was in one of the warships which were sure to attract the heaviest concentrations of enemy fire. The Western Sector, for all its wealth, excellent strategic position and large population, couldn’t afford to expend for a single battle millions of well-trained crewmen. The Tyrells were their enemies, of this there was no doubt, but there were other enemies waiting several systems away. The Dornish came to mind. And judging by the vast Reach fleet opposing them here at Highgarden, it was likely the Western Navy faced between eighty and ninety percent of the surviving Reach Navy. In other words, the rest of their Sector was protected by obsolete fixed defences, scout cruisers and starfighters.

“Lord Tywin is ordering the fleet in Formation Ruby-4, your Grace. The Fire Plan to execute in...three minutes and twenty seconds is Panther-2.”

“Acknowledge and execute,” Joffrey replied, feeling distinctly ill-at-ease. The more he observed the battle of his grandfather, the less he was fond of his tactics. Tywin Lannister was not a subtle tactician, and his moves consisted in exploiting to the maximum his advantage in numbers and giving as little opportunity to his opponent to invent genial stratagems and innovative assaults.

It was working. In Joffrey’s opinion, the Reach Admiral who had fought them at Dustonburry was a far better tactician than the Lord of Casterly Rock, but in the end the Lannister numerical superiority, advantage in fire-control at mid-range and the presence of two super-battleships had made sure the Reachers had to retreat at the end of the battle and abandon the Dustonburry System.

It had not been a cheap victory, both in blood and lives. Tens of thousands lives had ended in a relentless clash of laser and plasma explosions, and the slaughter was still giving him cold shivers during the night.

Joffrey could not help but think that if the Tyrells had the numbers’ advantage, they would have been able to inflict a decisive defeat to House Lannister. It was possible he was wrong. But his access to archives of past battles had revealed to him never in his entire career Lord Tywin Lannister had been outnumbered by an enemy fleet or army when he was present on the frontlines.

And the Tyrell fleet opposing them today was close enough in size to give him really bad vibes.

“The Reach fleet is changing its formation...again. It is a sort of...half-circle, this time.”

“Yes, it’s like the enemy Admiral can’t decide which formation will be the most useful to fight us.”

“Is it likely?” Lancel wondered.

Joffrey shook his head in denegation.

“I would love to believe this is the case, but we can’t assume we are so lucky.” The silver-haired King tapped his chin with two of his fingers in a pose none of his King’s Landing tutors had ever managed to get out of him. The fact they had been his genitors’ tutors had helped in his defiance, of course. “If Mace Tyrell was here, the moron would have tried to take command just to satisfy his sense of self-entitlement and the confidence in his prodigious military skills.”

The contempt was, in his humble opinion, perfectly justified. Mace Tyrell had repeated endlessly for half of his life that it was his leadership which had permitted the loyalist victories of the Usurper’s and Greyjoy Rebellion. But when for the first time he had a non-crippled opponent his bannersmen had not already severely weakened, the Lord of Highgarden had blundered like no one else had.

The Harvest Graveyard had been a disastrous defeat which wouldn’t be forgotten for centuries.

That was the *true* legacy of Mace Tyrell. To be the symbol of military failure all screw-ups would pale in comparison to.

More explosions flashed out. More Lannister ships died. The scout cruisers who had somehow managed the first brutal actions were vaporised or broken in half.

“The bastards have installed another minefield mid-way to Red Floral...”

“Starfighters, hundreds of thousands of starfighters! Estimation...sixty thousand starfighters!”

Joffrey gaped at the numbers, but the sensors and the tactical displays revealed the colossal waves of green dots launching from the ‘derelict foundries’ they had not even bothered to board. The starfighters were coming right from behind, and the Lannister fleet couldn’t fire at them without changing brutally of formation and course.

And of course...

“The Tyrell fleet is advancing. They are adopting a two-column all-out attack....wait, they are attacking through the minefield?”

This was like watching a nightmare. Joffrey, like every person on the bridge of the *Victorious Lion*, desperately hoped the Tyrells had suddenly become insane. Maybe the enemy Admiral had taken lessons from Aegon and decided to pave his way to victories by marching on an avenue of skulls and corpses.

But in mere seconds the stratagem was revealed. The enemy had left two small corridors in the minefield. And now it was using them to close the distance without fearing the power of the turbo-lasers and the barrage of Lannister capital warships, which were too busy trying to avoid the minefield.

“They are going to cut our fleet in two.” Joffrey couldn’t say he was a tactical genius, but by now the plan of the enemy was revealed in all its simplicity. “The first sub-fleet and the starfighters are going to strike us so hard we will have to take a swarm-like defensive posture. The second will hammer one-third of our ships of the line until they break and...”

The first Lannister ship of the line died. Its name was the *Pride of the Golden Tooth*, a brand-new Victory-class capital ship of two million and one hundred thousand tonnes. It was the flagship of Admiral Leo Lefford, and a magnificent warship.

It received over eight hundred missiles and six hundred more killing blows in less than ten seconds.

More than five thousand Westerner lives were lost, and like void predators, the shiny void behemoths of the Reach rushed into for the kill.

“Inform my grandfather,” Joffrey managed to articulate, “to change his formation and get the hell out of here. The enemy’s target is the fleet flagship. They are going after the super-battleship *Lion’s Domination*.”

**Ser Baelor Hightower, 19.10.300AAC, Highgarden System**

The battle was a cataclysm of death and destruction. And he, Baelor Hightower, was the engineer of this bloodbath. He could only pray the Father Above would forgive him when the time came to be judged for his sins.

“The Lannister fleet is cut in two, exactly as you planned, Admiral!”

“It is too early to rejoice, Captain! Tell the battlecruisers to intensify their fire on the formation gap! The heavy cruisers of Hornvale must die and quickly!”

This was a disorderly series of murders, not a battle. His ships of the line were fighting at a distance which should have been somewhere between ‘optimal plasma range’ and ‘suicidal sacrifice’. But no one dared using the big cannons now. His battle-line was breaking into the Lannister formation, and the Lannisters had reacted too late. Now firing the huge plasma guns was as likely to result in dead Western warships as those of the Reach. Lasers and missiles were the only options...and at this game, the fleet which had prepared for this type of confrontation had a great advantage.

“Heavy Cruisers destroyed, Admiral!” Baelor nodded, as much to acknowledge the information as to salute the sheer guts it had taken to the Rear-Admiral commanding these cruisers to throw himself against squadrons of battlecruisers outnumbering him three-to-one and weighting at least ten times his combined tonnage.

“Bring us into their formation. We must give Admiral Ambrose and Admiral Tyrell the maximum of time to destroy their part of the Lannister fleet.”

“Yes, Admiral!”

One of his ships of the line flickered and died, but one Lannister battleship and three scout cruisers accompanied him in death. And then they were at the enemy’s jugular, firing capital ordnance at everything in their sights, opening compartments to the void, inflicting critical injuries in the cuirasses of plasteel and shattering years of military investment.

“I wish we could rush at the second super-battleship, Admiral.”

“I wish it too. But it is too risky. The *Victorious Lion* is an older class and has not been upgraded with the recent turbo-lasers like the new warships of Casterly Rock were, but it is still a redoubtable opponent, and unlike the *Lion’s Domination*, it has a full escort of sixteen ships of the line. I suppose the information the Regent’s agents acquired must be true.”

Even the presence of ‘King’ Joffrey Targaryen had not changed the military objectives defined three days ago, however. And Baelor, both as a Lord and an Admiral, agreed wholeheartedly. The half-brother of the King they had pledged their swords to was at best a pretty face for the fist and the voice of Tywin Lannister, at worse he was a puppet. Baelor had had the dubious honour to meet several times the Lord Paramount of the West five times, and the man had never looked like a generous and trusted soul. If the thought of letting his grandson reign on his own had appeared in his head, it couldn’t have lived for a couple of minutes. Tywin Lannister didn’t share power, and Kings weren’t an exception to this rule. Killing the ‘Gold pretender’ would just ensure a younger and more pliable monarch would be crowned by the Lannisters in a few weeks. Unlike House Tyrell, the Westerners had two possible replacements of incontestable legitimacy.

“How fares Admiral Ambrose?”

“He has destroyed the Lefford and the Crakehall flagships, and crippled two Lannister squadrons of battlecruisers. Panic is spreading across their entire fleet.”

The Hightower Admiral smiled. He and all his subordinates had deliberately encouraged the idea in the Lannister’s heads the battle was going to be fought at long-range and on Tywin’s tempo. And then they had shattered this conviction in less than thirty seconds. No matter how experienced the crews and talented the leaders, it required a lot of flexibility to adapt in conditions like these.

“And they don’t have this sense of adaptation.” He whispered for himself. “They are too stubborn, too relying on their hierarchy.”

The irony in these sentences was of course that the same flaws had led to the total destruction of the Grand Fleet.

Still, for the moment it was Reachers doing it to someone else. His own fleet was busy shattering one ship after another the rear of the Western fleet, the enemy Admirals trying to stop him while removing the threat of the starfighters in their back. It was like seeing a warrior trying to face a predator while keeping an eye on the vultures above his head and a snake in the bushes.

The gap between the two Lannisters fleet was now so large it was twenty thousand kilometres wide, and things were going rather in their favour. Five ships of the line had been lost and two had been forced to leave the line, but ten enemy ships of the line were gone, and six of them were flagships for Vice-Admirals or high-ranking Westerners flag officers.

“My Lord, Lord Ambrose reports the *Lion’s Domination* is trying to run!”

This made Baelor grimace. By now, his battle-plan must have become all too evident to the enemy strategists and tacticians, and that included Tywin Lannister. Given how battered and pummelled the Lannister first sub-fleet was, the Old Lion had recognised there was no chance of victory if he stayed in this inferno.

Some would have accused Tywin Lannister of cowardice, but Baelor wasn’t among this number. The Lannister vanguard had been shattered, and too many of its escorts had been dispersed, courtesy of a formation specialised in long-range missile barrages. The ships of the line were unable to support each other and the screen of light units was busy dying; there was no line to break anymore, for it had already been crippled in the first instants of battle.

No, trying to run was the correct decision. But it couldn’t be allowed to happen. The losses of the Lannister fleet were massive, but not so great Casterly Rock wouldn’t be able to retreat and rebuild another fleet another day. The shipyards of Casterly Rock and the Western Sector were intact and ready to replenish their order of the battle. A war of attrition was not in the Reach’s best interests. Not after the Harvest Graveyard, the terrible sneak attacks and the deaths of millions of men and the capture of many, many Reach systems.

“For the survival of Highgarden and the entire Reach, Tywin Lannister can’t be allowed to survive today.” The eldest son of Lord Leighton Hightower commanded, no trace of a smile on his expression. “I don’t care how Lord Ambrose achieves it, Tywin Lannister doesn’t leave this system with his heart beating. Boarding assaults, long-range bombardment, mines, starfighters...he can use everything we have in reserve. But I want to see this super-battleship die! See that my words are communicated word for word to Lord Ambrose!”

This was at moment like this he regretted not having supported the nomination of Ser Garlan to the command of Fourth Fleet two months ago. Arthur Ambrose was not someone who had impressed him by his qualities of tactician or his intelligence in general.

But they had to destroy this super-battleship. Otherwise the victory the combined Highgarden fleet was busy winning would have no tomorrow.

“I would say ‘a Lordship for the first captain who sends the Lannisters straight to hell’, but we’re a bit short on Lordships these days...”

**Lord Tywin Lannister, 19.10.300AAC, Highgarden System**

There was a faint odour of smoke on the bridge of the *Lion’s Domination*. It should have been impossible, for the air-filters of the upper bridge and this section were numerous and regularly verified and replaced when needed. But a massive explosion blasting a communication section two compartments away had a tendency of creating many problems, and Tywin didn’t doubt this faint odour of smoke was the least of his flagship’s problems.

Assuming he didn’t count the aforementioned explosion, there were six compartments completely open to the void, and even for a super-battleship, this kind of damage was not good news. For the moment the spine of the great warship was holding and the fusion reactors continued to deliver the energy the drives and the weapons badly needed to lead the *Lion’s Domination* to safety.

They were running. There was no point pretending otherwise. The bards and all his propagandists would not present it like this should he survive to give them their marching orders, but for the moment a hasty retreat was the only option. Evidently, the reports of his agents that the Reach was on the brink of collapse and ready to surrender had been exaggerated by several orders of magnitude.

“How long until we can escape by jump translation, Kevan?” Tywin asked his younger brother.

“Approximately ten minutes and three seconds.” A new explosion illuminated the only bay of the bridge. “We have just lost our last battlecruiser escort. And the starfighters are coming back.”

“Then the light cruisers will have to protect us.”

“They are going to be hammered, Tywin.”

“I know,” he admitted after a second of silence. “But they will have to do their duty. We have one super-battleship and three ships of the line to save in priority.”

The forty-plus warships still surrounding his flagship began to modify again their defensive formation, the lighter units taking the rear and trying to fend off the tiny pursuers biting their heels.

It was a spectacle which burned the heart of the Master of the Rock, but turning back would be a stupidity of the highest order. The flotilla which had managed to extract itself from the trap was too damaged to even think about confronting the hundreds of Reach warships chasing them.

“How fares the rest of the fleet?”

“Lord Lydden and your grandson have successfully withdrawn with twenty-six ships of the line. They are now out of range of the second Reach attack formation and their first units are already beginning to jump out of the system.”

Tywin nodded. At least the Lannister fleet would survive. Of course, each of the escapee ships of the line had suffered large casualties and terrific damage, and would in all likelihood need months of reparation to be considered operational again.

“Send them a priority communication with my personal code. Once they are at Dustonburry, they must continue their retreat and take the supply fleet and all the garrison regiments they can take. They mustn’t stop their withdrawal until Old Oak.”

“Brother?” Kevan had a rare expression of shock on his face. “If we do this, we lose every opportunity to threaten Highgarden in the coming months. The Tyrells will be able to reinforce their other fronts.”

“Absolutely,” the Lord Paramount of the West agreed, “but I doubt that after the disorganisation and the beating our fleet has taken that we can hold Dustonburry in strength. The big forts, the missile platforms, the minefields, the laser bombs...all of these fixed defences are operational and deployed at Old Oak, not at Dustonburry.”

And this was because he and no one else had insisted to progress as fast as he could towards Highgarden. Priority had been granted to warships’ reparations, ammunition transports, fuel tankers and many offensive-oriented war supplies.

It had been an error, in hindsight. It was an error which was going to increase by several percent the human and material losses of his forces, and the responsibility was his. The Tyrells would not be completely beaten and enjoy a few months of respite, assuming the Dornish and the Baratheons didn’t finish them off.

The floor shook under his feet as another explosion thundered too close from the mighty super-battleship of the Western Navy.

“It could have been worse. The first Reach Admiral could have executed his manoeuvre correctly and prevented our retreat.”

The other Reach Admiral had not made this mistake, but this was to be expected since it was the man who had made the fighting retreat at Dustonburry. This was a good sign, for it meant Highgarden after the Graveyard had still its fair share of incompetent officers in its war machine.

“Yes. The enemy is slowing down,” Kevan remarked after a couple of seconds.

“Their starfighters are lacking ammunition and life-support, and their faster units are also badly damaged.”

It was imperceptible at first, but second after second the gap was widening between pursuers and the retreating Lannister warships.

“Maybe we are going to escape after all,” Tywin said calmly. “Though I think I am not going to like the list of casualties.”

“I am not going to bet on that,” Kevan replied with a gloomy expression. “Damion and Stafford’s flagships blew up with all hands. Including Lord Lefford, I think we have also lost five or six Lords of Noble Houses, and the less said about the army contingents we intended to use for boarding actions, the better.”

The reproach of his brother was heard and accepted. Once again in hindsight, sending over fifty thousand men with the Navy had been too optimistic and neglectful. Highgarden officers, for all their flaws and incompetence, were still defending a prime system of Westeros with the industry which went with it.

“We will have to do...”

Tywin stopped what he was about to announce. It was...warm. No, the temperature was suddenly way too warm on his bridge.

“Have there been malfunctions in the nearby compartments? We have...”

Hot. It was like someone had pressed a button and the bridge’s temperature had suddenly jumped up forty degrees in three seconds.

“Evacuate! Evacuate the bridge! Warn the fire-control team...”

A Lieutenant burst in flames. And then one another followed. Tywin gaped. It was impossible, men did not burn like they were matchsticks!

The Lord of Casterly Rock jumped from his seat and tried to grab Kevan’s arm as screams of agony echoed everywhere. The flames! The flames were everywhere! What was happening?

“I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long, long time, Tywin Lannister.”

Tywin turned and between five of his men screaming and dying in unnatural pyres, was a young woman in red robes. For some reason, she seemed familiar...

Kevan, his brother, began to burn too and Tywin was helpless to stop it.

“What do you want, witch?”

The smile he received in return made him shiver and for the first time in years, Tywin knew fear.

“A few years ago, my name was Tysha Lannister.”

The name...oh, no....

“I see you know who I am and what you did to me.” The bridge was engulfed in flames now, and every one save him was burning and screaming.

“House Lannister will kill you.”

The human flames took the shape of demons and monsters of the Seven Hells.

“House Lannister will burn.” The voice was like a choir of evilness and vengeance to his hears. “It will burn and it will suffer. You have accrued an infinite debt to me, Tywin Lannister, and NOW IT IS TIME TO PAY! YOUR SOUL IS MINE!”

Tywin began to scream when he felt the first demons seize him. And then the real torment started.

**Regent of the Reach Willas Tyrell, 20.10.300AAC, Highgarden System**

He was one million kilometres away from the doomed super-battleship, and he had really no desire to come closer.

The hull of the *Lion’s Domination* was burning in unnatural flames nothing could extinguish, and nothing the Reach fleet had done had been able to extinguish them.

Two Reach boarding parties had tried to board the Lannister flagship. They had perished in mere seconds and Willas knew over thirty men had begged to be relieved of their communication-section duties when they heard the screams and the agony howls of their fellow soldiers.

Since then, the cordon of battlecruisers was bombarding at long-range the great warship in the hope it would disintegrate and end this horror. The sensors of the scout cruisers which had approached it at ten thousand kilometres had reported they heard the shrieks and the agony screams, despite the sheer impossibility of it.

It was unnatural. It was something more nightmarish than he could have dreamed one year ago...and it had happened in the middle of his home system. They were not on a backward planet with barbarians mistaking an orbital strike for something akin to divine judgement. They were at Highgarden...and nonetheless the demons had come.

“I think we will need to tone down our propaganda where Stannis Baratheon’s mass murder is concerned.” Willas spoke. “I know he was the perfect culprit for Fawnton, but this new demonic intervention brings things into quite a different light.”

“I agree, brother,” Garlan grimaced. “I have a good idea where to begin our investigations: there are a few ‘Red Priestesses’ our dear King was very happy to surround himself with. I was never really comfortable tolerating a foreign religion with an extreme life philosophy, and I believe it’s time to get rid of them before they push us into something we will really, really regret.”

“You’re right. But until Lord Rowan replies to our messages, we won’t be in measure to act.”

“My advice is to prepare yourself for very bad news,” Garlan sighed. “I know it’s too late to change anything, but we put in command of our two greatest fleets the two men who were the two biggest disasters-in-being of Westeros.”

Willas wanted to open his mouth and say his youngest brother was completely wrong. But there was no point spending precious hours in vain denials. The battles had been fought and lost. All was left was now to fight and hope for better days.

“How is it we won a splendid victory and yet I feel absolutely no joy?” The new Regent of the Reach asked rhetorically.

“Because it doesn’t solve anything?” Garlan replied bitterly before lighting the tactical display and showing the Reach in its most disastrous hour. “We have managed to inflict the Lannister fleet a severe defeat and destroy roughly thirty-eight percent of their order of battle at the cost of eleven percent of ours, but we lost so much with the loss of the Grand Fleet we will be forced to stay on the defensive for many months.”

“At least we recaptured Dustonburry.”

“The Lannisters caused considerable damage to every military investment we made at Dustonburry. They were willing to ignore the civilian habitats and more or less everything associated with trade and food production, but the ammunition lines, reparation facilities and everything which might be of use for military offensives has been blown apart, sabotaged or pillaged by the Lions.”

Having an idea how catastrophic the state of the Reach Sector’s economy was, this was not something Willas enjoyed loved to hear.

“At the risk of sounding hopelessly naive, I prefer having these systems under our control. Baelor Hightower will likely recapture Dunn in four or five days.”

“Yes, and after that he will have to stop,” Garlan said dejectedly. “He has no chance to take back Old Oak without major reinforcements, and we can’t do a double attack on the Lannister flanks because Red Lake has fallen.”

Yes, the Lannisters had not made the same mistake the Reach had. The systems they conquered were re-fortified, and if the engineers of Casterly Rock had lacked time and resources at Dustonburry due to the rapidity of their advance and their stretched supply lines, this had not been the case at Old Oak. The Reach would require a lot of ammunition and capital warships to break through...and those warships didn’t exist anymore. Not to mention that the further away from Highgarden and Oldtown his battle-line went, the more exposed their flanks and their back was to the Dornish invasion.

“I know. We will have to hold, reform our finances, war fleet, armies and try somehow to compensate for the loss of so many systems.”

When it came down to it, the Lannisters had just been vultures willing to jump on their smoking corpse. The real threat, the one which had destroyed the Grand Fleet and humiliated the Reach forever, was still advancing. Rhaenys Targaryen had taken Dark Dell and Hutcheson Hills, and only a monumental bluff from a courageous Varner commander had prevented the system of Varner Plains from being added to her list of conquests.

Yes, humiliation was not too weak a word. The daughter of Rhaegar Targaryen’s plan, as dishonourable as they were, had annexed the fortress world of Nightsong and carved a path of venom and treachery across the stars. From Hutcheson Hills to Cockshaw Plains, the snake and lance flags were raised in triumph. Millions of men had been slaughtered like cattle at the hands of an enemy they believed inferior in all domains to them. Hundreds of starships were captured and now serving as transports in Dornish service. House Peake had betrayed them, and he could only hope the divisions he was ferrying to Goldengrove would arrive in time to prevent another betrayal.

To increase his burden, Stannis Baratheon had captured Norridge, so it was likely the entire south-eastern Reach was lost.

Never had the Reach suffered such a series of defeats like this. Not in living memory, and not under House Tyrell.

“If we resist six more months, the new battlecruisers will be commissioned and we will be able to launch limited counter-attacks.”

Willas grinned.

“Ah yes, the providential six months.”

“Don’t tell me...”

“In four days, plus or minus a day, House Tyrell and the Reach Sector as a whole will be officially bankrupt.” Garlan looked at him like he had announced the end of times was at hand. “Don’t look so surprised. Father didn’t take a single good decision after the Dornish attacked our shipyards, and the treasury has been haemorrhaging money from a million wounds. Add to that all the taxes and the resources we can’t no longer count on, the massive perturbations of interstellar and intra-system trade, and our economy is for all intent and purposes agonising.”

The eldest son of Mace Tyrell shrugged.

“The situation is not totally desperate. As long as we hold the line Highgarden-Horn Hill, we can keep more or less fifteen-plus systems under our control, and plenty of them are among the wealthiest of the Reach. If we make the necessary sacrifices, I think we will be able to begin new offensives in late 301AAC and regain some of the planets we lost.

“Assuming more unnaturalness doesn’t spread doom and murders across our worlds.”

In the distance, the pyre of Lord Tywin Lannister and thousands of Westerners continued to burn.

“Yes, assuming that.”

**Queen Rhaenyra Blackfyre, 21.10.300AAC, Wickenden System**

A new day and she had won another space battle.

No doubt her subordinates and whatever the shark-like information businesses were going to insist this was another step in a legendary campaign flying from triumph to triumph.

Rhaenyra thought they were idiots. But then given that about three-quarters of the profession’s number had been happy to repeat the lies of Rhaegar Targaryen and his dogs for seven teen years, stupidity was a given from the onset.

What had really surprised her was the fact Jon Arryn had not taken the opportunity to strangle the loud-mouthed parasites on the planets he controlled. At first she had believed it was a strategy to inflate her ego and let her lower her guard, but now the Blackfyre Queen wasn’t so sure anymore. The Arryn patriarch was wise in purely military affairs and had a nasty bag of tricks in politics and economy, but on the propaganda and information point, his decisions were...far from perfection. Just yesterday his decision to use certain types of incendiary ammunition in the siege of House Lynderly’s assets had been relayed in very negative terms.

Rhaenyra had fewer problems on that front. The bards, the reporters, the holo-newspapers journalists who called for insurrection or presented divergent news were kindly invited to meet one of her representatives, who warned them funding and helping rebellion attempts were ugly affairs. If they persisted, well...accidents happened.

All of this to say the conqueror of Gulltown was not impressed by the rhetoric which had led her to be nicknamed ‘Invincible Admiral’. Invincible. Seriously. In battle, invincibility was such a fleeting thing it was best to never count on it. The usage could be used to sweeten some deals and defang some enemies, but her victory of successes could end at any moment, and then what would they call her? The ‘nearly-invincible Admiral’?

Moreover, there were victories and then there were ‘victories’. Wickenden definitely belonged in the latter category.

Originally, her plan had been to feign ignorance while the Arryn forces tried to punish their rebellious vassals, then when the falcons were about to win, take them in the back and trap the maximum of warships and troops by a double offensive coming from Wydman and Crab Shore. The Arryn battle-line was too big to risk a conventional engagement, but if she caught their supply trains, sooner or later the ships of the line were going to pursue her and bellow for the battles they had been conditioned during their training.

It had worked, but only partially. Assuredly many requisitioned civilian ships converted for military purposes had been seized, to which could be added a mega-tanker, a hospital ship and two ammunition storage cargoes. A squadron of heavy cruisers and its screening elements had been defeated. Unfortunately, this splendid list of captured military-owned ships stopped there. The capital ships and the rest of the supply convoys had managed to escape into the void.

In fact, Rhaenyra really didn’t like how fast they had escaped. All military wings boasted of their vigilance and their dedication to duty, but in the real world, you needed to sleep, eat, and often leave your station to not go insane. The siege of Wickenden had lasted for close to a month. In other words, the Valemen shouldn’t have seen her coming. And yet they evidently had.

This was worrying. Had she become too predictable? There were old proverbs about not fighting too often the same enemy, and unfortunately, the Arryn forces had plenty of skirmishes and battle-reports on her and her subordinates by now.

“Ah, Uncle,” Rhaenyra slightly turned her head to verify it was him, one was never too prudent, but yes the bald head of her Master of Whisperers had passed the doors. “Do you have any explanations why the Arryn forces were in such a hurry to depart? Apart from the obvious, of course.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have anything to give you,” the secret Blackfyre told her in a rare admission of failure. “All the captains who may have shed a light on this unexplained move were the ones who void-translated out of the system. The officers and the crewmen we captured are as much in the dark as we are.”

“I don’t like this.” There could be a lot of reasons for an emergency deployment...an enemy attack, for example. But in the case of House Arryn, she, Rhaenyra Blackfyre, was obviously the enemy, the negotiations with the Heiress having ended in failure. And she was certainly not attacking any other system today. “Our picket ships don’t report an offensive from Ironoaks?”

The seat of House Waynwood had fallen three days ago, and while it was far too soon for any offensive to be launched, there was no denying a surprise raid could be dangerous to the squadrons the Golden Company kept to block this sort of audacious attempt.

“If there is, it has not reached us yet.”

The Blackfyre Queen huffed. So much for that idea. If Jon Arryn had wanted to take Gull Tower or deliver a decisive blow to her forces, his heavy battle-line would already be attacking and spreading all sort of chaos in her rear. But to observe no reaction was...weird.

“I suppose there is more bad news to support this unsatisfactory victory?” These tended to come at a frightening rate since the beginning of the invasion. The days they had gained by a quick capture of Gulltown were now wasted. The ‘loyalists’ of Robin Arryn were already weak and unprepared for a true war, and by now with their key leaders dead or prisoners, their cause was an unsalvageable ruin. And her capture of Wickenden wasn’t going to help things.

“The fortress of Snakewood has refused to surrender for the fifth time, but there are substantiated rumours a mutiny had to be crushed by the last members of House Lynderly. Numerous food convoys have alleviated the problems Runestone suffered. Strickland has been forced to disengage. With the Ironoaks corridor in Arryn hands again, the opportunity to force House Royce to bend the knee is gone.”

Rhaenyra winced as she mentally imagined the Vale Sector Map this created. Soon enough, the Master of the Eyrie would be able to concentrate all his forces against her. In two or three weeks, the young silver-haired woman knew the Sistermen were going to be the only supporters of the Red Dragon left on the battlefield. Assuming the Northerners didn’t move against them first.

“It will be very complicated to beat him.” Unlike Jon Arryn, Rhaenyra could keep all her capital assets concentrated. When it came down to it, the only system her Black Fleet needed to hold was Gulltown; it was the core of her logistical base and the harbour convoys from Essos used to deliver their ‘donations’ and the supplies she exchanged against Vale-crafted goods. The Lord Paramount of the Vale couldn’t afford to let his Sector unguarded and the fact she controlled the Redfort-Gulltown line was giving her plenty of avenues of attack. And House Arryn couldn’t afford to left them open to invasion, not when some systems were restive.

“There are whispers Braavos intends to intervene against you.”

“Not their full fleet, I hope?” Because if it was the case, Rhaenyra could very well begin to steal everything she could from Gulltown’s coffers and cross back the Narrow Void in a hurry with the officers she could trust. The odds of a total victory against House Arryn weren’t high, but they existed. But fighting House Arryn and Braavos at the same time? There was no victory to be found there. A super-carrier task force, in the hands of someone competent, would likely inflict crippling casualties on her ships of the line and the *Bittersteel*.

“No, not their full fleet,” Varys said. “There are rumours of a dragon tied with Daenerys Targaryen, sister of Viserys.”

“A dragon?” It was not the first time in several months the Blackfyre claimant was unpleasantly surprised. “But none have hatched in over a century!”

“Well, there is one now,” her uncle gave her a joyless smile. “My agents have bribed some servants in need of some additional income, and there is sufficient evidence to confirm it exists.”

“No wonder they want to intervene in this Westerosi civil war.”

Many things had allowed Aegon the Conqueror to crush all opposition and impose his will on the Seven Sectors. But when billions of people were asked the question, the dragons always were the first answer, and for good reason.

Because ultimately what had the rider of Balerion given the realm? A lasting peace? No, the Dornish war had caused millions of casualties and lasted many years, and after his death Aenys and Maegor had made sure oceans of blood would flow. Unity and a real system of laws and justice? No, this was the Conciliator who had achieved it. The Kingsguard? It was Queen Visenya Targaryen who had founded the white cloaks, and given how far they had fallen in recent times, it was not something to glorify. A proper system of succession? Between the Dance of Dragons, the Blackfyre Rebellions and many, many wedding and marital alliance disasters, one couldn’t say the word of a Targaryen King was worth his weight in diamonds.

No, the power and the prestige of House Targaryen was, for good or bad, tied with the dragons. And the Braavosi couldn’t ignore that.

“I will have to go back to Gulltown. It changes everything...”

**Lady Sansa Tully, 22.10.300AAC, Riverrun System**

“Sweet Sironia...” The name of the Goddess of healing and mercy had escaped her lips by the second holo-image.

Sansa had seen several deranging things in her life, most of them during their little excursion to King’s Landing. The capital had been a den of sin, thievery, lies and corruption that no other Westerosi planet could truly compare against. And as the civil war engulfed the River Sector in fire, there had been uncountable reports of massive battles, generally on a planet’s surface, where diverse River Houses killed each other because they didn’t support the same King or Queen.

It wasn’t pretty, but half of the time it was a combination of total confusion and panic which made sure tens of thousands people died for nothing. Many knights and senior commanders just didn’t have any idea how to move an army from point A to point B and to keep them in fighting shape.

But the holo-images she had in front of them were not showing the corpses of a battlefield. They were showing men and women who were somehow alive despite looking like living skeletons. They revealed a world of horror behind electrified wire, automatic laser turrets. Security units were ordering prisoners to dig their own graves. Wagons full of corpses transported more men, women and children to gigantic graveyards with an abominable frequency.

There were so many bodies, so many dead people...it was...it was horrifying. At the very least this was tens of thousands of civilians who had been murdered, and the spy who had managed at great cost for his life to transmit this information was just one man. There were undoubtedly plenty of massacres and killings which had taken place without their agents being able to report the scenes.

“They call these places ‘discipline camps’.” Her grand-uncle’s voice was subdued, and she didn’t blame him.

“What a good joke. They are extermination camps.” There was no other appropriate name for these killing facilities. “The authorities of Atranta are utterly insane. What in the name of Nantosueltos are they trying to do? Is it one more example of the Crown Prince’s madness at work?”

The expression of her Blackfish of grand-uncle was so sinister the new Lady of Riverrun felt something awful crawl in her guts.

“Based on the work of our agents and several scout cruisers’ patrols, Aegon Targaryen and his Reach-Crown allies are totally unaware what is taking place at Atranta. This...this genocidal procedure is happening with the orders and support of Lord Norbert Vance alone.”

“He is completely crazy.” And that was a polite judgement. She would use stronger adjectives and colourful description if she believed it made any difference.

“He lost his sons in the Battle of Wayfarer’s Rest,” Brynden Tully commented grimly, “and the four times I talked with him in person, I was never impressed by his mental strength. Now that he’s reached old age, I fear he’s lashing out in despair.”

“Many people have been losing sons, daughters and relatives in this war so far. I regret an old man has lost three of his sons the same day.” Though not because she liked the idiots. Ser Ronald, Ser Hugo and Ser Ellery Vance of Atranta had been the perfect examples of the young River nobility eager to lick the boots of the Targaryens. Sansa had not mourned their death, and she never would.

“Yes,” her grand-uncle replied, “but Lord Norbert somehow became convinced in the aftermath of this battle the real reason the River Second Fleet was defeated lied with the secret alliance of the Lannister and Stark sympathisers, masterminded under the patronage of the Old Gods’ priesthood. The employees of the Riverrun, Seagard and Raventree banking establishments have also obviously betrayed Atranta to their barbarian masters of Winterfell and Casterly Rock. From the propaganda sent every day to Castlewood, Lychester and Lolliston, the Vance’s authorities pretend this is a grand conspiracy going back to the Dance of the Dragons and Maegor the Cruel....”

Sansa raised her hand to stop the litany of insanity and madness.

“Fine. I understand, Lord Norbert Vance has gone completely insane and see enemies where they are none.”

About eighty percent of the employees of non-Atranta corporations had already returned to their home systems when the declarations of war were issued. And the planet ruled by House Vance of Atranta had, as far as she was aware, no First Men minority or cults worshipping the Gods of the North.

Oh, there may be one or two veteran soldiers who had converted in secret and some small communities in far-away provinces who continued to venerate Taranos and his fellow Gods and Goddesses generation after generation, but she doubted the sum of these ‘dissidents’ would reach ten thousand people.

“How bad is it?”

“Very bad, I’m afraid. Before the hostilities started, Atranta had a population of approximately two billion two hundred and twenty million. They lost their fleet and a lot of their professional armed forces in the first month, but they accounted for less than a percent of the total, and this was more than compensated by the flow of refugees coming from systems at war. Now that their Lord is tightening the noose and creating his system of unrestrained vengeance and terror...he may have already killed two million people.”

Two million. Dispatos have mercy on these poor souls.

Sansa was very aware that in the grand scheme of things, this was not a large number of dead people. When Fawnton had burned, over seven hundred million civilians had left this reality – hopefully for a better realm. And between the one-sided battles fought by Davos Seaworth, the Frey purges and her own coup in the River Sector, the Northern Navy, Army and Marines had a lot of blood on their hands.

But they had killed soldiers refusing to surrender and nobles who would betray them at the first occasion. The North may be ruthless, but never had any Lord in living memory decided to punish the population he ruled over in this ugly and despicable manner. Even House Bolton had never fallen so low, and given how bad some of the Red Kings had been, this was really saying something.

“And we can’t intervene...”

The majority of the warships gathered at Riverrun, Grell or Pinkmaiden needed jump points to travel across stars. The deep space starships available to her were limited to a few scout cruisers, and they would never be able to take a star system by themselves. Atranta had lost a fleet, but the system had still sufficient defences to swat the light units aside like flies.

“No, we can’t. And the Brackens are over-extended, while Atranta neighbours are fighting insurrections everywhere and won’t risk breaking ranks with Lord Norbert.”

The vicious part of her enjoyed this catastrophic political decision. The more this madness continued, the more it would be difficult to stop the information about the extermination camps from becoming public knowledge, especially as the criteria to target ‘traitors’ and ‘enemy agents’ were completely fabricated. It may take a few days or a few months, but in the end the Lord fighting under the Red Dragon’s banner were going to find themselves in an ocean of trouble. No one was valuable and important enough to not be executed after holo-images of this nightmare leaked out.

“I will write to Winterfell and see if we can’t get a few Manderly battlecruisers to bombard Atranta...”

**King Viserys Targaryen, 23.10.300AAC, Rosby System**

Viserys couldn’t say he had been seriously hurt in his life, unless you counted the visits to the royal dentist during his childhood.

Now that this was no longer true, he thanked the Gods he had not to endure pain before. Because pain, contrary to what certain people believed, was not a good thing.

Mentally, Viserys cursed his bastard of a nephew and dearly hoped the galaxy would throw back at him some unpleasant fate for his monstrous actions.

“The Targaryen dynasty is really giving a bad example to the Westerosi in times of war,” Viserys said as he tried to find a more comfortable position on his hospital bed.

“My Lord, it is not your fault Aegon the Monster is willing to use odious sorcery and unnatural powers to win the crown!” Perwyn Rosby exclaimed.

“No, it isn’t. But do you think many people will care?” the Green King grimaced, and not just because his body was weak. “Between my deceased father and eldest brother, we have practically violated every law and custom the Westerosi considered sacred.”

The Admiral of Dragonstone wished this wasn’t true, but in certain Sectors the expression ‘Targaryen’s promise’ had gained prominence to designate an oath which would never be respected. And as much as Viserys wanted to protest these opponents were wrong, he couldn’t deny they had very good points. Throwing prisoners of war into an arena and massacring them was against the tenets of a civilised nation. The Peace of Maidenpool had been violated before the ink was dry on the treaty. The Peace of Lannisport ending the Greyjoy Rebellion had been nothing but a cruel justification to abuse and murder millions of Ironborn.

And despite this inglorious series of crimes and oath-breaking, Aegon had found a way to make it worse. Mass usage of sorcery and bombardment of the capital of the Seven Sectors were going to pursue anybody who called himself or herself a Targaryen for decades.

“How bad is the situation at King’s Landing?” the injured silver-haired monarch asked to his Master of Information.

“It couldn’t be worse, my King,” Ser Varon Darkwood declared gravely. “The enemy has transformed the cities into a landscape of ruin and devastation. Whatever infrastructure survived is collapsing under the strain of billions of people who have lost their homes and their families. The sanitary issues are apocalyptic. There are tens of millions of corpses, and the occupation garrison’s main duty is to burn and incinerate as many human bodies as they can every day. There is not a hundredth of the maesters and healers on the ground to handle a catastrophe of this magnitude.”

Viserys closed his eyes in despair. He had known Aegon and his murderous lieutenants were not going to be gentle, but to go that far...

“Starvation is going to take millions of lives, and that’s in a best-case scenario.”

“There must be food reserves ready to be delivered.” Viserys countered. “I remember being informed that millions of tons of grain and various ration bars had been stockpiled in orbit...”

“And the warehouses and orbital installations we requisitioned three weeks ago were destroyed in the bombardment of the traitors’ warships, my King.” Rylian Telmar answered hesitantly.

“They weren’t military targets, were they...of course they were that stupid,” Viserys answered his own question, wishing he could strangle the Red senior officers right now. “What are they doing right now? Crowning my sorcerer of a nephew and organising show trials for the loyal men they have managed to take prisoner?”

“They are evacuating.”

Viserys blinked.

“They are evacuating?” He repeated like a poor echo.

“Yes, my King. The majority of their fleet is already gone, and more and more auxiliaries, transports and escorts are leaving day after day. By our best estimates, King’s Landing will be nearly undefended in five days.”

By the Seven, they had bled so much for the capital and the war was turning so badly for them that the Reds were unable to hold the capital now. This was...completely ridiculous. They must have lost hundreds of thousands and sacrificed an entire fleet, and ultimately it was all for nothing. And it was a nothing which had killed millions and was about to kill billions more.

“How much time does Lord Celtigar needs to organise a counter-attack?”

It was then he felt a sinking feeling of despair as each of his advisors refused to watch him in the eyes.

“My King,” Ser Sal Blackrock spoke, “we could try to launch a counter-attack in two days, and given the weakness of the Crown-Reach coalition around the capital, victory would be almost a certainty.”

“But?”

“But we have not a single cargo ready to help the people of King’s Landing. Food is already rationed at Rosby and Stokeworth to feed the millions of refugees we evacuated before the fleet’s defeat. All across the Sector, the agriculture production is intensified and yet we barely have enough food to avoid starvation and riots.”

“This isn’t...I mean there were large surplus last year...”

“There were,” intervened Perwyn Rosby, “but last year the Crown could exercise its prerogatives and buy at ridiculously cheap prices the grain and the other harvests of the River, Reach and Storm Sectors. Now Stannis Baratheon has stopped all shipment deliveries the moment he organised the slaughter of Fawnton, the River Sector is tearing itself apart and several of the largest granaries are in the hands of the Red supporters, and of course the Reach is closed to us. As unbelievable as it, my King, for the first time in centuries, the Crown Sector is on its own, and Dragonstone can’t feed itself.”

“Will there be improvements in the coming months?” Because if didn’t, he might as well surrender his crown to another claimant and go into an exile...

“Yes, there will.” Rylian Telmar tried to reassure him. “The Langward and Antlers system have been recaptured due to...certain poor initiatives of Aegon Targaryen. And the purges and the inter-House warfare are dying down on every planet now it’s clear the ‘grand offensive’ of Aegon Targaryen has caused more problems than it was supposed to solve. Give us three or four months, and we will be able to bring the Crown Sector’s supply situation to levels approaching the days before the declaration of war, and maybe recapture Cressey Hall and other Red-occupied stellar systems.”

“But we can’t recapture King’s Landing.”

“I’m sorry but yes, my King,” Varon Darkwood declared courageously. “To call the state of the capital a catastrophic mess is an apt summary, and as much as I want to save the billions of men, women and children trying to survive in the ruins, we must face the truth. And the truth is we haven’t the resources, the money and the manpower to rebuild King’s Landing. No single Sector, not even the Western planets of House Lannister, can remain financially and socially stable engaging in this sort of relief effort.”

For a minute, Viserys stayed silent. Inside, he was seething. How low could the name Targaryen could possibly fall? They had lost the dragons. They had lost all dignity and respect. They had lost their prestige and their technological superiority. They had lost their bannersmen and the Seven Sectors. They had lost the Behemoths. And now they had to let King’s Landing die because a Targaryen had unleashed his madness upon it.

This was over. There was no point pretending otherwise: Westeros was lost and if someone managed to reunify it, it wouldn’t be a Targaryen.

“Very well, I will follow your suggestions.” And he noticed the relief on his advisors’ faces and bodies. It convinced him he had taken the good decision. Rarely these men were all united towards a single goal, and if they were all in agreement, the situation was truly that desperate. “Give me the five most important reforms you have enforced before the doctors return to put me to sleep...”

**Lord Raymun Darry, 23.10.300AAC, Darry System**

“It is a disaster. Excuse me, it is another disaster. And yet I’m almost...relieved.”

Raymun wished he could tell the Whent knight in front of him to mind his tongue. But there was too much he agreed in these sentences to make an eternal pledge of loyalty to His Majesty Aegon, the Sixth of the Name.

“I suppose you’re referring to the fact we won’t receive these unpleasant couriers anymore? Those urging us to weaken our defences in order to reinforce failure at King’s Landing?”

The young man nodded and Raymun sighed.

“I can’t say you’re wrong...but we swore oaths. Aegon Targaryen is our King.”

House Darry had stood true for hundreds of generations, and its power had risen because past overlords had understood that when a Darry pledged his blade to someone, he kept it, no matter how harsh the times were and how many advantageous proposals were received by other parties in the mean time.

Because if your word and your oaths were not enforced in durasteel and war, what did your House stood for? Once you were a betrayer, unavoidably other betrayals would come, high and low.

“Yes, Lord Darry. I hope you will acknowledge that our situation is becoming more and more serious, however.”

“Yes, I do.” Even a man with no experience of war could understand the problem now. “With the loss of Chambers to House Bracken, or should I say to the Lannister Deep Space reinforcements the Brackens have managed to arm, we are cut off from the southern loyalist planets of the River Sector and surrounded by enemies.”

This disaster should have worried him. It didn’t. Because really, for all the boasts Atranta, Lolliston, Pemford, Stoney Sept and the others had made in the last weeks, Raymun had not seen the prow of a single warship reinforcing his First Fleet.

It had been extremely unsatisfying to realise that these mighty Lords who had greedily accepted his donations and still proclaimed their eternal loyalty refused to obey his strategic deployments. And in turn this provoked major defeats, most of them he wasn’t aware until the butcher bills arrived on his desk.

“We could reopen this southern corridor.”

“Chambers didn’t fall because we lacked the strength to defend it. The system’s defence collapsed because no one was interested fighting under a single supreme commander who was not the King. Bracken didn’t even send a single ship of the line!”

And judging by the evidence, there was no need to.

“No, Ser Whent, there isn’t any point trying to mount a counter-attack at Chambers. In fact, I think that for the present, it’s best to abandon all our offensive plans and remove our most vulnerable detachments before the Stark or the Brackens destroy them separately. In one week, we will withdraw from Kneeling’s King and take new defensive positions at Butter Dwell.”

“But...my Lord, the orders of King Rhaegar!” The knight of Harrenhal stammered. “The Kneeling’s King Memorial must be defended at all costs! It is...”

“It is a reminder that Aegon the Conqueror ordered Torrhen Stark to kneel before him and renounce his crown and his throne. Yes, I know the story. And yes, I’m well aware the Northerners are very likely to destroy the memorial and all the surrounding monuments the moment they capture the system.”

Neither Lord Eddard Stark nor any of his bannersmen had participated in such acts during the Usurper’s War, despite the Kneeling’s King System being held by their forces for half of year or so. But at the time, the Northerners had not been presented as an enemy of the Seven Sectors for two decades, humiliated for the most ridiculous reasons, and watched as treaties’ edicts were treated like excrements under one’s boots.

It was...probable the Master of Winterfell had given the demolition orders a few years ago and that his Admirals and Generals were ready to blast apart the memorial and the monuments King Rhaegar had built from 291AAC to 296AAC here.

“If the King learns we have abandoned the system without a fight, he will likely demand our heads,” said quietly his Whent interlocutor.

“I don’t intend to inform him of these circumstances.” Raymun Darry believed himself loyal, not crazy. “And while I’m pained to say this, I’m not sure the claims of the Red Dragon will last the year. We have lost too many planets, too many fleets and armies. The Vale and Storm loyalists are all gone. The Crown Sector’s key systems save King’s Landing and High Chelsted have decided Prince Viserys Targaryen is a far better choice.”

And he was not far from believing it, personally.

“No. Let the Starks have this lightly populated system if they want it. We must shorten our supply lines and make sure none of our squadrons are easy targets.”

**Colonel Ayric Sarring, 24.10.300AAC, Pyke System**

Pyke.

A planet which was in the image of its name: Ironborn-like and ugly.

Ayric had not come back since the complete subjugation of House Greyjoy and its armies had been made official. No veteran did. The Fall of Pyke may have been a victory, but he knew very well what the local population must think of Lannister troops. The point it was Reach soldiers garrisoning the planet must not have lessened the hate and the anger. Monsters the Beast or the Manticore had committed too many atrocities. The Ironborn would never forget the earth shaking under the shells of thousands of cannons, the screams of women and children defenceless against the mass rapes and slaughters of bloodthirsty marauders. And the men of Lannisport would never forgive the murders and the rapes the followers of Balon Greyjoy had done to the innocents of their system, the brutal and unprovoked surprise assault heralding a senseless war.

It was a cycle of hate without end. For how many centuries had it continued like that? Westerners killed Ironborn, and Ironborn killed Westerners. Systems were pillages, planets were devastated, harvests were ruined, and the survivors swore vengeance and undying enmity against their tormentors.

The Ironborn were the guilty party for this latest cycle, of course. Ayric had never belonged to High Command, but it was evident no one in Westeros had been ready to begin a new war when Balon Greyjoy had his ‘grand idea’ to rebel and crowned himself King.

It had been a huge idiocy, and now it was his brother who was coming back for the final tale of this tragic-stupidity.

After a decade of slaughter, crimes, economic tyranny, and genocides, the cycle of hatred was going to end.

It was ironic, but it was true. With Great Wyk, Lonely Light, and Saltcliffe reduced to radioactive hellholes, the Ironborn population had reached its lowest numbers in at least five centuries.

And if Pyke fell, if the Redwyne-Hightower command had no choice but to scour the planet in order to deny Victarion Greyjoy his victory, it would be only a question of time before the Ironborn civilisation went extinct.

Ayric was not sure how to feel about that.

“The monitoring stations are detecting several hundreds of void signatures arriving from the I-7 Sector,” Bronn announced. “They didn’t waste any time to sail from Orkmont.”

“Victarion Greyjoy is an idiot,” the veteran warrior replied, “but I think he is able to understand that ships require fuel to move from Point S to Point P.”

The distances weren’t huge between Saltcliffe, Great Wyk, Blacktyde and Pyke, but the Tyroshi did not build classes of ships noted for their efficiency and their low needs of maintenance. No, like a lot of Essossi navies, the engineers of Tyrosh had superb hulls...and they devoured fuel like there was no tomorrow.

“One way or another, his story ends here.” Sandor growled. “The Beast is dead, let’s kill his successor.”

The Westerner Colonel wished this was going to be that easy. But with sorcery involved...

“Open the communication with Admiral Tarly. It’s time to play our part.”

**Author’s note**: Next chapter will be the last in the War of the Ten Warlords Arc. The opening phases of the massive civil war and the Long Night have been fought and all factions are licking their wound, and trying to compile what they’ve left. The pre-war plans are not worth the documents they’re written upon.

For all intent and purpose, the Seven Sectors of Westeros as a single realm are dead and gone. Rhaegar was the last King, and his legacy will be reviled for centuries...assuming the Others don’t win this galactic war.

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

TV Tropes Page: / pmwiki/ / Fanfic/ LetTheGalaxyBurn

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

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