**The Dying Peace Arc**

**Chapter 4**

**Two Minutes to Midnight**

*It is too late to save the realm.*

*But you know this, don’t you?*

*The pillars of the crumbling palace you call a kingdom are a spider and the might of your millions-strong armies.*

*You have built great fortresses to protect your legacy. Kilometres-long battleships travel through the stars, obeying the orders of men they never saw in their lives. Behemoths and super-heavy tanks are only waiting a command to unleash untold amount of destruction. Tens of thousands infantrymen are recruited day after day, grabbed from their green villages to prepare for the conflicts to come.*

*Do you really think it was going to be enough?*

*The words of the dragon can’t be trusted. Ruin and betrayal have awaited those who were naive enough to trust them.*

*Bathing worlds in fire and blood granted you a reprieve, I will grant you this. But you can’t forge a new peace with only the threat of violence. Your glorious ancestor was wise enough to understand and he had a weapon you lacked.*

*Dragons.*

*Ultimately, it is always the dragons, isn’t it? The great predators of the stars allowed you to reign and died because the last dragonlords had grown too arrogant and complacent.*

*Three hundred years of reign is no small feat for a dynasty...but there will be no four hundred, and you know this.*

*In their old bastions, the lords of the storm are swearing their loyalty to the new heir of the Warmaster.*

*In the sky fortresses of the east, an old falcon prepares for his last fight.*

*In the shadows, the priests you scorned prepares their vengeance in the name of the Heavens.*

*In the void, a broken pirate king returns to claim a throne he never wanted in a name of the dead.*

*In the gold mines, the lions are sharpening their claws.*

*In the shining cities of other realms, a black dragon is reborn.*

*In the deserts of your own making, the snakes have long prepared their poisons and their spears.*

*In the cold wastes, the direwolves are moving at last, slow but implacable.*

*And beyond the veil of reality, my old enemies have mustered their legions. As I send you these dreams, they are already encircling the redoubts of the Children.*

*This time there will be no escape.*

*This war will be fought for life and death is no longer final.*

*The Age of Peace is over.*

*The Long Night is coming.*

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*For centuries, the Westerosi military forces not sworn to House Martell have accused the Dornish soldiers of conduct and operations breaking all conventions on warfare. In the last decades, the Iron Throne and the systems firmly allied with it have not spared their efforts to present the subjects of the Princedom as backstabbing murderers who can’t remember what chivalry and honour are.*

*The origin of this view is difficult to remember. Reachers and Stormlanders fought many wars against the Dornish long before the Targaryens built an outpost in the Dragonstone System. There were massacres and atrocities committed on both sides. Famous Generals of Highgarden dropped dead after drinking a cup of wine while Dornish children were mutilated and sent back to their families piece by piece.*

*It is known that in the First Dornish War fought by Aegon the Conqueror, the Martells and their bannersmen had no choice but to embrace unconventional tactics. The enemy threatening their systems had invaded them with dragons and the support of several realms which had been years ago bitter enemies. Outnumbered and outgunned, there was no question the Dornish commanders told their soldiers anything was acceptable to liberate their home planets and win the war. Generals, Admirals and officers of all branches were murdered in gruesome fashions. Behemoth and capital warships were sabotaged. The cease-fire accepted by Aegon I and the subsequent withdrawal of all Westerosi forces from Dorne certainly did nothing to correct the impression of the Dornish they had been in the wrong to use these desperate measures.*

*One hundred and fifty years or so later, it was the turn of Daeron I to try his chance where the rider of Balerion had tried and failed. This time the violations of the war conventions were even more blatant and terribly one-sided. The troops of the Young Dragon had no dragon to help them and generally accepted the offers of surrender in good faith...only to receive assassinations, sabotages, poison darts and other lethal weapons in return. The Lord of Highgarden, the Heir of Winterfell, eleven Western lords in a single banquet and ultimately the King himself were some of the prominent names who were slain by methods which could not be called anything but dishonest and unfaithful. In the end, the Dornish once more emerged unbroken from this ordeal: the crowning of Baelor I stopped the bloody conflict in its tracks.*

*Nowadays, the tendency appears to have been inversed: the administration of King’s Landing is hardly known for the respect of the accords it is signing while the Dornish have adopted an isolationist policy following the death of Princess Elia Martell.*

*This does not mean Lord Mace Tyrell was right when he publically affirmed in front of his peers after conducting the 297AAC war games that a new conflict against Dorne would see his forces emerge victorious. The Lord of Highgarden was extremely prompt to recognise the underhanded and treacherous tactics of House Martell, but assured the spectators his fleets and his armies were ready to parry sneak attacks and sabotages alike.*

*The Lord of Highgarden has seemingly forgotten the Dornish strategic position is weak compared to his own Sector. The Reach has sixty-two systems to the Dornish twenty-nine, and the manpower imbalance is worse for there are more than one hundred and seven billions Reachers for twenty-two billions subjects of Sunspear. A lot of the main systems like Starfall, Yronwood or Salt Shore are not exactly poor, but they can’t boast the sheer wealth a Lord like Leighton Hightower of Oldtown takes for granted.*

*It is not a guess that should any war come, House Martell and its bannersmen will resort to extremely unconventional strategies: it is a fact. By 299AAC, the Reach Navy alone will have in service ten times the number of ships of the line the Princedom musters. On the ground, the army divisions of Houses Rowan Fossoway, Beesbury and the rest of the Tyrell bannersmen have a fourteen-to-one advantage. In starfighters, the Dornish great specialty, the Reach has still a two-to-one superiority and thousands of new engines are in production.*

*Given the troubled political situation, the ramifications are of primary importance for the stability of the Marches...*

Extract from the Wrath of the Sun, by Lysene author Vitaeys Jiterro, 298AAC.

**Princess Rhaenys Targaryen, 03.08.300AAC, Sunspear System**

Rhaenys collapsed with a loud exclamation of relief on her orange couch. The day had been long and the last two hours she had spent dealing with administrative duties – stacks of data-slates to be exact – and logistic issues. It was not the kind of activities she enjoyed.

A word and the music devices pre-arranged behind the walls began to play one of her favourite songs. She removed her heels and threw them away without particularly bothering where they landed on the soft red rug. She seized one of the bottles of red from the Godsgrace she had kept nearby and filled half of a glass. The savour of the wine brought her some appeasement and relaxation.

Unfortunately, the moment her attention returned to the bottle, she noticed how little red liquid remained. The Lady of Hellgate Hall frowned. Either she was drinking in her sleep or someone was drinking her best bottles while she had her back turned. A second of reflexion and she concluded the latter was far more likely than the former. It was not the first time it happened, sadly.

“It’s not because I always receive the best wines as presents you’re forced to drink them, you know,” some noble might have wondered why she was suddenly speaking to an empty room but Rhaenys knew better. A shiver behind the couch, and suddenly her cousin was jumping next to her.

“But your presents are always so good,” Arianne purred, putting a long accentuation on the last two words and pushing her chest forwards, an action which just by coincidence put further emphasis on her large breasts. It must be said the cleavage of her light yellow dress today was not hiding a lot. “How can I resist?”

The daughter of Elia Martell shook her head in feigned sadness.

“If the Lords and Ladies of Westeros were aware of your ambitions to raid their wine cellars, their fear would know no bounds.”

And it wasn’t that much of an exaggeration.

“Ah, but they don’t know the horrible truth yet.” The busty Princess replied with a predatory smile. “And when they will, it will be too late! I will be in their wineries, grabbing with my loyal legions of wine-stealers hundreds of thousands barrels and selling them on the black market of the Free Planets while seizing for myself an ocean of alcohol! Never will I be thirsty again! Bwahaha!”

Rhaenys looked weirdly at the wine. It was powerful, but it couldn’t possibly have gotten the girl who was her sister in all but name drunk, could it?

“You have curious ambitions, Ari.”

“And you don’t have enough Rhae.” Arianne tried to stretch out her legs a bit more and was rewarded by a gentle slap on her feet. The Heiress of Prince Doran did a big show of yelping. “The moment your paramour broke up with you and returned at Starfall, you buried yourself in work and forgot to have fun.”

“Something nobody will accuse you of,” the Fowler twins had returned at Skyreach for the war, but her cousin had already found replacements to partake in vigorous activities after nightfall.

“Let’s not speak about me. Let me talk about you, Rhae.” The smile from Arianne was really frightening when you were the principal target. “We’re on the eve of the biggest war the Princedom has ever fought and you wander around in circles like a caged lioness. You need to think about other things before we leave in four days. Go fuck your White Knight tonight. I know you’re making doe eyes at him and yesterday you were ready to dance horizontally the moment Nymeria had left your side.”

“You make it sound so romantic.”

She didn’t deny it, though. It was after all true she had always thought fondly about Ser Jaime Lannister, the protector of her childhood...and the moment he had arrived at King’s Landing and they had met, Rhaenys had begun to entertain more than that.

“Romanticism is boring and outdated,” her cousin grinned. “Claim him before your waiting convinces the rest of our court this fine blonde-haired warrior is fair game. Tyene or Morgana will soon begin their seduction efforts if you don’t.”

Rhaenys was no prude, but Arianne comments made her cheeks far warmer than they should be. The ‘advice’ was also conjuring very vivid images in her head and they were particularly pleasant to imagine.

“I will think about it.”

This answer didn’t seem to satisfy her cousin who stood up and place walked behind her, placed her mouth next to her right ear and gave a very hot suggestion which made the Princess profusely blush. She would not repeat these words in public...heart of Dorne or not, there were expressions you didn’t voice out loud in public.

“You will do it,” and on this Arianne came back to her former semi-horizontal position on the couch.

They emptied one more glass of wine and then it was time for the real problems. They might not look like it, she in her white robe and Arianne in her yellow clothes, but they were both Commander of Five Hundred Thousand – second only to their Uncle Oberyn since Prince Doran was enjoying his last years in the peaceful atmosphere of the Great Water Gardens – and a lot of the initial strategies about to be used in the first stages had come from them.

“The current regime is weakened. On the surface, nothing has changed much at the capital but the attacks of the Sparrows have created a lot of uncertainty. And I have to wonder how loyal the Kingsguards are to their masters. No offence Rhae, but you really didn’t have a lot to say to make the ones sent to us change sides.”

It was true. At first, she had feared it was far too good to be true...that said the agents of the Princedom had uncountable ways to snatch the motivations and other critical information from their sources. Jaime’s defection to her cause, while quick, had been helped by the actions of her genitor. For reasons which escaped her and in all likelihood most of the explored galaxy, the madman had used one of the greatest protectors he had available to be an errand messenger. In other words, he was sent from planet to planet and proclaimed whatever the authorities of King’s Landing wanted him to say.

It was an utter waste of experience and talent. But what could you expect from the fool?

“The Kingsguard is ready to break apart like many institutions the moment we pull the trigger. Barristan Selmy, Oswell Whent and of course Arthur Dayne are going to remain loyal to the King, but between our operatives and the assassins the other claimants will send, I don’t think they will see the end of this year. Garth Hightower is with the Crown Prince and his House benefits too much from the Reach-Crown alliance, he will be loyal as long as the Tyrells are convinced my brother is their way to win the Game of Thrones.”

“Preston Greenfield is loyal to Joffrey.”

“And I can see Arys Oakheart swearing his sword to Prince Viserys.”

In appearance, it wasn’t so bad for the Iron Throne to have four Kingsguards out of seven. It was exact from a certain point of view. But historically, the breaking of the Kingsguard forced the sheep of the Crown Sector to remember the greatest conflict which had broken the White Order: the Dance of the Dragons. There were whispers the same had been true under Maegor’s reign though the files on this period were always difficult to access. But it was a pure coincidence.

Still, Kingsguards had a battlecruiser as their personal flagship, smaller units for escort and a small army of guards to protect their King. They also guarded the King’s secrets, were included in the most secret plans to defend the capital world and the core systems of the Targaryen dynasty. A single white sword could do considerable damage if he deserted. Two or three would be a nasty blow added to the others they were going to inflict to the lackeys of her genitor.

“I assume all the captains of Operation Midnight have sent us confirmation they had reached the specified spatial muster points?”

“They have,” confirmed Arianne. “Two of the Q-ships needed some repairs; their navigation in Deep Space wasn’t a calm journey.”

“As long as their capabilities are not impeded and they can repair, I see no point to reprimand them.” Rhaenys left her glass next to the wine bottle before playing with her golden earrings. “This is the reason we gave them a large timetable. Midnight and our official declaration of war are still one month away.”

“True. But there are still a few high commanders in Houses Yronwood and Blackmont who are not exactly happy with the basic generalities we gave them.”

“It can’t be helped.” She would have dearly liked to tell them in person the intricacies of the first operations but it was impossible if the Dornish fleets and armies wanted the first offensives to be a total surprise. “The spies of Highgarden are stupid, but there are a lot of them and many of our bannersmen planets are leaking information fastest than should be possible. Should we give them the plans today, in one month the Tyrells and the Hightowers will have completely modified their strategic dispositions and Midnight will fail because our spacemen face entire squadrons of ships of the line when they should be none. “The new war council at Skyreach will explain about seven out of ten of our intentions and contingency plans.”

Overall, she didn’t expect a lot of trouble. The Dornish Lords and Ladies were completely fed up with the family she had severed ties with and the Masters of the Reach. The best part was that no coercion, blackmail or bribery had been necessary. Rhaegar Targaryen and Mace Tyrell were very, very good to attract the ire of their neighbours. It was a bit funny, in a macabre sort of way. If they had been Knights or lower in the aristocracy hierarchy, they would have been sent to an asylum. Or their families would have isolated them in large mansions away from towns and holo-news the time for them to fade into oblivion.

“Obara wanted us to add Oldtown to Midnight’s list.”

“Again?” Rhaenys rolled her eyes in amusement. “I suppose you gave her a new explanation?”

“Not this time,” replied Doran’s daughter. “I was tired and in no mood to waste my saliva for her.”

Rhaenys grimaced internally. Obara Sand, eldest of the Sand Snakes, was not really in favour anymore on Sun’s Radiance. She was still one of her protectors armed with one of the Nymeria-3 battle-armours, but her influence in the strategic councils was nearly null. Obara saw a wall and immediately wanted to rush towards and crush it down. This was not a good thing when Dorne had fewer warships and bodies than their enemies.

Obara was simple, in her own way. Infantrywoman of profession, she had the title of Commander of Two Thousand and would lead a mix of heavy and light infantry in the war to come. And since their uncle had sired her with an Oldtown whore and her life in the unsavoury quarters of the metropolis had not been pleasant, she wanted to burn the Hightower planet.

“I agree on principle the removal of Oldtown and the armies it can field from the frontlines can only be a good thing but there are two major points against this strike. One, there are too many shipyards and industry to hit for a Midnight task force. We could hurt them and wipe out a tenth or a twelfth of their construction, but unless we go after the planet, the attack will fail.”

“And we can’t afford a defeat in the first stages,” murmured Arianne, abandoning her good humour for a deadly serious face. “Obara knows the second point too. If we strike every shipyard of the Reach Fleet, they are going to return the favour and send raiders with orders to cause the maximum of carnage.”

And it would be bad. The Dornish fleet could not be everywhere and the powered weapons of a battlecruiser over an inhabited world could create cataclysms. House Martell knew it better than everyone else. Many Dornish planets had been transformed into desert wastelands by Balerion and its lesser siblings.

It was why until the War of the Usurper Dorne had been the only entity to limit the numbers of children’s births. There were simply not enough resources available to allow population growth. The ability to shape their lands into a far more inviting environment existed, but it was a long and expensive process. With a 285AAC-type budget, it was going to take centuries for the Princedom of Dorne to recover a shadow of the splendour it had lost in the terrible conflict against the Conqueror.

But a new era was upon them. For the first time, Dorne was going to destroy this balance forcing every woman to abuse and abuse of the existing contraception methods. For the last two decades, the restrictions, societal and economic, had been lifted. The wrongs of Aerys and her genitor’s reign were going to be paid back in full.

“I would still prefer a straight advance on Highgarden, however,” Arianne declared, emptying a new glass of wine. Rhaenys gently tapped the hand of her cousin, telling with just a nod it wasn’t the moment to finish her reserves.

“It is not impossible we will be able to launch a variant of Mamba. But I don’t think the Admirals commanding the enemy battle-squadrons are that stupid. It would require the sort of brainwashing the Lysene give to their genetic pleasure slaves for them to leave their most important system vulnerable. Midnight and Sweet Nightmare will hurt them and cause them to doubt their strengths, of this I have no doubt, but their current fleet is so large we can’t risk open battle.”

“The Sands Snakes are going to love this.”

Rhaenys grinned innocently. The Sand Snakes was the name every Dornish man, woman and child was giving to the daughters of Prince Oberyn Martell, the Red Viper. By a mystery which was akin to magic, her uncle had been unable to sire a boy. As a result, there were thirty-three young women and girls as she spoke who could claim this name. Of course, many were still babies or just in age to play in the pools of the Water Gardens. Assuming nothing changed, seven of them were going to be involved in the fighting.

“They will not and you know it,” the two cousins exchanged amused glances. “I trust there was no strategic-changing event while I was dealing with the logistics?”

“No, the Lords Paramount and their Admirals are continuing to increase their forces and purchase thousands of weapons instead of feeding their people.”

On this last sentence Arianne left her quarters...but not before not-so-subtly seizing the wine bottle they had just been drinking from. Rhaenys sighed loudly. Her cousin was incorrigible.

Using the mini-tactical display she used for her war-simulations, she entered manually the last deployments while eating two honey biscuits. The music providing the ambiance also was changed to provide a more martial tone. Playing the four most probable scenarios in advance speed cost her half an hour for no real gain. The odds had not changed since her last session.

Operation Midnight had a ninety-three percent chance of success.

Operation Sweet Nightmare victory conditions were accomplished in ninety percent of the holographic fights.

Her chances to be Queen of Westeros in five years when the dust would have settled were of six percent.

“But since I am not that desperate to have this ugly pile of melted weapons at all costs...”

The chances of the young man who had been her dear baby brother were far greater...in theory. In practise, several Dornish commanders had tried directing the fleets like Aegon did in the stolen records from the King’s Landing Royal Academy and the consoles of their command stations. The ‘battles’ which had been observed had provided a lot of good laughs. ‘King Rhaegar’ had not only turned him against Dorne and probably used surgery and genetic modifications to change his looks. He had also made his Heir a brainwashed moron.

Rhaenys tried hard to concentrate after abandoning that but like Arianne had so aptly said, she felt like she was in a cage...

“Oh by the Great Wyrm...” Suddenly she had enough. Enough of these endless meetings, enough of the headaches caused by thousands of logistical problems, enough of the political promises she had been required to offer at an age most of the Noble houses progeny were losing fortunes in brand-new casinos and buying air-cars with astronomical prices.

For a few hours she was going to do what her body and her heart pressed her for several days. In one instant, all her clothes were flying at the four corners of her personal quarters. In replacement, she only put over her shoulders a transparent nightdress after releasing her long black hair from the black headband. One last look in the mirror and she activated the combination to open one of the three secret passages she had access to from her wing.

One minute later, and she was in her White Knight’s bedroom. Fortunately, he was not yet asleep despite the relatively late hour. She loved how the shock of her arrival disappeared fast, and desire took its place as he contemplated her breasts and the rest of her body. This nightdress was not hiding anything.

“Princess, you...”

The space separating them ceased to be the moment after and she kissed him deeply, voraciously. For a second or two he didn’t answer. After that their tongues fought and Rhaenys knew she had her lover. The kiss was like a bite, deep and life-ending.

“Princess, this is not-“

The exclamation when they broke the kiss was silenced by a finger on his lips. The nightdress fell on her toes, leaving no choice but to gaze at her naked body. She placed one of his hands on her left breast and the other on her ass.

“I am your Queen. And I want you to please me.”

There were no further arguments and for the rest of the night, her White Knight did exactly that.

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“*The King’s decision to send his Heir to the Reach was understandable. The idea of sending Prince Joffrey to Braavos by himself was sure to cause huge problems. Sending one of his daughters to the North was beyond idiotic. A Kingsguard who landed on a Dornish planet was either going to provoke a war or a catastrophe. But there was no one who had the nerves to contradict the Lord of the Seven Sectors in public and thus the die was cast..*.” attributed to Lord Petyr Baelish, 300AAC.

**Princess Visenya Targaryen, 06.08.300AAC, Moat Cailin System**

In her mind, this mission was already a great success. Despite the best efforts of the King, she had not started a war between the Northern Sector and the rest of Westeros.

The key word was ‘yet’, of course.

But presently, no one was shooting at anyone, which was the best outcome in a list including very dreadful possibilities. She had spent several bad nights thinking how the status quo could fall apart. Her fears had not been diminished in the least when she had learned the senior fleet officers of the Willow Wood Fast Reaction Force had received ‘Royal suggestions’ she was to be escorted northwards by a full squadron of River battlecruisers.

Another great idea like this one and House Darry was going to lead the Rebellion in the next war.

Happily, House Ryger and their allies of the Trident had been convinced by her rhetoric to not pour hydrogen on top of the volcano and the ‘suggestions’ had been ignored. The fact it preserved seven battlecruisers which had a good chance of being lost if they went into the Northern-held systems may have played a role too. As a consequence, two scout cruisers had been detached to guard the heavy cruiser *Night Spear*. Since the two light units were part of the Crown-crewed warships made available to the loyalists of the River Sector, House Ryger would not lose anything if they were transformed into clouds of dust and debris. Moreover, the soldiers defending Northgate could not mistake a weak formation like this for an invasion force.

To be fair, if she wasn’t aboard of those ships, she would argue the Crown fleet would lose nothing important if they were blown up. Visenya had been forbidden – and by her genitor no less – to attend any military academy or join the regular forces or the Goldcloaks or whatever job which had some qualification demanding you to shoot someone. Not wanting to obey these ‘suggestions’, she had used whatever influence her name brought her to become an unofficial test pilot for one of the big evaluation boards overseeing the new developments of the new Crown starfighters.

On the bad side, she had no rank and was reduced to the status of passenger wherever she travelled, while her incompetent half-brothers strutted around with Admiral ranks.

On the good side, she had not suffered the mental crippling of those passing the doors of the Fleet Academy. She had also a good idea of the firepower each class built in the Crown Sector had been granted and plenty of classified information she would not have had access otherwise.

This was why she had been less than enthusiastic for her little adventure.

The *Night Spear* was in theory a good heavy cruiser. The lead ship had been commissioned in 287AAC and had been intended for close-guard convoy duty or important raids in enemy territory. In total, it boasted twenty heavy plasma guns, twenty battlecruiser-grade laser batteries and six missile tubes.

There was a little default, however. The main weapons of the cruiser used too much energy and the fusion reactors had problems delivering the minimum outputs to every weapon in time. In other words, the designers, engineers and officers had screwed up.

Again.

A Void Shark class warship could not use all his plasma and laser weapons at the same time. At any given time, thirty percent of the existing armament had to remain silent unless the captain wanted random problems to appear thorough the hull. The Crown Navy had discovered this inconvenient detail the hard way when the *Void Shark* had seen its power reduced to zero for four long seconds in the middle of a war exercise. The casualties aside –and they had been heavy – the consequences for the class had been disastrous and quite a few highborn councillors had been retired with extreme urgency.

Obviously, the smart decision by that point should have been to interrupt at least temporarily the construction of the Void Shark class but between the incident of 288AAC and the official abandon, two years had been wasted and they had not had the courage to reveal their mistakes in public committee. The Void Shark class construction had been officially stopped due to the return of experience from the Greyjoy Rebellion – where none of the heavy cruisers had been involved in the heavy fighting.

Thus the Crown Navy had built fifteen heavy cruisers who could not fight properly should they find themselves under fire. It was stupid, but it was the truth. Two squadrons and one ship were absorbing considerable sums of money and a lot of maintenance for no practical result save some people wanting to preserve their families’ reputation.

Meagre consolation, the designers had built the King Aenys-class in 297AAC which fulfilled the same jobs but apparently had none of its defaults. Last year, three brothers of the *Night Spear* had as a result been decommissioned to make place for the new warships. It was likely the twelve remaining –including the *Night Spear* – would share this fate by the end of 301AAC.

The *Red Sun* and the *Red Comet* were not better although for very different reasons. These two scout cruisers belonged to the Red Moon-class and had been formally accepted in service ten years ago. It had been by all accounts a generalist scout cruiser, one destined to fight one-on-one the scouts of the rebel navies and patrol hundreds of light-years with a minimum of resupply and spare parts. It had been launched in 288AAC...and the chief supporter of this class had been one High Admiral Lucerys Velaryon.

Following the death of the war hero at the Battle of the Arbor, the Noble Houses had fought a shadow war to grab dozens of small companies who had participated in the construction of this class. The direct result had been that the updates on sensors and fire control for the Red Moon-class were unavailable and would continue to be so until the end of times. The arrival of the Gratitude and Endurance classes – poor copies of the Red Moon-class - in 294AAC out of the Buckwell and Langward shipyards was not worth commenting.

There were hundred similar stories across the fleet. Like with the Magma starfighter, corruption, incompetence and inexperience were creating hundreds of problems and as smallfolk were banished from anything more prestigious than a Lieutenant rank, the readiness of individuals declined.

“Your Highness, our arrival at Moat Cailin is imminent,” the voice of the captain broadcasted in her room’s communication-link interrupted her dark thoughts.

“I will join you on the bridge in a few minutes,” Visenya answered, trying at the very least to sound polite. It was not like she wanted to strangle the man with his own intestines...oh wait it was exactly what she had in mind. The man had forbidden her to touch the simulators onboard after she beat the top scores of his men in her warm-up. Just for that, her vengeance was going to be terrible.

“Thank you, your Highness,” and the exchange was over.

Visenya uttered a few curses shortly after. The Senior Captain of the *Night Spear* was seriously annoying her. She had not discovered how many masters he was serving but it was quite certain he had given commands to his crew to know each and every one of her moves. The Crown Intelligence Agency and the King seemed a given. House Stokeworth had to come in somewhere since the Captain was a distant cousin.

“Time to dress for the circus, I suppose,” the silver light of this mission was the fact she had not to constantly be careful about her words in private: none of the perfidious harpies who pretended to be her servants had come with her. In the Red Keep, there was nowhere you could hide from spies...on the *Night Spear* at least her quarters were a refuge after she destroyed the bugs and other monitoring devices the imbeciles continued to install day after day.

The black clothes based on the spacefighter uniforms were removed. As much as she delighted breaking protocol when she could get away with it, this was not a time where it was advisable to do it. The Northerners of Moat Cailin may have seen the holo-news, but this was the first time they would see her and first impressions were primordial. The tutors her genitor had hired in service of House Targaryen had at least managed to tell her that much.

The massive wardrobe was opened and the trial of clothing started. Visenya could swear she heard the laughter of an invisible audience behind her, but dressing correctly was a complicated affair for a Princess of House Targaryen.

First, it was best to avoid the colours of the Lords Paramount in formal receptions unless you had family ties with them and were expressly invited by them to don their colours. Arriving in yellow-black at Storm’s End had been the cause of four wars between Andals and First Men in ancient times.

Secondly, you didn’t dress in the colours of the Lords Paramount’s rivals in the Sector. In the Northern Sector, this meant no pink for the Red Kings of House Bolton had made it their emblem after skinning the opposition.

Thirdly, the appearance of a red dragon on your attire was greatly encouraged. Accordingly, it was better to forget the idea of a black dragon anywhere nearby. For a strange reason, people were still afraid of the Blackfyres. This was illogical in the extreme. The Heirs of Daemon Blackfyre had utterly failed at conquering the Seven Sectors and the more rebellions they did, the fewer victories they achieved. During the last attempt, they had not managed to set foot on a Westerosi planet. The Starks, Arryns, Tullys and Baratheons on the other hand had come quite close from toppling the Iron Throne.

There were many more rules...she had not bothered learning them.

After a few seconds of reflexion, she decided the red uniform with the black cloak was a safe choice. The latter had the three-headed red dragon of course. Visenya tied her long silver hairs in a ponytail, and gave a long look at her appearance in the mirror. There were no servants to act horrified at her haste or at the lack of makeup on her face.

Five minutes later, she was on the bridge of the Night Spear and as usual her honour guard was waiting there and the dozens of officers bowed and scrapped in front of her. It was easier than ship maintenance, yes. But if the Smith didn’t dare voice any objection at their behaviour, who was she to remind them of their duties?

“Your Highness, we will be in orbit around Moat Cailin in fifteen minutes,” affirmed the Senior Captain whose name she had not bothered to learn. The man had made clear he was going to be a nuisance for the time she had to spend in his ship, the only moment she was going to find a use for it would be to spread rumours he was the pet dog of her genitor. Hey, Joffrey had Clegane and Aegon had the Velaryon and the Greyjoy Heir. It was not impossible...

“Thank you, Senior Captain,” she replied before taking the seat to her right. The man had almost a heart attack at the sight, but recovered fast though he was transpiring a lot. A woman taking the seat which was destined for a Squadron Commander was unprecedented in the Crown Navy...which was perhaps the reason the warships of this Sector had a tendency to not come home when the hostilities were declared. Returning her attention to the tactical display, she saw Moat Cailin in all its splendour. “Not an easy location to attack.”

There weren’t seeing much, of course. The four scout cruisers and the lone light cruiser escorting them were jamming their signals extremely well. Save the asteroids and the planet, it was impossible to say if a fleet or nothing awaited you behind every floating rock. Visenya’s money was on a fleet.

The Captain gritted his teeth but didn’t disagree openly. Good to know at least he wasn’t that stupid.

The green orb grew to enormous proportions under their eyes. It wasn’t a spectacle urging you to celebrate and depart for a holiday. The infamous planet looked already an awful place in orbit and having read the data on it, she was sure thing the appearance matched the danger.

“There is one Northern ship of the line,” informed the Lieutenant of the tactical section. “It’s a big bastard, all right.”

And where there was a ship of the line, it was virtually certain there were others nearby. No Admiral worth the name was going to send one of its main units alone and unsupported.

“Sources from five years ago indicated their Blizzard-class was larger than the warships they used to support the Usurper...” grumbled the ship’s second in command before paling when the image of it materialised on the display.

The ship of the line was simply a monster. Every part of its hull was either armoured or had weapon emplacements. It was a mass of durasteel and diverse alloys built to charge into the greatest missile salvoes and continue the fight after hundreds of hits.

There were no decorations save the name and a hull number. The hull was not a rectangular block, but it was as close as it could possibly for a mobile platform of war. Except the engines, there was simply no way to know where to direct your fire: the dark grey of the capital ship was projecting an aura of mystery and danger.

“Ship identified as the *Flames of Rebellion*,” added a Lieutenant. “Sir, I don’t think this is a Blizzard-class.”

The second comment passed way over the head of many Crown officers. They were completely flabbergasted at the insolence of the Northerners. Visenya mentally applauded; it took some courage to give a ship a name like this one when you were still nominally loyal to House Targaryen.

“We always knew they must have commissioned new warships in the last years.” The *Night Spear*’s Captain looked unpleased. Perhaps it was the idea of explaining at home the Northerners had built new ships without anyone being aware of it. Or it was just the point his heavy cruiser and the two cruisers would not survive a minute against this titanic ship. “They need to replace old ships arriving reaching their limit of age too, you know.”

“With all due respect Commander, this is not a replacement. This thing is a bloody threat! I don’t think anyone but the Reach has bigger ships of the line.”

“Calm yourself Lieutenant,” his superior was not pleased at seeing one of his men lose his composure in front of her. “We have massive ships of the line and super-battleships in the Crown Navy, you know. The North may have a few big units like this...but their poor planets can’t afford more than two of their squadrons before they all go bankrupt. Alone, our Sector can field twice their numbers.”

“This information and the breach of trust it signifies will be reported to the capital,” announced the political officer. Brown-haired and with hard traits, he had the fervour of a fanatic in his eyes. “The Starks have not stopped their rearmament projects like they promised at the end of the Greyjoy Rebellion.”

The murmurs and the sentences spoken on the bridge in the next minutes were not chanting the virtue of the Northern culture and its people. About two-thirds of the content was extracted from different holo-emissions sponsored by the services of the Master of Information.

“Commander, we are receiving a message from the ship of the line,” the announcement had come from the communication section. “Vice-Admiral Seaworth is honoured by the presence of the Princess in the Moat Cailin System and invites her aboard the *Flames of Rebellion* for a reception befitting her status.”

The simple effect of the name increased the temperature on the bridge by several degrees. If the Captain and his officers had been angry before, you could literally see the smoke coming out of their ears. Okay, she was exaggerating a bit but not that much.

“They made a smuggler an Admiral?” was probably the most composed and correct exclamation which came out of their mouths. The rest of the outbursts were far more insulting.

“King Aerys should have burned the whole Sector to cinders while we had them on the ropes...” and it was not a warrant officer but the second of the *Night Spear* who voiced this horrifying comment.

The conversation wasn’t returning to proper levels of intelligence so Visenya decided to intervene.

“Prepare my shuttle Senior Captain,” the Princess ordered. “It would be rude to let the Admiral wait hours for my arrival.”

“Of course, your Highness,” agreed the obsequious officer, making a sign for several guards in red and black to follow her. And to think, he believed himself clever.

The travel to her transport was accomplished swiftly. This more compensated the time she had to wait for a ‘proper escort’ to be constituted...for some reason the Lieutenant which should have accompanied her was unsuitable and was replaced – sound the trumpets – by three Lieutenants in total and five warrant officers of the bridge. Visenya was confident the bridge was not going to perform very efficiently if they had a fight on their hands.

Half an hour later, their shuttle was making the final approaches to land on the Northern ship of the line. The closest they came, the more she saw her first impression was justified: this warship was a monster. Everything in this ship’s appearance screamed aggression and sturdiness. The lines of weapons were uncountable and were presented like the murder holes of a fortress. The armouring presented no weakness. This was a hull built for war. It could have no other function and certainly wasn’t going to lead peaceful expeditions for Guilds or the great trade companies.

Their landing took place in a bay which was as grey as the exterior paint. The name of the ship was on the back wall and there was a shield or arms: a sword enshrouded in flames. Otherwise, it was just grey, grey and grey. It was...dull. She wasn’t going to affirm the Tyrell were right to paint every corridor and shower room in bright colours, but a bit of decoration had never killed anyone.

This was not the only thing which was different from all her arrival. Despite being a bit far in the succession to the throne, her presence in general was deemed sufficient for Lords to welcome her with a few thousand troopers and a full committee of officers.

“Targaryen arriving!”

The usual call resonated...and the hangar really looked deserted. There was a man in the grey clothes and the stars of a Northern Admiral, sure enough. But he had about forty guards to form a double column, five of his officers –certainly his staff – and a group of young men and women behind him.

It was certainly the smallest welcoming committee she had ever seen in her life. And when she descended the metallic ramp, not one of them bowed. Visenya did her best not to wince or show her contrariety. It was a blow for her feelings, but the big problem lied elsewhere. The gold-clad officers following in her steps had already been unhappy in the shuttle and this refusal to acknowledge Royal authority did not make them less furious.

“You stand in presence of Princess Visenya Targaryen, daughter of the Great King Rhaegar Targaryen, Sovereign of Westeros, Lord of the Seven Sectors, Protector of the Realm and Shield of the Faith! Bow Admiral!”

The exclamation was out of the senior Lieutenant’s mouth – a young man of twenty-five name days who had coloured his hair silver in a vain attempt to receive her favours – before she had the occasion to tell him not to be stupid.

“I have a very delicate physical condition, fragile kidneys and can’t bow easily,” replied the man who must be Davos Seaworth. The lie was so obvious she had to stop a guffaw in her throat. The Vice-Admiral was slim and looked like a man in perfect health.

The hint of rebelliousness was evident...and the officer of the *Night Spear* seized the bait without thinking.

“You will bow or it will be war!” The man made a big show of putting his right hand on the grip of his gun in the holster. She would never know if it was a bluff or he really intended to use it. A second later, three detonations partially deafened her and the body of the Lieutenant explored in a shower of blood and various human fluids. One shot in the head and two in the torso, the big rifles of the grey battle-armours had not left anything to chance.

“Don’t try to grab your weapons. Place your hands on your heads if you value your life.” The Admiral’s thin smile had been replaced by a far more dangerous expression.

Obviously, two of the guards didn’t agree with the ‘suggestion’ and received the same treatment, dead before they touched the floor.

“You know, nothing good is going to come from these actions,” she said as calmly as she could while putting her hands on her head as commanded. “My genitor has lost all his marbles and the moment he hears you killed his men, there is going to be war.”

“Good reasoning, which is why we have sent a false message with a raven-drone and the Captain personal codes to inform the King your flotilla is travelling with you to Winterfell.”

Visenya tried hard not to think about the fact their communications were completely and utterly compromised.

“In the best scenario, it will give you only a few months,” two months, perhaps three if the Small Council and the rest of the power-that-be were long to react. “Don’t do this, Admiral. The King is not up to the task of reigning but...”

“But he is not worth the millions of lives his removal will cost?” gently asked the former smuggler.

“Yes,” Visenya said.

“The entire Northern Sector and Lord Stark disagree.” A Captain next to the Admiral retorted. “As long as the South continues to kiss the feet and the ass of this Rapist, all our worlds will be in danger of annihilation.”

“The Crown will destroy you! The Reach has ten times your number in ships of the line! Our Sector has more than twice your numbers!” exploded the youngest Lieutenant.

“Yes, yes,” the tone of Admiral Seaworth was absolutely unimpressed. “The Redwyne fleet was broadcasting on all frequencies seventeen years ago my doom was imminent and my cause futile,” a small smile lightened his common visage. “Yet here I am.”

The former smuggler’s eyes watched again the Lieutenant.

“But we aren’t going to fight a war and then kill the King of Westeros,” and for a strange reason the reasonable voice scared her more than a thousand screams and warmongering proclamations. “The owner of the Iron Throne will be removed first. We have other enemies to fight and the moment your tyrant is removed all the potential claimants are going to fight each other in a bloodbath of galactic scale.”

Visenya wanted to say the Northerner he was wrong. But he was far too well-informed, Seven damn it. Joffrey, Viserys and Aegon hated each other and before her departure their ties had been severed like they had never existed. It was already a minor miracle nobody had done something to inflame the court. If her genitor died...they were going to set Westeros aflame.

“You may be right, but it is not going to give you victory in the end.”

“Don’t underestimate the Northern fleet.”

The ranks of the Northern officers opened behind the Admiral and a young woman came into view. For a moment, Visenya stayed with her mouth wide open. The grey eyes and the silver hairs were really like hers. She was slightly taller and their traits were not perfectly similar, but she could say that if she wore grey instead of red and black, few men and women at King’s Landing would be able to say who was the Princess of King’s Landing and who was the Northern twin.

“Baela?” She asked bewildered. The Royal orders had called for her sister to come at Moat Cailin but given deployment delays and the insubordination of the potential rebels, Visenya had not entertained very big hopes she was going to meet her twin.

“Unless there’s another twin sister travelling the stars and raising hell against the Iron throne...” Even their smirks were close. “You should quit the red. It doesn’t suit you at all.” Their hands were joined and Visenya realised that while Baela did not look a muscular woman, her grip was stronger than hers.

“And your grey is dull,” she replied. “By the suns and stars of Westeros, how can you live in these colourless places without enduring mental depression?”

“It is a question of habit...we prefer security over comfort.” Then the joining of the hands became a big hug. When it stopped and her eyes deviated to the left, her eyes fell on something which was either a hallucination or the biggest wolf in existence. It was an albino too, with its white fur and its big red eyes.

“Is it yours?”

That the Northern ships were more brutal and fear-inspiring than the Crown was not difficult to give them, but if their pets were also better now, it was really unfair...

“No, it is Joanna’s.” Baela sighed. “I have something...more...exotic.”

The way this was articulated let her to believe she was not speaking of a parrot from the Summer Sector.

“I still think your war is a dangerous folly.” The war provoked by the kidnapping of her mother had caused millions of death and the secession attempt known as the Greyjoy Rebellion had killed millions more. “I don’t love King Rhaegar but the destruction of Westeros is going to kill billions.”

“Nothing what I or you will do will prevent this war. It is too late.”

It was like watching your own reflexion in a mirror. Why she could not endure this? Why did she felt so cold and tired?

“The pack can offer you protection and a haven at Winterfell. Come with me and meet our uncle. Your escort will await you there until you’ve made your decision.”

“By this point, the war will have commenced.”

“Yes,” her twin replied without flinching.

Seen like this, there were not a lot of options. She could reverse course and flee southwards, but if the hostilities were so close, only a Lord Paramount or someone higher could offer her a real hope of protection. Aegon would love to put her in his bed again, but his Tyrell betrothed would kill her the moment she had her back turned and she was not eager to have her heart broken a second time. She did not trust Joffrey and she lived even less the Lannisters. The Admiral of Dragonstone was somewhat more acceptable but his intentions were a mystery for her. Shiera and Daeron were nice, but too young to really matter. The potential rebels would see her as a Targaryen or a dynastic problem and the history of the Dance made no mystery that your age was not a protection when someone decided you were a risk.

“I will go to Winterfell, then.” After a moment of silence, she added the same words Princess Elia had supposedly told before the Gold Fists stormed the throne room. “Let the galaxy burn.”

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“*Luck is the hidden power of House Tyrell. But it is best to remember that nothing is eternal and chance can turn at the unlikeliest moment*...” attributed to Lord Petyr Baelish, 297AAC.

**Lady Asha Greyjoy, 10.08.300AAC, Horn Hill System**

Thirty-eight.

This was the number of marriages she had participated in either as the bride, a wedding witness, a maid of honour or a spectator since her fifteenth name day and the moment she was a hostage of the greenlanders.

After today, it would be thirty-nine.

The nobles of the Reach loved organising unions after unions where it was raining food and drink, fireworks lit the sky and jewels, air-cars, necklaces, precious metals and creation from every firm working in the luxury industry were gifted to their friends.

As the handmaidens helped her don the dark blue corset, Asha remembered the last two occasions where she had been supposed to play the role of a blushing and enamoured bride.

The first man the high and pompous Master of Highgarden had decided she would marry had been named Ser Philip Rosekeeper. Before the revelation in Highgarden green halls, she had never even heard of this House and half an hour of research had been necessary to learn this was a Knight House sworn to House Oldflowers.

In uncountable receptions and parties, Asha had heard the Reachers complaining the Ironborn were unsubtle, murderous and insulted everyone as long as they could get away with it. Well the Hightowers, the Tyrells and their clique should look in a mirror sometimes. She had got past her twentieth name day when the ‘proposal’ came. It was not a scandalous age for a wedding...except the groom was seventy-one years old. House Rosekeeper was also poor and in dire economic straits, and it did not take a genius to realise this was a way for the Lord Paramount to save a loyal House and grab the gold of her dowry.

The moment she had seen the corpse she was supposed to be shackled with, Asha had known she was going to kill him.

Since splitting his ugly face in two with an axe was impossible – the Tyrell guards were slow and dumb but they would react eventually – Asha had stolen some powders in one of her escapades in the labyrinth of streets of Highgarden City. Not knowing exactly the poison’s lethality, she had poured four doses at regular intervals in his drinks the night before the ceremony.

Contrary what the rumours said and to her great surprise, Ser Philip Rosekeeper had managed to walk to the altar the morning after. It was all he had been able to do however. He had spat a lot of blood while the septon babbled his religious nonsense and ten minutes after saying ‘I do’, he was dead.

Obviously, the marriage was declared null and void, as there had been no bedding to seal the vows. The sons Philip Rosekeeper had sired during his three first marriages had not been happy at all but she didn’t care. Asha had took back the kraken cloak of her family, and two nights later she had joyously burned the rose-tower-sun cloak her ‘husband’ had placed over her shoulders. Last time she had heard of House Rosekeeper, most of their possessions had been seized by their creditors and four of the men had joined the army in a last attempt to reclaim honour, influence and wealth.

The second marriage attempt had taken place in 298AAC, two years after the first. She was going to give credit to this bitch of ‘Queen of Thorns’ and her granddaughter, they had conspired fast and in secret. She had been informed of the union four nights before, and from that moment she had been surrounded by hundreds of guards, handmaidens and servants. There was simply no way to acquire a poison in these circumstances.

Strangely, it was like they expected she wouldn’t be pleased with their choice. It was a wonder why. His name was Ser Dorian Cypress. Unlike Rosekeeper, House Cypress was not impoverished or anything like this; it was a Masterly House sworn to House Oakheart and their warships had fought at Ashford, the Trident and Pyke.

The problem in this union had not been the greed of the man. The problem was his appearance and his age. Dorian Cypress had fought in many battles against the rebels and in the ‘glorious victory’ of House Targaryen in the Trident System, he had been trapped in a compartment when a Stark heavy cruiser had reduced it to a wreck in a storm of plasma and lasers. Supposedly, he was unarmed below the waist. This was not something she had intended to verify. His face, well it was a nightmare of scars, and his age – he was past his fifty name days – were not his prime qualities.

Ser Dorian Cypress could have given classes of odiousness and ill-behaviour to her eldest brothers. The man hated House Greyjoy since one of his brothers had been killed in the Fall of Pyke. He was extremely violent: he had beaten one of his servants in public with his bare hands for a trifle.

Asha could not thank the Tyrells enough to give her such a delightful companion. One hour before the end of festivities and the dreaded bedding, Ser Dorian Cypress had been found in the men’s toilets with three silver knives in the back and his head in the toilet bowl. Morale of the story: you really, really should pay your servants in time and hour least they decide to find extra-salary elsewhere.

There had been some voices which had risen against her, but being in the middle of the great hall and surrounded by hundreds of guests and guards who had never stopped watching her, they had been unable to find any evidence she was the culprit. Soon the murder had been quietly removed from the minds and memories by the Queen of Thorns. It wouldn’t do at all for the questionable habits and actions of a war-hero to be brought under deep scrutiny.

And thus her second marriage had ended here and there.

 To be sure, her two – very short – unions were small events. House Greyjoy had lost everything in this idiotic Rebellion – if Uncle Rodrik had not intervened she would not even have the tiny protection of the dowry – and the grooms were not scions of Noble Houses.

There had been far greater gatherings of the Reach elite, the greatest and most remarked being of course the marriage of Lord Mace Tyrell’s own sons. In 296AAC, his second son Garlan had married the eldest daughter of the Lord of Cider Hall Leonette Fossoway. Five months ago, it had been the turn of Willas Tyrell. The Heir of Highgarden had wed Lady Leyla Cordwayner, sole daughter of the Lord of Hammerhal.

For this exceptional event, the Lord Paramount of the Reach had not hesitated to open large his treasury chests. No expense had been judged too unreasonable. Swans had been painted pink, the main avenue to the Great Crystal Sept had been paved in white marble and several tons of fresh golden flowers had been thrown before the groom and the bride’s arrival. Seven days of festivities had been proclaimed and it had been excess after excess of bad taste. To the fireworks taking the appearance of each Reach House’s colours to the litany of poems praising the Fat Rose, billions of dragons must have been spent to satisfy the Warden of the South’s monumental ego.

Of course, it had likely been the last marriage of a Tyrell of the main branch for awhile. Margaery Tyrell was promised to the Crown Prince and her marriage was to take place at King’s Landing. As for the younger son, there were enough whispers and murmurs around for her to know women would not be desired in the marital bed.

“A last touch, My Lady,” informed her one of the handmaidens. Asha did not move, sigh or breathe too loudly. She had learned the hard way the women hired to prepare her for her marriages didn’t like it at all and their tools could be really painful when they entered contact with her skin.

“You should take better care of your hairs,” added another with a pink headband.

Asha did not roll her eyes, these long hours of dressing-torture had taught her there was no way to counter the assertions of these wedding fanatics and keep your sanity. Minor consolation, it was better than her two aborted marriages. At the first, the Tyrells or the groom had insisted she was presented at the wedding with a pink dress and her hairs had received a new blonde dye.

She had burned every holo-image and destroyed every bit of data which could possibly show her an image of that day.

The second groom had wanted her to wear a dark green dress and no undergarments. If it had not been against tradition, the Greyjoy cloak would not have been accepted during the wedding ceremony. Images and recordings had been destroyed too, by the way.

“The robe, my Lady,” declared a handmaiden...and Asha had to admit that this dress was way better than the two previous ones, not that this was a hard achievement. It was a very elaborate piece of cloth. It was dark blue. It also thankfully appeared to be a light material, as the city of Archer’s Bridge, capital of the Horn Hill System, was in its summer season.

The next minutes passed rather quickly. The dress and all the accessories were added. It was not very comfortable and the corset under the dress forced her to adopt a completely different posture. The worst part was undoubtedly the very high dark blue heels she was forced to put her feet in. The first steps were dolorous. It had been two years since she had used infernal contraptions like these ones. She had not missed it.

Her hands disappeared in silk blue-coloured gloves and for the first time in several hours she could watch herself into a two metres-tall polished mirror. To her shame, she had to admit in the privacy of her mind she looked good. All her sessions in sword training and the physical exercise she did at Highgarden had let her remain in top condition and while the robe and the rest were conservative, they did not hide her curves that much. Asha was looking like a young woman in dark blue with some lighter shades of blue here and there, and between her black hairs and the cloak of her family...she looked good. The necklace which had been tightened around her neck had a large sapphire. This alone cost far more money than she put in her clothes purchases for an entire year.

She would never admit her satisfaction in public, of course.

The handmaidens dispersed like a group of scared sheep once their work was done, though the arrival of a middle-aged Lady in the room may have played its part too. The new arrival was not a grumbling old crone, but her best years were past her as her brown hairs were showing tiny shreds of grey. Her long green robe was far more conservative than Asha’s blue dress, but they shared the exquisite facture. The woman was also wearing a couple of silver bracelets and her necklace had been created around a big ruby. The big ears were the biggest drawback, she decided.

“I am Lady Melessa Tarly,” the woman presented herself. Despite herself, Asha felt herself tense. It was all she could do with these heels and the restricting her clothes she had. This woman would be her mother-in-law in a few hours. “I have heard a lot of things about you, Lady Asha Greyjoy.”

The eyes fixed her mercilessly and for a moment Asha was brought back years in the past when she tried to convince her Uncle Rodrik she had not taken great joy in throwing a large book at the other end of the library.

“Do you intend to kill my son?”

“No,” and she was sincere. Killing a Knight or a man standing in the succession of a Master House was very different from murdering the Heir of a Noble House. She was also not at Highgarden, her hostage status would not save her if the greenlanders decided she was to be eliminated before the next morning.

“Good,” Lady Melessa approached her before whispering in her ear the rest of her sentence. “My son is the greatest treasure I have left and if I lose him because of you, the demise of Ser Dorian Cypress will look like a gesture of compassion.”

Asha repeated herself she was not afraid, but the slight shiver in her body could not be controlled. The Tarly Lady then took her left hand and slowly escorted out of the large dressing/marriage preparation room. Any other time she would have been angry to show such a weakness, but the heels were really killing her and she had to control her respiration with this damn corset.

It was a short walk and yet it seemed like she had climbed to the summit of Ten Towers when they arrived to the air-cars. Hundreds of servants, guards and other men and women were around, but she paid them relatively little heed, concentrated as she was to keep her equilibrium.

The vehicle which was to be their persona ride was a marvel. Red on the outside, the interior of the air-car was full of first-class leather and suits which looked like they had been designed for a king’s big backside. A surface of darkened supraglass was separating them from the pilot and the guard in front. Lady Melessa and she were the only passengers aboard.

The motors roared, they tightened their security belts and in the next seconds they were in the air, leaving them enjoying the view of Archer’s Bridge. It was still the morning, and the buildings were shining under the brilliant yellow sun. Unlike Highgarden, Archer’s Bridge was not built in the plains or near an ocean; the first inhabitants had settled in a valley encircled by high and snowy mountains. Several peaks had still a lot of white right now, in early summer. It was rumoured there were a lot of bunkers and secret military installations based under them.

“You are lucky, you know.”

The words left her a bit angry. She did not felt very lucky. Living at Harlaw with Uncle Rodrik and Mother had been fine. Theon and she were away from their brothers and the other ‘uncles’. The members of their family which were at Pyke had loved punching or humiliating them. Honestly, she could not remember shedding a tear for them. Why should she? They had tormented her younger brother and the things they said while they were pretending to share jokes with their friends...

 Harlaw beat being a hostage of the Tyrells without trying. By all rights, they shouldn’t have the right to marry her or to decide anything for her future. In fact, they should have released her at least a couple of years ago...but the deteriorating situation in the Iron Sector meant there was no chance they were going to send the insurrections a potential figure to rally around. And as for her ‘rights’, the Tyrell were behaving like their masters: they were the winners and whatever they decided, ordered or invented had to be right.

“How so?” Asha tried to remove the bitterness out of her tone.

“Before my son decided to talk too long with a pretty young Lady, the Queen of Thorns had plans for you my dear.”

“Knowing she was behind my first two weddings, I’m sure I am not going to like whoever she had ready for my hand.”

The mother of Lord Samwell Tarly made a small smile.

“There were talks to give your hand to the Heir of Lord Dunn, Victor.”

“I don’t know him.” In the Iron Sector, she had known all the big players and their heraldries by heart at fourteen. But the number of Houses and emblems existing in the Iron Sector was just insignificant compared to the size of the Reach nobility. There were sixty Noble Houses to begin with, each with dozens if not hundreds of cousins and the like. And she was a foreigner hostage of the Tyrells, she was not introduced to everyone.

“You didn’t miss anything,” and there was a hint of something darker in the Reacher’s mouth. “He is thirty and has already buried two wives in ‘hunting accidents’. But assuming you managed to get rid of him, there were talks of giving you to Garth the Gross.”

That name she knew very well. He was Mace Tyrell’s uncle and the Seneschal of Highgarden. He had a reputation of debauchery and several cases his name had been uttered in slaver trials. This was not someone she wanted to seat near, much less share his bed.

“What is her brilliant plan?” This was something which made her curious. “Did she want to get rid of these men?”

“It is difficult to know what this old scheming bat has in her head,” replied prudently Lady Melessa. “There is only one rule: don’t underestimate her.”

Asha clicked her tongue unconsciously.

“You disagree,” it sounded like an affirmation, not a question. She didn’t deny it.

“I don’t think she is a formidable opponent, really. For all her reputation, she is just the Sector’s Master of Whisperers and the games she play are in her backyard where her voice is the law.”

This was something which had always annoyed her. She wasn’t the Heiress of House Greyjoy. Forgetting a moment there was not much of anything to inherit, Theon was the Heir right now and even if he died, she would not become the Lady of Pyke. The Ironborn would never tolerate a woman in a position of power, and one which had been hostage for ten years in the home of their enemies even less. Yes, they could grab her dowry and have a weak claim...but this was all they could do and if they thought it was going to stop the occupation problems their garrisons forces faced, she had some lands at the bottom of the acid lakes of Pyke to sell them.

“I am not an enemy worth fighting,” she added. “The strength of the Iron Sector is no more.”

Her interlocutor shook her head in a silent ‘no’.

“The battles you consider worthy to be fought and the ones the Queen of Thorns invites herself to are a world apart.”

Asha chuckled.

“Yes, I noticed. They crush their opponents by throwing at them hundreds of capital ships and then they take your lands and humiliate you until you have no choice but to revolt.”

“It worked,” Lady Tarly pointed out.

“No, it didn’t,” she countered. Before her first marriage and the massive increase of guards she had shadowing her, she had studied the data of the failed Rebellion in one of the tactical displays which were left available to the high-ranked nobles visiting the capital of the Reach. The results had been edifying. No matter the tactics and the scenario chosen, House Greyjoy and the Ironborn always lost. In the best simulations, the forces of Father held for five years and tripled the amount of casualties of the greenlanders. It changed nothing, except the point the Iron Throne executed the Fall on all planets in the aftermath, not just Pyke. “My House couldn’t win alone and unsupported.”

For fifteen seconds Lady Melessa watched the mountains and the sky before continuing the conversation.

“There have always been concerns similar to yours in the Noble Houses. Not everyone is convinced the road to the stars created in the aftermath of the Usurper’s War is the correct course.” Something that suspiciously sounded like a curse left the lips of the older woman before she looked her straight in the eyes. “I advise you not to share this opinion in public. As a Greyjoy, your opinion had little importance and could be ignored. Tomorrow, you will be my son’ wife and your speeches will carry the will of Horn Hill with them.”

“I will keep it in mind,” Asha promised.

The red air-car progressively lost altitude and the progression continued half a meter above the ground, escorted by a few security vehicles and other brand new engines which looked like ground starfighters for rich people.

This was then she saw the people. Asha had seen the crowds that celebrations like these attracted at Highgarden, but never for her. Here in the great street they had just arrived, there had to be tens of thousands men, women and children. There were thousands of flowers and decorations. Four endless columns of soldiers were forming a human barrier, allowing the air-cars to progress at a snail’s pace.

Minute after minute, her estimations were revised upwards. The streets were literally black with people, there were spectators on every balcony and the flashes were so intense they were challenging the sun.

“Half of your capital must be here today,” there were giant holo-screens in the distance for the spectators not able to come into the main street but those two seeped to be under assault.

“I made today a public holiday and the preparations tabled for a minimum of ten million people,” Asha was not that clever, but she could tell when someone was laughing at her amazement and Lady Melessa was doing it. “I didn’t manage to convince my son to experience with girls before, so you will be his first. Please make sure his first night is enjoyable. I want grandchildren in a few years, not in three decades.”

Asha deeply blushed after the last remark. She tried to regain some sense of calm and serenity but her face had to be redder than a tomato.

“I...I never did it. Not with a man.”

In the Highgarden System, there simply had been no man she was going to authorise to be that close to her. Women were fine since she could easily take control and the Queen of Thorns could prove nothing. But she had really not been willing to give House Tyrell a weapon against her.

“In this case it’s time to learn, Asha.”

The driver stopped, as they were now to the left of a gargantuan white monument. It was a great sept, and while it was not the height and the width of the religious architecture in the capital of the South, it was big nonetheless. Ten metres-tall angels were sculpted with an incredible precision next to the representations of the Seven, scenes of the greenlanders’ holy books and victorious Knights returning in heroes.

The door on her side opened and slowly the niece of the Lord Paramount of the Iron Sector left the calm of her ride for the brilliant atmosphere of Archer’s Bridge. Gods, it was loud. Loud, brilliant and perfumed; the moment she stood outside it was almost like a blow. The crowd screamed...after a couple of seconds she knew they were cheers.

A gesture of her hand and they saluted back by hundreds of thousands, with the power of fifty orchestra behind them. Step by step, she walked to the massive white gates waiting for her in the distance. Several times she stopped and saluted, bring new waves of acclamation. In reality, her feet were killing her and she needed badly the rest. Her lungs were also tiring really fast...it was kind of humbling as she had believed to be in good health and ready for a battle or two. Her head and her mind were also becoming more and more chaotic. She was going to be married, and for good this time. There were no murders planned on her part, no evasion attempt ready and no stratagem to execute.

Climbing the fifty-plus steps of the sept was even worse, and she was really grateful once it was over. Thanks to whatever deities existed or not, she had not fallen once. Just as this thought came to her, another procession was coming from the opposite stairs. Asha had approached the Horn hill sept by the left; this one was coming from the right while ceremonially the centre – and the great avenue – was left for the journey back after the union was officially proclaimed.

At last, she met the man she was supposed to marry.

He was young. She had known it, but it was the first point. He was also a bit big-boned, however the large green-and-red traditional suit accompanied by a great furred cloak woven in the huntsman’s image was making him bigger, not lighter.

It was not the ‘Jonquil’ these stupid maids stuck to the rear of the Tyrells were in adoration with, and he would need to lose some weight, but compared to the first two grooms, he was really acceptable.

“Lady Asha, I...”

Men were men and he had probably nothing really intelligent to say by that point. Asha seized his right hand and raised it in the air before turning forty-five degrees for the uncountable greenlanders waiting below.

As far as her eyes could see, the city erupted in applause and cheers. The ruckus was huge, but she heard the Lord of Horn Hill’s whisper next to her.

“Maybe this marriage won’t be so bad...”

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“Amateurs strategists will study a hundred battles trying to gain some insight from their predecessors. Experts will study logistics, for they will know this is where ninety-nine battles out of a hundred are decided...” attributed to Vice-Admiral Davos Seaworth, 300AAC.

**Lady Calla Peake, 10.08.300AAC, Starpike System**

“Calla, be reasonable.”

These words could have been calming and nice...if their owner could find his courage and look at her directly in the eyes.

It was not the case. The Lord of the Goldengrove System aka Admiral Mathis Rowan aka her father was watching the zoo of Star Mountain on the other side of the great window.

This didn’t surprise her. Deep inside, Calla had always known the man was a coward. She had just underestimated the limits of it.

“I think I am reasonable,” she replied in a betrayed tone while she felt nothing of the sort. “You want me to steal the blueprints of the Starpike Defence System in the databases of my beloved husband. This is treason and it has only one punishment if discovered.”

The word ‘beloved’ was anything but serious of course, and they both knew it. The Rowan guards had escorted her from Highgarden to Starpike and watched over her at every hour of the day and the night. One might say they had done everything except saying ‘yes’ in front of the altar.

Titus Peake was not the worst husband of the Reach. But it didn’t mean he was satisfying either. Five minutes after her robe had been ripped apart and the bedding started, the man was already deep asleep. This was really a pitiful sexual performance.

“No,” she answered after ten seconds where she feigned a deep concentration. “No, I don’t think I will. I like my head where it is and didn’t you always repeat with mother a marriage is based on confidence and trust?”

This time her father finally stopped pretending and turned around, abandoning his observation of non-existent wild animals. He appeared furious. Too bad, she was not really happy with him too.

“You are my daughter,” he began before she interrupted him.

“It’s funny how you remember this when you need me,” the new Lady of Starpike said mockingly.

“You have only yourself to blame for your marriage.”

She burst in laughter and this time she really didn’t need to feign it. Oh, her poor father was so clueless, wasn’t he?

“Let me remind you father, that I was the undisputed Heiress of Goldengrove before you decided to marry me. Except you, no one in this galaxy could change this. I didn’t betray the Seven Sectors, I didn’t sell military secrets to an enemy nation and I certainly didn’t conspire against Highgarden. I was not guilty of any crimes...”

“You opened your legs to young men!”

“And?” Her reaction caught the Admiral in his great uniform completely out of the blue. “I was no longer a virgin at my wedding, true enough. But when half of the River Sector and the totality of the Crown Sector support their daughters when they jump into the bed of the Crown Prince or his half-brother, this is not exactly a problem.”

She licked her lips, trying to see how uncomfortable she could make the great and mighty Lord Mathis Rowan.

“Is it because my lovers weren’t silver-haired? Is it because I refused to bend the knee to the prim and proper Princess Margaery of House Tyrell? Was it because I was getting close to ugly realities and it is forbidden in the Reach to doubt the word of our masters?

“ENOUGH!” bellowed the Lord of Goldengrove before hissing between his teeth. “You clearly don’t understand...”

“Let’s stop this game, *Father*.” The accentuation she placed on the last word made him retreat two steps. Like she had said, this man was really a coward.

“I understand perfectly the situation you are finding yourself in. As we speak, the fleets of the Reach Sector are able to muster one hundred and ninety-six ships of the line, three super-battleships, four hundred battlecruisers, seven hundred heavy cruisers and over half a million starfighters plus whatever squadrons you sent to the Iron Sector. There are also a multitude of scout cruisers and old warships Highgarden has not judged useful to mothball.”

Nonchalantly, she began to circle around her genitor. The man who should have passed down to her the Lordship when he died, but who had preferred her far more pliant sister Rosa.

“This is a great fleet, I must admit. In the last three hundred years, there has never been an armada of this size mustered by a single Kingdom. And with the help of the Crown, River and Storm loyalists, I have no doubt it is going to get bigger.”

Her father appeared perplexed she was singing the praises of the Reach fleet. Good, the return to reality was going to be harder.

“But in reality, it is evident you have forged a dragon of paper,” she asserted murderously. “Most of your warships were obsolete before their hulls were completed. Moreover, your good friend Mace Tyrell has failed to understand there was a reason no one had ever built a fleet this size. It was too dangerous. In previous wars, the Reach was an opponent like the others. This year, you are the Sector to crush before you can turn your military war machine against a single opponent.”

“It doesn’t matter,” the idiot Admiral replied stubbornly. “Next year, we will have a fleet able to crush all Sectors decisively and-“

“You don’t have a year,” she cut him there. Honestly, common sense and contingency plans must die in a meeting where more than two Rose Admirals were present. “In fact, you don’t have three months. You can thank your King and Mace Tyrell for that. The economy of the Storm Sector is near bankruptcy and Jon Connington is the most hated man of his Sector. The Lannisters, the Martells, the Brackens, the Freys, the Arryns, the Royces, the Starks...all these Houses are now the Reach enemies.”

“But they don’t need to defeat you,” Calla replied charmingly. “They just have to fight.”

“I don’t understand,” and for once, her father appeared completely sincere.

“It’s simple, Father.” She explained. “When the declaration of war will come, certainly from the Baratheons, Lord Mace Tyrell first reflex will be to call for his full muster.”

“As well he should.” Calla wondered who had given her the brain intellect she was using. Her mother had the conviction of a goldfish and her father...

Anyone of sense in the Game of Thrones had to leave his or her options open. This was the first rule of politics.

“We are speaking of at least ten billions of men, paid on average four hundred dragons a month.” This was one of the lowest minimum wages in Westeros. The Lannisters paid more and knowing the tiny value the Lord of Casterly Rock gave to the rank and file, this was saying very depressing things about her home Sector.

“So if the war last a year, Highgarden and the assembled Lords will have to pay one of their men four thousand and eight hundred dragons for his service, right?”

“Right,” her father looked a lot less confident, perhaps understanding her point.

“Four thousand and eight hundred dragons by ten billion make four point eight trillion dragons. It’s just their monthly salaries, though. The war pensions are another source of spending. We had around eighteen million dead in the Greyjoy Rebellion and all these brave martyrs had families. Now I realise many Lords defaulted on their secular obligations, but if we go to war, they will have no choice but to open their purses if they don’t want mutiny or the recruiting offices staying empty. For a year, it will add five thousand dragons by eighteen million.”

“You are finished?”

“I’ve just begun, Father.” And she gave him another smile showing her perfect white teeth. “You know, you and your Lordly friends were so happy boasting to Westeros, Braavos, Pentos, Volantis and who knows else how large our fleet is that you forgot to consider the issue of fuel.”

“We have fusion reactors, Calla,” he reminded her like she was an imbecile. “Hydrogen is not exactly hard to find.”

“In this case you will be happy to know that a ship of the line cost approximately the treasury seven point two billion a year in times of war just for this ‘cheap’ hydrogen. This is tabled on two major offensives per year, by the way. I’ve not been able to discover how much the monstrosities you call super-battleships use, everything about them is top-secret but I don’t think it is less expensive.”

This time the Lord was at last surfacing and presenting a cold, stone-faced expression.

“Your point?”

“Mace Tyrell sank so much of the Reach budget in the new rearmament programs that the money reserves are at their lowest level since 282AAC. By my estimates, you have exactly fourteen months to defeat all your enemies before the economy of the Sector disintegrates. There is no spare money, and certainly not to build a hybrid version of the Longbow Network. It is too late.”

Mathis Rowan laughed like a fool. She raised an eyebrow but stopped speaking. Perhaps he had realised the truth in her reasoning...

“Ah, I’m glad Rosa is my Heiress.”

Fine, she had wasted her breath.

“You’re really a little viper, *daughter* and I am glad you are no longer my successor.”

Calla could have answered this insult by others. She could have told the lesser footrest of Mace Tyrell that when the dust settled, Goldengrove was going to have a new Lord and it was unlikely House Rowan would have any say in it. She could have informed him the partial analysis she had given him was tabling on a lot of optimistic predictions. She could have revealed to him there was a hole of four billion dragons in his private accounts for her special operations and for over two years he had been unable to notice it.

But why waste her time and her saliva? Mathis Rowan was a condemned man. If this galaxy and the Seven had any justice, he would die licking the shoes of his beloved Mace Tyrell.

“Leave this planet *Father*, and never come back.”

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“*The Greyjoy Rebellion proved the Ironborn could shed their humanity and regress to the level of beasts. The years after these battles demonstrated we Westerosi can very well sink to their levels of indecency and amorality if given the chance*.” Inspector-General Axell Florent, 298AAC.

**Beron of the Broken, 12.08.300AAC, Great Wyk System**

Beron had never known anything but war in his life.

He had been seven when he had had his first state of it. The bloodthirsty monsters had come and razed his village, raped his mom before killing her and burned his ten year-old sister alive.

Ten years later, it was difficult to imagine there was anything but conflict. When they didn’t fight against the occupier, there were scavenging whatever food, water, ammunition and medical supplies they could before taking a few hours of sleep and going back to the fight.

There was no peace on the planet of Great Wyk. There was only an eternity of war, a sky covered in the fumes of destroyed cities and crippled warships and lands so barren no harvest would ever be able to grow. The rains were now more acid than water.

The majority of the Rebellion had built the new cities deep underground. He had been there once. These were crowded places, and you could not stay often but what he had seen had given him hope. It was in one of these places real food was produced and fed the bellies of the very young children. They had factories where new guns, new weapons were forged to use against the monsters dirtying by their very presence the soil of the homeland.

But it had been ten months ago and once back to the surface, the loathed greenlanders controlled the skies and the big strongholds. The danger of the orbital strikes, flyers’ bombardment and artillery barrage was always present. There were no frontlines on Great Wyk. If you were not tattooed and ready to sell your soul to the authorities, you were ‘an enemy of the state’ and a quick death was something to embrace because the armies of the Beast never gave it to you.

Beron was not stupid. Many in his group fought, but they would have stayed back home given a chance. They complained endlessly, fought reluctantly and were the first to throw down weapons before fleeing in the middle of the night. Anywhere else in this cursed galaxy, there would have been mass surrenders.

On Great Wyk, surrender was the sure path to a torture session with the monsters. And once they were done with you, the second they had tortured everything you could possibly give them, you were sent in front of a firing squad or one of the sick ‘games’ the Tyrant-General had started six years ago. Few had believed the monsters of the West could get worse, but the creation of the first ‘Wipe Out Games’ had proven that the Beast, the Manticore and their main lieutenants had still reserves of evil to draw on. Over one hundred men, women and children were summoned in an arena. There, they were forced to compete individually or collectively in obstacle races.

They had seized a lot of recordings from these monstrous shows, either by smugglers or grabbing all the possessions on the enemies’ corpses.

If you didn’t stop watching after the first minutes, you were either a psychopath or a butcher. Or both.

Civilians, rebels, dissenters or people who had been at the wrong place at the wrong time...it didn’t matter to these demons. The obstacles were pools of acid, missiles, flamethrowers, laser fire, real landmines, and three meters-high metallic spears amongst others. The deaths were gruesome. And all the while there was the cheering and the applause of these psychopaths in the background.

No one had ever lasted the three hours required to qualify as a victory.

But Beron and the rest of Great Wyk were sure that whoever commented the bloody show would shoot the survivor if someone managed one day to triumph these impossible trials.

His communication cracked and whizzed before the voice of one of his commanders was heard.

“They are coming your way.”

It was like something horribly cold was poured in his veins. Slowly he stood from behind the burned wall where he had been resting.

“How many of them are they?”

“Thousands,” something died inside of him. “We need time to evacuate the supplies and the workers.”

“I will do my best,” Beron replied. “For Liberty and for Great Wyk. Over.”

“For Liberty and for Great Wyk.”

Beron threw a stone against a carbonised pillar before beginning to give orders to his men, alerted by the noise. Seconds later, several bombers went over their heads and in seconds, the explosions were spreading all around the destroyed village which had once been their base.

It was completely inaccurate fire, but his group had nothing to fire back. The bombers and the starfighters were way too high in the dark skies. The anti-air guns and the more powerful weapons were only released for very big operations or emergency situations. The defence of a ruined village by forty members of the Resistance was not answering to one of these definitions.

“Come on men! We fight in the darkness!”

“And we will until dawn returns!”

Grey, red and black shuttles roared in the sky before landing and disgorging hundreds of troops. From the valley in the distance, the dread shapes of artillery guns and tanks were arriving. The bombers returned and exploded a few ruins in the process. But they were all in position, crouched behind what must have been a manor’s wall back in the ancient days. The battle-armours were surrounding them.

They were going to lose. Beron knew it, the enemies knew it and his soldiers knew it.

“Why do we don’t show them our colours?” asked one of the girls on his right.

“Quellon didn’t manage to repair the sheet five days ago,” the little boy didn’t sound terribly sorry and replied with a song which was familiar to every Ironborn these last years.

 “The Grey King sealed the Krakens far away in the storm...”

The forces of the Beast rushed for the kill. Dozens fell to the old landmines but there were more landing every second.

“And bound them in blood...”

A shell left a trail of blood, splinters and body parts where two boys had been moments ago.

“The stars will be ours and by the Void God...”

The light rifles they were all equipped fired at last. At anything except close-range, they could not pierce the battle-armours but they had to try.

“Where we will...we roam...”

The first greenlanders were upon them. Blades and lasers killed an entire wave but there were too many. One by one the Ironborn died.

“Yo, ho haul together, hoist the colours high

Heaves ho, thieves and reavers, never say we die...”

A colossal warrior came out of the smoke, crushing armoured and non-armoured fighters alike. His battle-armour was towering over the entire battlefield and all colours which had once been painted upon it were long gone, replaced by the red and black of human blood.

“Where are my supplies?” The monster roared.

*Beast*.

“They are waiting for you in Hell,” he retorted and stabbed two enemies as they had stupidly stopped fighting when their commander screamed his imprecation. The rest of his group were dying or pulverised to the four winds. He was alone.

“You will die slowly for this, scum,” the helmet masked the face but he could sense the madness in these eyes.

The gigantic vibro-blade came too fast and suddenly there was an explosion of pain in his chest. His right arm, his good sword arm, was shredded in blood.

“Wrong...choice...” the plasma grenade in his left hand was activated. It was not going to take down the Beast, fucking Terminator armours were too tough. But the rest of the sellswords would not be so lucky.

Beron of the Broken Rebellion Group was still smiling when he and over sixty sellswords hired by the Tyrant-General Gregor Clegane ended their lives in a massive explosion.

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“*In a few months, I think we will need a crane for the High Septon to walk from his bed to the Great Sept*.” Anonymous septon, 299AAC.

**Sparrow Dagger, 16.08.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

The dining hall was a vision of gold, silver, platinum, diamond and crystal. There were sumptuous clocks in rare wood, spoons and forks in ivory, the chairs were looking like thrones fit for the backside of Lords.

It was in her opinion the symbol of everything that was wrong with the Faith.

The High Septon was eating at the end of the rectangular table. From the beginning of his two hours-long lunch, His Holy and Most Obese Greasiness had eaten five meals, where a single one could have fed a family of King’s Landing for a day. The plates they were served in could have bought a modest life style to a couple of hundred beggars in the megalopolis this moon was orbiting.

Alysanne was sure these considerations had never entered the big head of the High Septon and the two fat-boned septons swallowing part after part of meat like they were small treats.

*They believe themselves the Master of Creation here*.

This was not the first time or the ten thousandth this thought came in her head. It was the pure truth and it helped.

The Great Sept was on Visenya’s Moon, safely away from the dirty and unwashed masses living on the main planet. There were tens of thousands pilgrims landing and departing per day, but most of the estate knew no visitors but the septons and the septas maintaining the superb edifices imagined in his dreams by Baelor the Blessed.

It was the perfect place for the High Septon and his supporters to enjoy their degenerate activities.

Today it ended.

There were guards outside the room and four in the dining hall itself. Two were near the accesses to the kitchen and two near the doors. An obvious sign the man was not nearly as loved as he proclaimed to believe. Septas and septons were forced to disrobe more than once per day, for the Holy Fatness was fearful to be assassinated by a hidden blade. There were also two food-tasters near him, a risky task if there ever was one. Four of them had already died this year.

“Yes, yes,” was mumbling the puppet of the King. “The times where the Faith wielded the blade are forever gone and I said...”

Alysanne didn’t scream a loud battle-cry. She was a humble septa. She had played the role of a servant girl for the last two years. It was not her role to shout the defiance of the Heavens to these apostates.

“No existing army can conquer the stars, High Septon,” she said softly and took his silver knife full of copious spiced sauce and meat juice from his surprised hand. “But the Faith alone can conquer the galaxy.”

One strike, and the knife was now lodged in the throat of the High Pig. This was a really morbid spectacle, as the plate he was eating from got thrown over his white clothes and the blood mixed with the hot food. During his agony, he squealed and gurgled a lot. The Stranger was going to have fun judging this one.

“The Sparrows send their regards, High Glutton.”

She had really overestimated the guards. By the time one managed to stab her with his long ceremonial sword, she had killed all the guests sitting around the table with a pair of knives.

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*The terrorist attacks of the 16.07.300AAC claimed by the Seven Sparrows were a major blow against the credibility of the Iron Throne.*

*Small Council members, military commanders and experts had promised these explosions would never happen again. To make this a reality, security measures had been considerably increased, private rights of the smallfolk in the street had been trampled and thousands of aspiring revolutionaries and terrorist apologists had been arrested without a trial.*

*Now the thousands of hours the Ministry of Information had spent is efforts on were rendered useless in an instant. Like the previous series of attacks, the terrorists struck seven times but the magnitude of their attack shook even the most jaded and cynic ambassador.*

*In high orbit, a hijacked hydrogen tanker was rammed into a space storage facility containing highly inflammable fertiliser. The monumental explosion killed over forty thousand people and destroyed sixteen ships of diverse tonnage. It would take five days to realise the target of this operation had been the death of Septon-Voice Burton, who was entertaining one of his mistresses in his private yacht.*

*In a great restaurant of King’s Landing, Most Devout Lucas and fifteen men of his delegation were poisoned and expired in five hours of long agony.*

*In one of the underground circuits built for supersonic engines, fifty-three young men and women belonging to Master and Knightly Houses were at ground zero of a massive explosion. As their activities at the moment of their death would be best described as an orgy, the Goldcloaks and the Gold Fists never managed to identify all the victims for certain since there were more than one thousand dead in total.*

*The crew of a Behemoth, busy exploring the delights of pretty women in a whorehouse, were ruthlessly cut down by a storm of laser and grenades.*

*Five air-cars of a Faith mission which had just departed the Red Keep four minutes ago were shot down by anti-air missiles. The authorities refused to confirm it, but in the next hours the rumours spread another Most Devout had met his end.*

*The Ruby Sept, a project the Faith had invested billions dragons into, saw its grandiloquent and extremely expensive dome collapse seven days before its official inauguration. Hundreds of septons and septas died in the catastrophe, and the religious structure which should have been the third greatest sept-basilica of the King’s Landing System was ravaged by flames and explosions. Tens of thousands workers would clear the rubble and secure the damaged walls in the aftermath of this heinous act. There were many debates within the Faith and the Royal circles to repair and rebuild. The Seven Sparrows could not be granted this victory, exclaimed the most ardent of the Faithful. But ultimately, less than a month later the beginning of the War of the Ten Warlords would sign the death warrant of this reconstruction hope.*

*The seventh attack was the one which caused the least amount of casualties, and yet caused the greatest shock in the religious sphere. A female servant killed the High Septon and his guests during their lunch in the very heart of the Faith on Visenya’s moon.*

*The Faith of Seven had just been decapitated and the holo-images which spread by millions in the streets of King’s Landing revealed a tale of corruption, debauchery and ill-respect of their own rules. To say it caused tremendous damage in their crumbling hierarchy was a fair description.*

*The Seven Sparrows had just started a religious crisis when the political scene was already far from stable...*

Extract from The Sparrows and King’s Landing: Terrorism and Intolerance by Sea and Sun Editions, 301AAC.

**Lord Petyr Baelish, 17.08.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

A constant among the hundreds of Small Councils he had participated in were the polite manners and the genial smile of Lord Varys, Master of Whisperers.

The eunuch was playing a role, obviously. They all did it. For all his dedication to the Iron Throne, the Master of the Crown Intelligence Agency was only human. Petyr was rather sure he must have murderous thoughts frequently when Lord Walter Whent declared it was a good die to increase the taxes for the six times in the Storm Sector this year. It was just an example chosen randomly. He could have affirmed Tommen Costayne was not going to receive prizes when his laws barred smallfolk and guild’s affiliates from occupying high administration posts. The ruthless waves of arrests ordered by Alliser Thorne, the billions of dragons Tommen Lannister was borrowing like he was buying candy and the chaotic deployments of the fleet ordered by the High Admiral were causing more and more work for the Spider.

But it was extremely rare to see him abandon his smile or to lose composure in public. Hired by Aerys in a time most people around the ancient table were non-entities, the bald man knew the rules better than everyone.

It was not a good omen when he decided to break them.

In a decade of political infighting, pardon a decade of loyal service to the Iron Throne, Petyr Baelish could say Varys had really raised his voice and let his anger show twice.

Neither had been very good memories.

It looked today was going to be the third.

“IMBECILES!” bellowed the Master of Whisperers. “YOU ARE ALL IMBECILES! I AM SURROUNDED BY IMBECILES!”

The eunuch was widely considered to be the less military-inclined of the Councillors, which made a very unpleasant surprise when the large red ledger he had arrived to the meeting with was thrown directly in the Master of Coin’s face.

“YOU WANT TO ORGANISE A CONTEST OF INCOMPETENCE, IS THAT IT?”

A Volantene vase which had been brought here under the reign of Jaehaerys II was grabbed by his ring-covered hands and got thrown on the other end of the room, missing the head of Lord Commander Arthur Dayne by mere centimetres.

“Please stop this, Lord Varys,” ordered the Kingsguard who had been Rhaegar’s shadow for as long as everyone remembered. “You forget your place...”

“AND YOU FORGET YOURS, SWORD-FUCKER! GO BACK POLISH YOUR PRECIOUS WEAPON AND LET ME SPEAK OR I WILL USE IT IN A WAY YOU WILL REMEMBER FOR ALL ETERNITY!”

Plague and chaos, Petyr could not remember anyone managing to beat the Sword of the Morning with just a glare but Varys was apparently doing it in his fury.

Yes, the best strategy was to sit comfortably and let the thunderstorm choose targets that weren’t you. Really, he had never seen the spymaster that angry before. It was like decades of frustration had been unleashed in the wake of the new terrorist attacks.

The elderly Hand of the King cleared his throat.

Oh the big mistake.

“YOU ASSURED ME YOU WERE GOING TO USE YOUR POSITION TO STOP ALL OUR SECURITY PROBLEMS! WHY WERE FIVE MONITORING STATIONS OFF-LINE DURING THE ATTACKS? WERE THEY WATCHING PORNO MAGAZINES OR WERE THEY BUSY NEGOTIATING THEIR BRIBES WITH THE NEXT BLACK MARKET DEALER?”

Oh the former, definitely the former. Porno magazines sales were on the rise this year, he should know it he owned five of them.

Ser Jaremy Rykker lowered his eyes when the hellish eyes turned in his direction, but not fast enough.

“YOUR GOLDCLOAKS ARE USELESS! THE SPARROWS INSTALLED THEIR MISSILES IN BROAD DAYLIGHT AND THEY DIDN’T FIND ANYTHING WRONG WITH THEM! I THOUGHT THEY COULD MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MISSILE AND A VIOLON! IT’S NOT COMPLICATED!”

The more he thought about it, the more Petyr was convinced a travel to the Longbow Hall System with his wife and his two children was a good idea in the short-term future. He loved a bit of agitation to bolster his influence and power, but the capital was really becoming too volatile to his taste.

“DO YOUR JOBS IMBECILES! DO YOU NEED THE KING TO DELIVER YOU ANOTHER STUPID PROPHECY? YOUR UNPOPULARITY IN THE POLLS IS LEGENDARY AND I THINK I CAN FIND OSTRICHES DOING A BETTER JOB THAN YOU!”

And on these words the irate Master of Whisperers stormed out of the Small Council, smashing two more vases and one statue in the corridors before his footsteps faded away.

“What is an ostrich?” asked the Lord of Harrenhal.

**Prince Viserys Targaryen, 18.08.300AAC, Dragonstone System**

When one watched from orbit, Dragonstone looked like the antechamber of the Seven Hells. Fire and Blood, Aegon the Conqueror had chosen for his new House before unleashing his dragons on Westeros.

Three hundred years later, the dragons were all dead but the planet was still bathed in fire. There was not one week where a volcano didn’t erupt. The surface was only red and black, flames and ashes, magma and black obsidian.

Dragonstone was an ideal nesting ground and resting place for dragons. For humans of flesh and blood, it was a hellish landscape where death awaited you at every step.

But it was this constant volcanic activity which made Dragonstone so valuable. There were rare minerals which could be easily exploited there and the foundries could work night and day without a care for environmental norms.

Dragonstone was the arsenal of House Targaryen, both on the ground and in orbit. Everywhere you watched, there were only weapons, warships or production lines destined to build more weapons. The system was the official base of the Crown Deep Space Fleet and also welcomed massive planetary armies.

It was a system of paramount importance, unlike Summerhall who was a pleasure and holiday amusement park. But it was shamefully ignored by his nephew and as a result he was the Lord of the place in all but name.

It was ignoring the duties they owed to their ancestors.

It was a sign how far they had fallen.

“So my Royal Brother continues to ignore the problems while he tries to decipher thousand years-old prophecies.” The Royal Admiral sighed. “Why am I not surprised?”

It was the old Lord Celtigar who decided to voice his opinion first.

“My Prince...I know you were reluctant to think about it, but I fear the removal of the current administration is the only option left to us if we want to save the realm.”

Lord Ardrian was not smiling, but he did not look displeased either. It was difficult to reprimand him. The sour Vice-Admiral had fought loyally in three wars for House Targaryen, and his rewards had been destroyed warships, a loss of influence at court and he had to remove his Heiress from court before one of his ‘beloved nephews’ took her maidenhood.

“I know why you think this is now or never but don’t forget Crown Prince Aegon must have reached the Highgarden by now. If we move against my brother and remove him from the throne, war will be a certainty. If we are lucky, I will be able to take hostage my brother, his Queen and her two youngest children. We won’t be able to capture Joffrey, Aegon will be out of our reach and the kingdom will burn.”

“But with all due respect my Prince, wouldn’t the Tyrells fight in the scenario where Prince Aegon is in our custody?” demanded Lord Baelor Staunton. The Lord of Rook’s Rest had come to this meeting in a green suit, neatly different from his golden uniform of a Crown General. “The Rose has invested too much in the marriage of Margaery Tyrell and the Crown Prince. On the other side, you are already married and your daughter is too young for a marriage proposal.”

“You are saying they will fight whether they have a claimant or not,” it was something he had tried to not to think a lot about, especially when the opportunity had been there to secure the entire Royal Family but now...his fist tightened and his mood darkened.

They had been so close. A few more months, and he would have two-thirds of the Crown Sector with him when the time came to declare his brother insane, remove his crown from his mad forehead and begin solving the considerable problems of the Seven Sectors before they plunged in the abyss.

It was now impossible. Two Princes and one Princess had been sent away, and while he didn’t worry too much about Visenya this meant Joffrey and Aegon would rush to Casterly Rock and Highgarden the moment they heard something was wrong. Their claimants secure in their ancestral strongholds, Tywin Lannister and Mace Tyrell would fight this conflict until their triumph or their utter defeat.

It was not something he wanted.

A war against two or three rebel factions but where the claimants were under his control would end in a few months if the first campaign was a defeat for them. It was difficult selling war to your Lords if you had no one to crown.

A civil war against multiple opponents who had each crowned their chosen silver-haired boys and had no easy way out, on the other hand... It would destroy Westeros. Viserys had seen the Fall of Pyke. The Prince of Summerhall had really no wish to let the rest of the Seven Sectors receive this treatment.

“I do,” affirmed Baelor Staunton.

“I don’t disagree with you Lord Staunton,” it was the turn of his third invitee to speak, Master Guncer Sunglass, of the Masterly House of Sunglass in the Driftmark System and Rear-Admiral in the Crown Navy. “But we have to remember that if the Reach Navy is arrayed against us, we might very well suffer a terrible defeat. I have no a lot of confidence in our new generation of warships. While House Baratheon may have promised their support, they will have their hands full dealing with Connington. In the River Sector, our friends are going to be very busy between the Lannisters, the Darrys, the Brackens and maybe the Valemen. Aegon took a large task force with him when he departed to the Reach and the Tyrells have two hundred ships of the line in service.”

Seen like this, their chances were flimsy. The best way to win would have been to divide the Reach and the West, make a lot of promises for their bannersmen to betray their Lords Paramount the moment the first shot was fired.

“But waiting will make it worse,” Lord Ardrian Celtigar said with a large huff. “You are terrified by the two hundred ships of the line the Fat Rose has; me I’m having white nights at the idea of this arrogant idiot mustering four of five hundred battleships with a thousand battlecruisers!”

“If we want to remove the King,” added Lord Staunton, “it has to be before year’s end. Once the new Reach fleet will be completed, the fiercest of our Crown Lords will refuse to rise up when they won’t be able to face the enemy with any chance of success.”

And this was it, when it came down to it.

He had to act or cancel his plans. Remove his brother and pray it wasn’t too late or wait powerlessly while the kingdom failed to be a kingdom before the crown was handed to someone even less deserving of it. Rhaegar was insane and obsessed with prophecies yes, but he wasn’t actively malicious, just convinced he was right and let his incompetent friends bicker while the fortress burned. Viserys was not convinced the same could be said about the Crown Prince.

No, no he couldn’t watch and let his brother ruin everything. It was probably too late, the chances of defeating his enemies were slim, but he was not going to calmly wait at Dragonstone while the King who had sent his little sister away like a bag of gold created dozens of new disasters per year.

“We are readying our forces,” he announced and unconsciously, the Master and the Two Lords slightly relaxed. “We will have to accelerate the war games and the training course of the last recruits, but I believe we can be ready for the fourth of Velkrys.” Standard time, this meant 04.10.300AAC. “Lord Ardrian, be ready to dismantle the dispersed shipyards and the small mining companies in the outer system. A raid while we’re away is unlikely, but I prefer to not take undue risks on this front.”

The Dragonstone System static defences were formidable, but he simply could not afford to lose the arsenal at this point of the plan. The loss in influence and power would be disastrous.

“We will soon travel to the save the realm!” Viserys raised his cup for a toast. “Victory and fire!”

“Victory and fire!” replied his three supporters.

**Lord Edmure Tully, 19.08.300AAC, Riverrun System**

Family. Duty. Honour.

Edmure watched the large pile of correspondence which had just arrived on his desk this morning. The messages were in every possible shape, modern or archaic, invented by humanity in the last thousand years.

Funny fact, he didn’t need to open a single one to know what they were containing.

Yes, yes, there were all marriage proposals.

It was getting worse year after year.

As usual, he removed the missives of the Western Lords first. The lions could voice all the protestations they wanted, he saw perfectly through their little games. The moment he married a Lannister or one of their vassals, his moves, his ideas and his plans would be leaked to Casterly Rock. A lot of the images sent were showing attractive women, but for all he loved sleeping with blond whores, he was not going to say yes to one who wouldn’t hesitate poisoning him if Lord Tywin Lannister made it an order.

The lone letter of White Harbor was thrown in the box destined for the incinerator. Edmure was not interested in consorting with traitors and rebels. His father had been idiotic enough to play their games, and look what had happened to him. House Tully had lost the title of Lord Paramount, and its forces had been broken both on space and land. They had lost their reputation of integrity and loyalty, all for nothing. House Targaryen reigned, and their word had the strength of the law. Why would he care if the King decided to get rid of a few Northern barbarians?

The Vale was next, but the four propositions were not of Houses noted for their loyalty. Moreover, two of them weren’t from proper Noble Houses and it was out of question he married below his rank. Riverrun was a prestigious Lordship and he wasn’t going to sabotage the influence he had so painfully gathered under the banner of the trout.

There were three messages from the Storm Sector. Two were from Knightly Houses and thus unsuitable. The other one was from House Kellington, and in theory satisfying the lineage conditions...except he wasn’t going to bed the ugly creature on the holo-recording for all the treasury of Casterly Rock, thank you very much.

“Why I am attracting all the ugly ones?” He moaned to himself.

The Reach was also unsatisfying. He was ready to do his duty, but for reasons which escaped him, all the proposals were all from Masterly Houses or below. He had even written to some of his contacts at Highgarden to request explanations but the answers were making themselves wait.

There was nothing from Dorne. There never was but since he didn’t want to invite a scorpion or a viper in his bed, he would survive the disappointment.

The Crown Houses had the status, but rapid reading informed him of the same problem: they all wanted money and favours. By the Father and the Mother Above, when a marriage happened it was the wife who arrived with a dowry, not the husband! And yes, he was friend with Prince Viserys but he wasn’t just about to loan someone a couple of billion dragons just because there some passing acquaintances!

After one good hour of work, this meant ‘only’ the River Sector proposals were left.

There was just a small problem. Those were a natural mountain by themselves.

Edmure had to repeat seven times his House’s words in his head before beginning the long and inglorious task of rejecting them letter after letter.

He didn’t care about the naivety voiced by the parents; he wasn’t going to wed someone who had sold her maidenhood to one Prince or a Prince’s friend.

Lord Bracken could keep his second or third daughter. Edmure was not going to tie his House with someone who was at the beck and call of Prince Joffrey and the Masters of the West.

Ah, if only the Vances or the Pipers or any of his allies had daughters of the correct age and a bit pretty...

But they had not and in the end the same problems were met in appalling quantities. The girls were uglier than sin, several levels below the whores he was regularly demanding for his bed. Half were of lesser status and it was unacceptable for a Tully of Riverrun to wed someone below his rank. A third were so impoverished marrying them would bring him nothing but the name.

“Beauty. Lineage. Wealth. Surely it’s not too much to ask, surely?”

**Jon Arryn, 20.08.300AAC, the Eyrie System**