**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 6**

**Death to the False King**

*Several battle-cries are old. ‘Death to the False King’ is one of them.*

*In 296AAC, several maesters closely affiliated to the Targaryen regime presented in the Red Keep their huge illustrated book Loyalty to the Iron Throne to the then Prince Viserys Targaryen. Under the praises and the revisionist writing, the authors affirmed the infamous war cry originated from the First Blackfyre Rebellion and was shouted spontaneously by Crown soldiers charging the rebels of Daemon Blackfyre at the Battle of Redgrass Field.*

*Like many things written in this book, it was a monumental lie.*

*The original battle-cry had been shouted the first time by the Faith Militant when Maegor the Cruel burned the first Great Sept of King’s Landing. Yes, ‘Death to the False King’ was originally one of the most virulent anti-Targaryen rally calls. And one might argue it was one which caused plenty of trouble to the rider of the Black Dread. A dragonlord has one of the most dangerous weapons known to Mankind able to unleash dragonfire on its enemies, but he needs some people underneath him to rule. If no one toils the fields anymore, if the planets burn, if the armies go into rebellion as their pay fail to come into their pockets, even the Black Dread can’t and won’t save you into the end.*

*Maegor learned a bit too late this painful lesson and lost his crown.*

*Jaehaerys I succeeded him and this should have been the end of it. Aenys had been weak and indecisive. Maegor had been cruel and ignorant. Between them, the two brothers, the very blood of the Conqueror, had showed every trait making a king unfit for the Iron Throne.*

*With Jaehaerys the Conciliator, the Targaryen had the portrait of a monarch, who while not perfect, could listen to his subjects and make reasonable decisions concerning the realm. The era of madness and rebellion was going to pass away from memories.*

*Then Viserys I ascended to the Throne and the seeds of the Dance were sown across the realm. Rhaenyra and her half-brother Aegon plunged the Seven Sectors into one of the greatest wars – civil or external – Westeros and Essos had ever seen. And once again the calls were shouted by smallfolk and highborn alike.*

*Death to the False King.*

*Death to the False Queen.*

*Perhaps it would have stopped there. If the Targaryen had been able to remember the perils of the past, they certainly would have.*

*But they didn’t. Aegon the Unworthy poisoned forever the waters of peace when he legitimised all his bastards on his death bed, and the result was civil war and brother against brother once again. The Blackfyre Rebellions would set the realm aflame, and that no side could unleash dragons anymore was a meagre consolation. Both sides would claim unavoidably their sovereign was the legitimate one, and of course the other was the ‘False King’, the false-born and treacherous candidate having no rights to sit on the Iron Throne.*

*The Blackfyres never managed to conquer Westeros and for a time from Winterfell to Sunspear the billions of Westerosi felt a long era of peace would last centuries.*

*But the problem was still there. The madness continued to lurk in the hearts of the Targaryens, and under Aerys II it finally exploded.*

*The calls were different for this rebellion, though. The coalition of the North, Vale, Storm and River demanded death for all adult Targaryens. The Iron Throne replied by giving the nickname of Usurper to Robert Baratheon.*

*And for a few years the Targaryens seemed vindicated. They found in Balon Greyjoy a new ‘False King’ to crush militarily and thereby prove their moral and physical superiority.*

*But nothing can last forever. The military, while outwardly impressive, was a Behemoth with feet of clay. The Lords were vicious predators prompt to turn on each other for favours, money or warships. The economy was bleeding gold and steel while the pockets of the lower classes were emptied. The merchant classes had to endure more and more taxes.*

*And the King was a madman.*

*The time was right for a new candidate to step in. It was time for a silver-haired Prince to rebel against the madness of the Lord of the Seven Sectors. It was time to repair the errors of the last two decades, and once more raise the torch of justice and prosperity.*

*Death to the False King Rhaegar Targaryen, and may his successor heal the wounds of Westeros.*

*It was an enticing dream.*

*It never happened.*

*This was no longer a game where there were two factions. In his rash prophetic-obsessed actions, Rhaegar Targaryen had done worse than Aegon the Unworthy: he had given many of his great bannersmen claimants to the Iron Throne. Lannister, Martell, Hightower and Stark had all blood-ties to the Targaryen dynasty now...and several million good reasons to raise their flags in rebellion.*

*And in these troubled times, where was the legitimacy? Having or not the Conqueror’s Blood in your veins was not what it mattered. It was the number of Lords, armies and fleets willing to follow you into the inferno of the War of the Ten Warlords.*

*From the Harvest Graveyard to the radioactive ruins of Fawnton, from the banners of the Black Dragon at Gulltown to the nightmares of the Iron Sector, the war cry came, irresistible and dark.*

*Death to the False Kings. Death to the Targaryens. Death to the Mad Dragons.*

Extract from the *Era of Warlords*, by Bran Manderly, 370AAC.

**Davos Seaworth, 26.09.300AAC, The Twins System**

“Lord Mallister, welcome to the Twins,” Davos politely began after a formal military salute.

“Thank you, Admiral Seaworth,” replied the Lord of Seagard. “It is a moment that we have awaited for a long time.”

And for plenty of legitimate reasons, Davos was sure, as the thousands of Northerners and Riverlanders walked in a disciplined formation across the tourist bays of the orbital station *Walder the Great*.

The view was spectacular, especially after all these months spent watching recording and low-resolution holographic images of Westerosi star systems. Northern warships had excellent reasons to forbid any reinforced glass alloy and burying their command bridges deep inside a durasteel hull, but it didn’t change the fact you were often missing the beauty of the universe.

Today this was not the case. Below their feet, Bridge’s Edge was an orb of white, blue and green shining under the sun of Twin A.

More than seventeen years after the battle won by Lord Bolton, the Northern navy was now once again undisputed master of the Twins System.

“I understand the losses have been minimal so far,” Lord Jason Mallister commented, his austere face giving him a resemblance with one of those sea eagles his House was enjoying training.

“They have been under our most optimistic previsions,” the former smuggler agreed. “The Sixth Fleet of the River Sector – which as we all know was mostly the Freys and their bannersmen – tried to fight us but we caught them while they were still in complete redeployment. Their fleet was divided into three formations and their land regiments had no time to build adequate bunkers or anything like that. They lost four ships of the line, three armoured cruisers and six battlecruisers in the affair, and after five hours of battle, the Haigh’s Fort Garrison understood there was nothing they could do to inconvenience us.”

And if he was going to be honest, even Davos and his senior commanders had been astonished by the magnitude of their victory. Yes, they had known the new missiles and the years-long training, the new doctrines, the long-range shattering impact of the new armoured cruisers and all the new toys were supposed to give them an edge over the River Navy and all their enemies in the South.

They had still been staring with their mouths wide open at the sheer massacre the Battle of the Haigh’s Fort had been. Some of his officers had even manifested a sort of guilt...his flag lieutenant had compared it at sending newborn chicks against the direwolves.

“It was not a complete success, of course,” Davos commented for the assistance more than for Lord Jason Mallister. “Lord Charlton and Lord Vypren’s ships of the line were far enough to avoid entering our missile range and they had the mental...flexibility in them to get out of the system with their fleet’s remnant before we forced them to surrender. Still, overall the main goal was achieved: we took the Haigh’s Fort...and the Night’s Watch had plenty of new recruits.”

Hundreds of grins and satisfied smiles appeared on the visage of the Stark and Mallister spacemen. Davos, with the authorisation of his liege and their allies, had been vocal months before this war started the women and the men under their command had to know the real war fought by the rest of the Northern military was the one which mattered. Yes, crushing the supporters of whatever dragon the local River Lords supported was not to be neglected, but the Great Enemy was massing its forces against the Wall; it was not sitting at King’s Landing.

As such the eleven million men who had decided swearing the rest of their life to the black was preferable to the fate the Northern cannons had in fate for them were a very welcome addition. And they would soon be joined by several millions more from the Twins, Erenford, Charlton and Vypren Systems.

“Lord Charlton died in this very system, I’m told,” the River Lord said as new windows gave them the view of the assembled fleet around the former Frey planet.

“Yes, his *Pride of Charlton* and the most damaged units of his Sixth Fleet mounted a jump point system to slow us down while the rest of their intact units withdrew to Vypren.”

And unfortunately from his point of view, it had worked. Jason Mallister had had to reduce to debris the Erenford defences while Davos and Twelfth Fleet won at the Haigh’s Fort. As a consequence, by the time the Northern and River squadrons had operated their junction, the surviving Charlton-Vypren coalition had been too far away to hunt down.

“Charlton will not prove too difficult to breach, but Vypren will certainly be another story,” the Master of Seagard declared.

“This is why you sent one ship of the line and two armoured cruisers to Fairmarket, my Lord.”

“True and I suppose I’m a bit greedy right now,” the smile was almost apologetic. Almost. “That said, whether Vypren sees reason before we are able to dictate him our terms with our batteries pointed at his chief citadel or not, the real challenge will begin at Shawney and Wayn’s Fort.”

“Indeed,” these two Lords, by most recent reports, had declared for King Viserys Targaryen, expelled the foreign merchants and executed most of the agents they had been able to discover. Consequently, neither Davos nor any of their allies had a good idea what they were doing, but there was not a high chance he was going to enjoy their preparations if they were given the time to fortify properly their home systems. “And we need to defeat them if we want to secure the stars west of the Green Rift.”

This was not a strategy Davos completely agreed with, he would have preferred beginning east and link with the Vale, but political considerations and the need to take Riverrun and block the Lannisters before they had the time to spread into the River Sector had taken priority above else.

“What about House Frey as a whole? Are they going to cause us further problems Admiral?” asked the chief of staff of Lord Mallister.

“I would be tempted to say no, Captain,” Davos replied levelly. “On the other hand, I’m sure Lord Stark thought the same thing when he killed the treacherous Lord Walder and dozens of Freys seventeen years ago. They have taken terrible losses and I’ve already confirmations we exterminated eight secondary branches, but the Freys are breeding faster than rabbits.”

How Lord Walder had possibly thought it was going to be a good idea to have so many family when the succession issues appeared on the horizon, he had not the slightest clue, but it made them a pain to find them all and make sure they were no longer a problem.

“We killed Lord Emmon, his sons and his grandsons in the previous battle at the Haigh’s Fort. We also removed Alesander, Merrett, Lothar, Jammos, Whalen, Hoster, six Walder and two Rhaegar Frey from the rolls of nobility. That accounts for Emmon’s line and we got more sons and grandsons of his brothers here. We also captured Genna Frey born Lannister, Tywin’s only sister, and on this planet there are a few more daughters and wives which will be sent to Silent Sister’s septs.”

“The weasels married in the Goodbrook, Vypren, and Paege Houses in our Sector,” Lord Jason Mallister gave his own tally when Davos had finished giving his list of Frey casualties. “Those will be dealt in time if they can’t be trusted. We got Maester Petyr one year ago and Kyra Frey recently.”

It had to account for most of the Frey family, Davos hoped. There were some of Lord Walder’s youngest children at Rosby but from the best reports they had, the trio had taken the Rosby name and had never caused the North any problems. Geremy and Raymund Frey were serving in the Night’s Watch. Some daughters who were visiting Darry had claims but they could be ignored for the short-term.

“That leaves this insolent Most Devout Luceon.”

“We have his name on our black list,” Davos promised.

“Good...who do you have in mind as a military governor for the Twins System while we continue the war?”

“Lord Stark suggested sending a message we are not pleased with Lord Lannister’s policy in this theatre...” Davos passed his hand in his beard. “Our new interim ruler of the Twins will be Domeric Bolton, Heir to the Dreadfort.”

**Ser Garlan Tyrell, 27.09.300AAC, Cider Hall System**

There were a lot of circumstances when a dutiful son had to step in his father’s shoes and take command of a fleet. Garlan wasn’t able to remember who in recent history had to face a disastrous situation like the one he was facing right now. Maybe it was the despair many Ironborn had experienced after their fleet was defeated at the Arbor. The pirates had been forced to retreat to the Pyke and prepare for a last stand they knew they couldn’t win. Or maybe they had been too stupid to acknowledge how outnumbered they were going to be. Balon Greyjoy and his senior commanders had hardly been famous for their rational actions.

Of course, insulting the ‘Iron King’ right now was leaving a taste in his mouth which had never been there before this month. Because as much as the scion of House Tyrell wanted to shout the Ironborn were idiots – and yes, the pirates were morons and void-addicted imbeciles – his father had plunged the Reach Navy, House Tyrell and the entirety of House Tyrell in the greatest disaster ever suffered by a single military force.

Before the Battle of Harvest Hall – or as everyone aboard his ships had taken to name it, the Harvest Graveyard – the greatest military defeat ever suffered by the Reach Navy had been the Field of Fire.

But while the Gardeners had been annihilated in this bloodbath, there were alas two points to remember above everything else.

First, the opposition on that red day had three dragons, and one was the Black Dread.

And second, the Reach Navy had committed something like forty ships of the line, thirty fleet carriers and seventy battlecruisers. They had been supported by twenty Western ships of the line too...and each and every one of these capital ships had suffered cataclysmic damage or surrendered to the Conqueror.

By his best estimates – and they were just estimates at this hour, the very size of them made them properly impossible to number – the one-sided humiliation Lord Mace Tyrell and House Tyrell had experienced made the Field of Fire look like a mild punishment.

And yes, he was aware the Dornish had taken losses. The totality of the defences guarding the Ashford jump point had perished, and three battlecruisers, seven heavy cruisers, twenty-five light cruisers and fifty-plus scout cruisers, auxiliaries and Q-Ships of House Martell had been completely destroyed and he was sure they had crippled more warships in the process.

Unfortunately, this kind of loss was nothing for Sunspear and the Lords and Ladies sworn to Queen Rhaenys Targaryen.

 The Dornish possessed certainly what was the weakest navy of the Seven Sectors – assuming the Ironborn were not counted as a true naval power – but three battlecruisers, Seven Hells, even ten battlecruisers were something they could take and recover from. Their losses in starfighters, especially these demonic furtive snake-like new models, were at less than two thousand and this was one of the major advantages Dorne enjoyed over all its real and potential enemies.

The point was, Dorne could and would probably endure four or five casualty lists like this one before suing for peace – and that was probably optimistic because their ships of the line were all active and in pristine conditions.

The Reach...the Reach Navy had just metaphorically received the equivalent of three tank shells in the head, the heart and the legs before the Dornish opponent plunged their heads into a plasma reactor.

It was possible Garlan was too pessimistic. But his duty now demanded he was humble and as pessimistic as he could be.

No navy had lost one hundred ships of the line in a war before...or if someone had, it had been over decades of war and it was a mix of ambushes, attrition, demobilisation, captured units and betrayals. No one had lost one hundred ships of the line in a single battle...but House Tyrell had. Oh they had, and it was just the beginning of the disaster.

Bad enough that the assault on Harvest Hall had been disintegrated and the survivors were forced to run with their tails between their legs.

Bad enough they had lost the battle against an enemy they in all likelihood outnumbered ten-to-one or more in tonnage and heavy squadrons. Bad enough their fleet supply train had served as practise targets and half of the starfighter elite of Highgarden had met its end in what should have been a mere formality, a battle they couldn’t possibly lose.

But it had not stopped there. The Yronwood and Uller warships had jumped on their heels in the Ashford System and he had been forced to use his ships of the line like a massive shield to soak the long-range bombardment of the Dornish starfighters and heavy cruisers. That he had still ten ships of the line at the moment was more due to the solidity of a ship of the line than any tactical miracle from his desperate orders.

Each and every capital ship heavier than a battlecruiser was going to take weeks of repair minimum.

And he had lost the Ashford System.

Militarily, the Harvest Graveyard had cost them fifteen million dead but it had been lost in a Storm Sector so the infrastructure crippled or wiped out was not something he had to deal with.

Ashford, on the other hand, that the Dornish battlecruisers had neutralised like its defences were made of butter, was a Reach star system...and its population was two billion and eight hundred million officially. It was not a first-class system, but it was definitely a second-class one...and he had been forced to abandon in record time.

He had abandoned it because the pathetic remnants of his fleet could not oppose the Dornish fleet. Not anymore. Not after they, like the magnificent imbeciles Rhaenys Targaryen and the Red Viper had believed they were, had swallowed the bait and presented their throats for their killers.

Ashford was lost, and the litany of disaster was just beginning. Because assuming they managed to muster enough strength to mount a counter-attack the Dornish forces were not going to transform into burning wrecks, there was the question how they convinced the population of Ashford to rise in rebellion.

Lord Quentin Ashford had died in the first missile strike of the Harvest Graveyard. So had his three sons, and a lot of his cousins and potential heirs. The last male heirs had been aboard the key orbital defences...the same Ynys Yronwood and her fellow Dornish had been busy exploding right and left.

For all intent and purposes, there was no House Ashford anymore.

Rhaenys Targaryen had not announced to the wide galaxy yet who she was going to name in replacement, but it was a matter of days...the occasion was simply too good. Too many Ashford nobles had been killed, and while the smallfolk and merchant population should have revolted at the very mention of being conquered by the Dornish, the sheer shock of the defeat and his quick retreat must have broken every certainty the inhabitants of Ashford had.

It was no longer possible to predict what was going to happen. It wasn’t.

“Bryan, tell me you have good news,” he grumbled as his chief of staff entered his personal quarters.

“The only good news I have, Admiral, is that Lord Ambrose and Fourth Fleet have received their confirmation of your brother’s orders and are on their way to Highgarden, reinforcing us with the older units when they come into this system.”

“You’re right, this is good news,” Garlan affirmed before giving a glance at the star map and grimacing. “Father Above, we are speaking about abandoning everything from Ashford to Tumbleton to Rhaenys Targaryen and Stannis Baratheon...”

“The defences at Grassy Vale could use some improvements, but Bitterbridge is well-defended,” Bryan Fossoway looked like an officer who tried to convince himself of his speech, Garlan reflected.

“Two months ago, I would have agreed with you. Now with the new weapons the Dornish have fielded and the ruthlessness showed by Stannis Baratheon let’s not pretend our defences are going to cause them more than a short delay.”

“We could station one of his squadrons at Longtable,” his subordinate proposed.

“No, absolutely not,” Garlan sent one of the data-slates his desk was buried under crashing against the left wall. It didn’t bring him a lot of satisfaction and it didn’t ease his rising frustration. “Today our strategic choices are simple. Either we accept we may lose everything east or the line Starpike-Cider Hall, or we accept we are going to lose Highgarden to Tywin Lannister.”

The first would be a political, military, strategic and...fine, it would be a complete disaster.

The second would be, without doubt, the end of House Tyrell. As it stood now, Garlan was not sure if House Tyrell was going to be in control of the Reach, nominally or effectively, by the end of this year, and that it could have been worse was not a relief.

One thing however was sure. If they lost Highgarden, they lost all the ships of the line still in construction, their seat of power and more or less nearly every reason their bannersmen had to follow them on the battlefield.

“Admiral...we can stop the Lannisters at Dustonburry. Can’t we?”

“No we can’t.” The admission was really easy to utter after seeing all the points he and the near-totality of the Reach Lords had failed to think about. “Baelor Hightower has Third Fleet, but even assuming Willas gives him all the Highgarden reserves, that leaves him with thirty-five ships of the line...Tywin Lannister has sixty with him and two super-battleships we have no available counter for.”

“There is Ninth Fleet...”

Garlan laughed, but he put no joy or positive feelings in the sound.

“Assuming Lord Redwyne chose to leave the Arbor defenceless...something I found unlikely since his two sons were with the Grand Fleet we just lost...his ten ships of the line are Deep Space units. Near the gravity well of a planet, they will be terribly slow to manoeuvre. The Seven know Tywin Lannister is not Robert Baratheon, but he’s not stupid. We send Ninth Fleet against a conventional fleet in a space environment favouring conventional fleets, we might as well send them against the Dornish at Ashford and ask them for a second Graveyard.”

And that was if the men aboard these warships didn’t mutiny or decided if the heads of House Tyrell looked superb when offered on a platinum platter to Tywin Lannister.

“There is simply no choice,” the second son of Mace Tyrell said in an exhausted voice. “We must stop Tywin Lannister before he destroys the infrastructure of Highgarden and achieve the conquest of our core systems. If we want a chance to stop him, we need Fourth Fleet and Lord Ambrose. His twenty-one ships of the line are not the Grand Fleet, but they can make all the difference between victory and defeat.”

The Lannister fleet which had captured Old Oak would still have a slight numerical and firepower superiority, but maybe Baelor Hightower could stop the Westerners. Still, it would be fifty-six Reach heavy capital ships against sixty-two Westerners. Victory was not impossible. Then again the recent disaster had proven nothing was truly impossible...

“The debris of the Grand Fleet we were able to save can’t stop the Lannisters. Mathis Rowan and Seventh Fleet may not receive their recall orders before tomorrow. It’s Fourth Fleet or nothing.”

“I...I agree, Admiral, but many Noble Houses are not going to be happy.”

“Bryan, we are about to be effectively bankrupt in a few days.” Garlan designated with a gesture of his left hand the mountain of data-slates. “I am not an accountant or a financial expert, but I regularly debate with my eldest brother to know it’s going to be awful.”

Garlan sighed at the dubitative look of his subordinate.

“We lost millions of men in a single day, Bryan. Millions. The system of pensions for the families who lost a son, a father, a brother or a relative is going to explode. We won’t have to pay what we promised in the Ashford System I suppose...but that will still leave millions of pensions to be paid. All at once, and our war pension system had already met significant problems during the Greyjoy Rebellion. I fear the pension funds we kept in our coffers are going to be emptied in one day...and then we are going to have to tap into our personal funds to compensate the difference. If we do not pay...the consequences do not bear thinking about.”

A Gardener King of old had tried declaring the pensions null and void over four hundred years ago. His cousins had never managed to recover more than one ear and a few teeth when his own guards and the bloodthirsty crowd had finished explaining him their displeasure.

“I...I didn’t realise it was going to be that bad, Admiral.”

Garlan watched the small golden statue his sister had offered him on his eighteenth name day when he formally joined the Reach Navy and tried to formulate an answer which was not depressing, pessimistic or counter-productive.

“It is possible I am too pessimistic,” Garlan acknowledged. “But we lost many Lords. Plenty of Noble Houses have lost their patriarch, and I have no idea what it’s going to do where our war strategy is related.”

The knight of Highgarden swallowed heavily.

“I have no idea if my father and my brother are alive,” more than once Garlan felt the temptation to run to the sept of his flagship and pray for their survival. Assuming his father and Loras were alive however, they would be prisoners of the Dornish, and this was not an enticing fate. The last Lords of Highgarden to wage war against Dorne had not died gloriously. And yes, he had remembered the bed of scorpions ten times since this morning. “And too many good soldiers, cousins and friends died with the Grand Fleet. Anyway, we are currently finished as an offensive force. Assuming we have time to properly fortify, we may be able to inflict heavy losses on any Dornish attempt to capture this system.”

“You don’t look...convinced they will try that, Admiral.”

Garlan nodded with a frown.

“Replaying the massive defeat on my tactical display, I am convinced Rhaenys Targaryen – or whoever was in command of the operation as a whole, it’s possible it was the Red Viper – planned this trap before the first shot of this new war was fired at Westbrook. It might have been engineered years ago, for all I know. They wanted to erase our numerical superiority by one big nasty trap to compensate for their numerical inferiority. When you add the sneak attacks at Westbrook and elsewhere, the crushing defeat of the Caron forces at Nightsong...I can safely make the hypothesis they began this war with an elaborate and complex set of operations to defeat us.”

Garlan bit his lip in annoyance and shame.

“And for the moment, much as I hate admit it, the Dornish plan is working to perfection.”

**Queen Margaery Targaryen, 28.09.300AAC, Highgarden System**

Margaery had seen many demonstrations spreading in the large avenues of Highgarden’s capital in the last five years. The majority of these had been peaceful. A minority had ended with violence and damage. However, all had been authorised by the Seneschal of Highgarden.

House Tyrell and the Houses dominating the nobility of the Highgarden System were not tyrants in their home systems. They were not House Lannister, breaking demonstrations with cohorts of Red Cloaks and sentencing the participants of the demonstrations to decades of imprisonment. They were not the Stormlanders, who challenged in duel any smallfolk having the temerity to protest the Lord’s command. They were not the Northerners who enjoyed throwing out by the nearest airlock those contesting their choices. And they were not the Greyjoys, pirates and murderers who declared everyone not voting for war unfit to be called an Ironborn.

Demonstrations were authorised at Highgarden and across the entire South...under the reserve the organisers of the demonstration had cleared it with the office of the Seneschal at least ten days before.

This wasn’t the case today. There had been no authorisation demanded to block the air-car and low-altitude transports for smallfolk to announce their opinions. There had been no warning from the smallfolk...and even less preparation coming from the watchmen paid by House Tyrell. Another time, this would have been grounds for dismissal but alas this time she wasn’t able to accuse them of incompetence. No one, not her, not her grandmother, not her brother, not any of the intelligence services, had seen this coming.

The news of the Battle of Harvest Hall had begun to spread five hours ago, and this was the result. Millions of people descending in the streets, stopping whatever duties and jobs they were supposed to fulfil today, and joining the ranks of the contestation.

Since her holo-console hadn’t any top-secret additions, Margaery wasn’t able to have the estimates. But as the avenues, parks and plazas leading to the palace she was currently occupying were black with people and tens of thousands people forced their entry on several skyscrapers to paint messages of anger and incomprehension, there was no way the situation could be considered good.

Her screen was too small and the holographic resolution was too low to examine one by one the visages, but she could see the messages and the banners the smallfolk had written in all haste. Most were in a bright red and it made for unpleasant reading.

WE DON’T WANT THIS WAR

NO MORE BLOODSHED

GIVE US BACK OUR SONS

WHERE ARE THE VICTORIES KING AEGON PROMISED US?

Not every insults and accusations were directed at her family, of course. The crowds were disparate movements and clearly there was no unifying figure. Thus there were many sheets painted red who wanted something to be done with the enemy they had every reason to hate.

DEATH TO SUNSPEAR

A GOOD DORNISHMAN IS A DEAD DORNISHMAN

BURN ALL THE MARTELLS AND LET THE SEVEN HELLS SORT THEM OUT

KILL THE VIPERS

KILL THE SNAKES

REMEMBER THE CONQUEST OF DORNE

VENGEANCE FOR THE FALLEN

But for every placard or warning sign shouting its hate of Dorne, there were three or four demanding an accounting for the monumental military defeat suffered by the Reach forces.

INVINCIBLE AND DEAD

WE HAVE SO MANY SHIPS WE ARE USING THEM LIKE MISSILE SPONGES

ADMIRAL OF THE IMBECILES

A MARTELL WHORE HAS MORE BRAINS THAN TEN TYRELLS

In hindsight, the Targaryen-sponsored propaganda they had broadcasted for long weeks had not been the wisest move they could have made.

True, it was not like she or her grandmother had been asked to give their advices on the issue in public or in private, but at the time it had seemed like a good idea.

Eh, ‘it had seemed like a good idea’.

Margaery had been forced to acknowledge in the last three or four days that a lot of past decisions taken by House Tyrell had now a great chance to cause them bleeding ulcers.

It must have looked like it was a good idea to marry Crown Prince Aegon Targaryen when her father had signed the nuptial contract seventeen years ago.

AFTER THE USURPER’S REBELLION, THE WARLORDS’ REBELLION

Even three or two years ago, it was an enticing proposition. Neither King Rhaegar nor his eldest son had the inclination to study how to compose a coherent economic policy, different social programs or an education stance. Margaery had thought she would be able to use these silver-haired arrogant dragons for her own purposes and those of House Tyrell. If she had to tolerate sleeping with Aegon Targaryen and the presence of a few whores next to her husband, so be it.

RECONQUER ASHFORD, NOT KING’S LANDING

But Rhaegar Targaryen had one year ago massive support in the River Sector, a large base of loyalists in the Vale and Storm Sectors, the Crown Sector was ruled as his personal fiefdom and most potential troublemakers had been laying low, with only the Lannister baring their fangs in defiance. And she had not yet met Aegon Targaryen, who in private was an odious and arrogant excuse for an human being. Of course, it was because he thought he was a dragon...

BILLIONS OF TAXES FOR MORE DEFEATS

MACE TYRELL, GIVE US BACK THIS GRAND FLEET

This last message was obviously popular, as hundreds of smallfolk had taken decided to paint it on whatever materials they had at their disposal. Margaery honestly didn’t see why. If House Tyrell could go back in time and cancel the results of the Harvest Graveyard, neither Willas nor she would have hesitated a single second doing it. This disaster was costing them too much influence and military resources. It had cost them a father and a brother – whether they were prisoners of the Dornish or dead, no one at Highgarden knew - and it was a near-miracle Garlan had managed to escape alive and save something from this disaster.

“We must find a new plan,” Willas declared as he entered and half-collapsed on the green couch. “The Generals and the Admirals supposed to provide me ‘sound advice’ are all losing their heads. Now that the Dornish have handed us their defeats, they are convinced ten thousand Martell capital ships are going to jump in this system tomorrow and annihilate our infrastructure.”

“Everyone is panicking...” Margaery commented with a wince. “It’s only a matter of days before Tywin Lannister resumes his offensive and strikes Dustonburry. And without our father to act as a shield, our chances of victory are not that good.”

For the first time in several decades, House Tyrell was really at risk of losing a war. It was not something she enjoyed contemplating but it didn’t make it any less true.

“This is why I’ve recalled every fleet which can make a difference...the problem is Mathis Rowan and the Crown forces are really far away and it’s going to take them days to acknowledge, never mind turning around and return to Highgarden.” Willas sighed. “Lord Rowan is loyal, but father sent him really far away from every other fleet and important flotilla.”

“As long as he is there to present a reasonable voice in the circle of arrogance my husband surrounds himself with...” Margaery returned watching the demonstration. “I just hope he is not going to do something stupid, we really don’t need more bad news after this nightmarish month...”

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 29.09.300AAC, High Chelsted System**

“The resupply operations are complete?”

“Yes, your Grace.”

“Better late than never,” King Aegon VI Targaryen remarked in a loud voice.

Jacaerys mentally rolled his eyes before crossing eyes with Theon and exchanging a look full of consternation and relief.

“I want the fleet ready to jump in five hours for Bywater Rest,” their sovereign ordered them. “We have lost too much time as it is. My treacherous uncle and his forces have been given the opportunity to evacuate the system without opposition; I won’t tolerate more delays and excuses.”

If the speaker had been someone below him in nobility status or military rank, Jacaerys would have interrupted him and told him to stop being an imbecile. Bywater Rest jump point was far away from the inhabitable planet of Bywater Rest; there had never been any prospect to take the space and ground forces garrisoned there by surprise. But assuming somehow a squadron found a way to inflict a decisive defeat on some light and scout cruisers...then what? Bywater Rest had not profited from the rebuilding of 292AAC, unlike High Chelsted. It had not the funds to increase its static or its mobile defences. It was not a maintenance base or hosted several industrial mega-companies making their fortune with heavy industry. Viserys Targaryen was certainly guilty of high treason, but nothing in the spy reports had shown the now self-proclaimed ‘Green Dragon’ had lost senses and decided to concentrate his forces in a worthless system.

By 298AAC, Bywater Rest had something like four hundred and fifty million inhabitants. Now, as a three-way civil war had raged between the last men of House Bywater and their betrayers of House Follard and Farring, it would be extraordinary if there was two-thirds of the pre-war population still around. It was not High Chelsted, which boasted over seven hundred million souls...and far more loyal hearts willing to stay true to the True Heir of King Rhaegar.

“We will be ready, your Grace.”

That was the theory. In practise, he and all the ship commanders would have to expedite a lot of procedures that traditions and safety measures insisted not to skip. But to convince Aegon of the necessity of every supply operation, overhaul and the myriad of things was making Aegon more and more impatient, and there were hundreds of courtiers, not-so-chaste young women and of course the Red Witch always whispering in the royal ears.

Needless to say, none of them had one hour of military experience whatsoever, but it didn’t stop them from voicing their opinion...and his cousin from listening to them. Normally Jacaerys should have been confident Aegon was recognising the absurdities in this sea of insipid flattering, but for someone who had received top marks at the academy, Aegon was perfectly willing to ignore every action which didn’t involve smashing traitors and deciding who was in command of the different attack formations.

“I want the *Balerion*, the *Meraxes* and the *Conqueror* leading our offensive in the Bywater Rest System, Jacaerys. I want my bastard of an uncle shiver in fear when he realise the size of the fleet we have coming for his head.”

He was forced to mumble something positive in return, but his head and his heart weren’t in it. In the end, it was not likely to matter as the enemy had no good counter to the three-battleships and unless Viserys Targaryen was deaf, blind and dumb, he had to assume the entirety of the 1st Crown Fleet was coming for his head. But there was expecting something, and there was revealing your entire order of battle before the first shot was fired. If the Grand Fleet was supporting them, their numerical superiority would have carried the day but with the effectives they had, a bit of subtlety would not be unwelcome.

Alas, given how his last suggestions had been received, it was better to say nothing. Better preserve whatever credibility he has for the vital decisions which would need to be taken in the days to come.

“Lord Mathis Rowan will have the honour to form the first line behind our super-battleships. The second line will be our King’s Might-class ships of the line.”

Jacaerys and Theon nodded but of course the courtiers crowding the reception room of the Balerion had to cheer and transform the simple comment in a mummer’s performance.

“There will be no mercy for the traitors!” Aegon shouted raising his fist in the traditional Valyrian salute. “They shed the blood of my father, broke their oaths, and seized a crown they never had any rights to claim! I am King Aegon VI Targaryen, descendant of Aegon the Conqueror! And I say the days of my uncle Viserys the traitor are counted! DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

Jacaerys had no choice like all the officers present to shout their approval, like this battle-cry was going to convince King’s Landing to return magically back to the fold.

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

**Lord Varys Tivario, 29.09.300AAC, Redfort System**

Varys couldn’t remember an Admiral being so unhappy after winning what was by all accounts a splendid victory.

The purple eyes of his niece were watching the fortified planet with what could be fairly described as a threatening glare. The bridge was silent, as sailors and officers sworn to their cause were for the moment sent away to deal with the reparations and the post-battle maintenance a ship like the *Black Dragon* required.

Thus it left them alone, and under the light of Red Star, Rhaenyra looked like a black and silver statue facing the stars.

“I think I’m beginning to deeply dislike Jon Arryn,” the victor of Gulltown said at last. “Now that I have battle-experience between a competent Vale commander and an imbecile, I think I prefer the latter. They are easy to get rid of, and they’re predictable.”

“I think you admitted in your own words during your last council Jon Arryn was a dangerous opponent it was best to not underestimate.”

Rhaenyra curtly nodded, tightening her fists in controlled fury before calming herself. There was no rant, no objects thrown...but the implacable purple eyes were still cold, calculating once again the scenarios, evaluating the possibilities and analysing the problems.

“Jon Arryn will suffer no fuel shortages for the short-term future,” his niece articulated. “To give credit to the Old Falcon, I must admit his strategy was brilliant. Five days before the start of the war, he used his largest super-tankers to move about half of the Redfort fuel reserves to an unknown location.”

Turning back and pacing between the windows and the consoles of her officers, the new Blackfyre Queen hissed several Essossi curses between her perfect white teeth before giving him her undiluted attention.

“Since it would be stupid to hope the Master of the Eyrie is becoming senile, I must assume he has done the same for every depot I wanted to attack.”

“I don’t know if I fully agree with you. Yes, he certainly did it for the Egen Fort facilities. But Longbow Hall is a system where Arryn authority has been shaky for the last five years and Old Anchor is next door to Ironoaks. It’s...probable...he didn’t want to raise suspicion before the hammer came down.”

“I see your reasoning, uncle.” Rhaenyra murmured before speaking louder. “But the fact remains my hopes are not entering in this line of planning. I must be realistic, and the cold and simple truth is that Jon Arryn emptied his fuel storage facilities before I had the time to seize them.”

Fingers clicked and the purples eyes grew more thoughtful.

“This battle was not a waste of time,” Varys tried. “You have total naval superiority in the Redfort System and whatever fuel Jon Arryn took, the fact remains we have now the other half plus the extraction facilities and the refineries.”

The tactics employed in this stellar system, while staying objective, had been a work of art. His niece had used a small portion of her fleet to race in the outer system, while the other prongs jumped inside the gravity well with minimal emissions and then by a series of coordinated strikes had managed to board and capture the ship of the line commanding the Redfort forces.

Ser Creighton Redfort had been captured alive, and the rest of the Redfort forces, surrounded and leaderless, had promptly capitulated to her.

“For all the good it is going to give me,” Rhaenyra snorted. “Yes, the conquest is nice but I have no doubt the planet is going to explode with a massive insurrection if I make the mistake to land the Golden Company or sellsword troops on the ground. The Redfort is an old system and its population is over two billion and four hundred million. I can’t control what happens below the orbital stations...and we’re too far from Gulltown for me to feel comfortable about stationing a fleet permanently here.”

Stopping her walk across the bridge, she took her command seat and began to type new combinations on the consoles nearby.

“Ser Creighton Redfort is prisoner and we captured one ship of the line and two battlecruisers with three thousand starfighters and some escorts as a bonus, but I can win battles like this every day and still lose in the end.”

This was likely an exaggeration. Jon Arryn and his bannersmen had less than fifty ships of the line all told and they could not afford to lose important systems like Redfort or Gulltown every three days. Or soon there would be no Vale Sector for them to command.

“I suppose the question is what you intend to do now.”

A thin smile appeared on the rosy lips of his niece.

“A decisive battle against the Arryn main battle-fleet remains out of question,” the reply came quick, decisive. “I must force its commanders to disperse it and use their fuel existing reserves in a long war of movement. It is going to take months instead of days, but if our squadrons managed to take Egen and Old Anchor or at least destroy the fuel-based industry, we might yet force them to experience a fuel shortage. Gulltown accounted for thirty-one percent of the Vale total fuel production. Redfort was producing fifteen percent if your reports are as reliable as ever.”

“Jon Arryn can retake the Redfort,” Varys pointed out.

The silver-haired Arch-Dominarch rolled her shoulders in amusement.

“He can but the flotilla I will leave here will have the order to blow up the refineries, the depots and the extractors if they face a massive counterattack before evacuating. No, one way or another Jon Arryn will have lost over forty-six percent of the Vale fuel production in this phase...more I hope if we achieved my goals on one of the other targets. Egen Fort has few major facilities, they were accounting for only nine percent, but Old Anchor gives them twenty-three percent of their production. If they were at peace, it might not be so bad but in these troubled times, the military is known to devour fuel like there’s no tomorrow.”

It was all well and good...and yet there was a tiny flaw in this strategy.

“You have not spoken about Longbow Hall.”

“I think it’s better to assume our plans for Longbow Hall are not worth the digital support they were encrypted on,” Rhaenyra declared bluntly. “Jon Arryn was smart enough to empty many fuel depots before some of his son tried to stab him in the back and House Grafton rebelled. A man that smart will not be blind to whatever plans a snake like Baelish schemed at Longbow Hall. I think that by the time I return to Gulltown, a raven-drone will await me with the demise of our Master of Information in high-resolution holographic video.”

“This is going to cause a lot of delay for your other plans.”

“It can’t be helped,” his young niece affirmed. “If I am not able to conquer a Sector and administer it properly, I have no right to involve myself in the wars ravaging the other Sectors...”

**Lady Alysanne Arryn, 29.09.300AAC, Longbow Hall System**

“Are you my bannersmen?”

The question cut through the many voices voicing their innocence, accusing their neighbours, or protesting their actions had been somehow misinterpreted.

At least they were all intelligent to stop speaking and close their mouths. Good, because her father was really, really in a bad mood now.

“I was just asking the question,” the Lord of the Eyrie snarled, “because your lack of respect, your disloyalty, and your arrogance almost made me believe someone else was the Lord Paramount of the Vale Sector. The more I try to find any redeemable qualities in your House, the more I am convinced you are irredeemable betrayers and oath-breakers.”

The members of House Hunter shook their heads, shoulders and tried to protest with their bodies, but they stayed silent, as the two neat lines of Arryn guards on each side of their group were ready to slam them a vibro-halberd in the ribs if they dared make a threatening move.

“A few days ago, I wondered when I confronted my son Robin why the boy had stood against every honourable ideal I tried to put in his head. There are times in the evenings I sometimes wonder if I was not blind to leave him close to his mother...but then I see you, Lords of the Vale. Men who should have stood next to me in war and peace...men I favoured, men I treasured the advice...you were ready to sell me to the Targaryens at the first opportunity.”

Lord Gilwood promptly bent the knee in supplication in front of this voice of iron.

“Please, my Lord...I recognise my errors...my faults...I was led astray by my brothers and treacherous councillors.”

This was exactly the wrong thing to say.

“I am pleasantly surprised by your admission, Lord Gilwood.” Her father paused for a moment for theatrical effect before continuing. “We found letters and documents signed with your personal signature and the seal you always keep around your neck proclaiming your allegiance to King Viserys Targaryen. Can you explain me how it is possible your brothers managed to ‘lead you astray’ in this manner?”

Gilwood Hunter stayed with his mouth wide open like a particular stupid fish and his brother Eustace snickered next to him. This was another wrong move.

“Ah yes, the valiant, the incredible paragon of virtue named Eustace Hunter,” the young knight reddened under the obvious mockery. “While your eldest brother was busy trying to profess his allegiance to the Admiral of Dragonstone, you, Ser Eustace, exchanged dozens of raven-drones with the West. Once your brother was out of your way – tragic hunting accidents are not very imaginative, but who I am to judge? – you were going to sell half of your soul and a tenth of your assets to Lord Tywin Lannister. You wanted to become Lord Paramount of the Vale, and supporting the claim of Prince Joffrey Targaryen seemed a nice and safe way to do it.”

The youngest brother of the trio kept an emotionless face, but it didn’t save him from the diatribe he deserved.

“Ser Harlan...I must admit you chose well.”

“Excuse me, my Lord?”

“Your allegiance to the Red Viper of Dorne is well-suited to your tastes. Both of you have a tendency to eliminate your opposition by poison and other massacres where the tenets of knighthood and honour have not their place. Given the similarity with your methods and those of the Dornish in the last five hundred years, I must admit your reasons to join the Dornish in exchange of the recognition of your Lordship made sense. I fail to see a post-war Westeros where Rhaenys Targaryen sits on the Iron Throne, but I must admit that at least you did not hide your murderous predilections.”

Alysanne noticed Harlan didn’t know at the end of the tirade if he should feel vindicated or insulted.

“And then there is the Royal Couple of Betrayals itself. Lord Petyr Baelish and Lady Janyce Baelish born Hunter.”

Of the two Vale nobles named, it was the man who was the most unassuming. Average height, average hair, average face...it was the eyes however which were not able to hide the truth. These were amoral, ugly irises. The soul behind these eyes had to be dark indeed.

“My Lord...”

“Guards, if Lord Petyr Baelish open his mouth again to speak without my approval, cut his tongue.”

Two men in light blue armours stepped forwards, and the former Master of Information closed his mouth.

“At least with you, Lord Baelish, I can sleep soundly. I don’t know how Lord Hoster Tully could be so ignorant to see what sort of treacherous slime he was nursing into his home, but I know it is his fault, not mine. From the moment you swore your oaths to me, you never stopped trying to ignore them or to violate the spirit and the letter of your feudal contract. I don’t even think you know the definition of the word loyalty. Each time you tried to convince me you were a loyal man when all the evidence dug by my agents proved the contrary. You took the post of Master of Propaganda for the Targaryens against my will. You married Lady Hunter without my consent. You never paid over a tenth of the taxes you were supposed to pay. Did you think you were going to find a warm welcome at your return to the Vale?”

Many Lords would have felt shame at these serious accusations. But the expression on Petyr ‘Littlefinger’ Baelish’s visage was more akin to cold rage than remorse at seeing his illegal actions discovered.

“Even in your betrayal, you were not able to stay true to a single master or mistress. As far as we have been able to discern, you tried to sell your network and your allegiance to my son, Crown Prince Aegon Targaryen, the new Blackfyre claimant, the unlamented King Rhaegar, five Lords of the River Sector, Lord Eddard Stark, Lord Roose Bolton, Lord Lannister and the Seven know how many others. You can’t swear an oath without breaking it for the next ten days. You disagree, Lady Janyce?”

 “I do,” the red-haired with a voluptuous chest replied. “He stayed true to our marriage oaths...I made sure of this.”

“And your reaction about his...divided loyalties?” This was a point they had wondered before arranging this ‘audience’ in orbit over the home of House Hunter.

“Why should I care?” This was...unexpected.

“Janyce, we are your brothers!” For the first time, Harlan Hunter looked genuinely shocked.

“Ah yes, my poor brothers,” Janyce Baelish born Hunter stuck her tongue at them. “As the Usurper’s Rebellion raged, you were trying to convince our father to sell me to Lord Walder. I heard your suggestion of ‘why should we care if she becomes the broodmare of the Twins, Walder is not demanding a dowry to touch her fat tits.”

The unrepentant woman made an ironic bow.

“I regret not having the time to arrange their deaths with my husband, my Lord,” the three young men gave her loathing looks as they heard the ‘confession’. “And I didn’t swear any oaths to you, Lord Arryn. I am not an oath-breaker. You can thank the deceased Lord Eon Hunter for this oversight.”

“You have a point.”

Lord Petyr Baelish looked almost gleeful at this...until he was once again the target of the Falcon’s anger.

“However, Lord Petyr Baelish definitely violated his vows...so many vows in fact I would be surprised if he even remember the meaning of the first oath he swore to me. You want to protest, Lord Baelish?”

The former member of the Small Council indeed moved his arms like windmills in a vain and silent attempt to protest.

“I do, my Lord.”

“I am not your Lord. You made this very clear years ago as you preferred serving the Targaryens in the Crown Sector and preparing holo-emissions where I was presented as an ‘old senile fool’. It was under your advice funds and weapons were provided to the Graftons and their band of malcontents. All the while you were happy to stay out of my reach until I died of old age and you were able to whisper your treachery in the ears of my wife and my son...but you failed.”

“I was forced by the Targaryens! They menaced my family, my Lord!” The expression of surprise showed by Lady Janyce next to him told Alysanne how little truth there was in this ‘revelation’.

“I amend my previous judgement. You are not just an oath-breaker, a betrayer and a perpetually disloyal Lord. You are also a pathologic liar, Lord Petyr Baelish. But then as the Chief Liar of the Targaryen Regime, I suppose you had plenty of experience.”

“But...a trial...”

This was the point she intervened.

“A trial took place one year ago, Lord Baelish. You were summoned to the Eyrie; raven-drones were sent to the Southern Fingers System, your holdfast, to demand your presence. A jury of your peers, merchants, knights and smallfolk was assembled to judge your crimes and defiance of your liege.”

“You aren’t serious! This is a farce! This is not justice!”

“You were declared guilty of each of the five hundred chiefs of accusation levelled against you, Lord Petyr Baelish.” Was it wrong to feel so much pleasure at seeing the bastard become livid? “The sentence is death, the method of execution is left to the Heir of the Eyrie.”

Before meeting the man and knowing the intentions of her brother, Alysanne might have been merciful...but not now. She couldn’t afford politically to appear weak, and honestly there was no mercy for this traitor.

“Your tongue will be cut,” it was a fitting punishment for his uncountable lies, “and you will be given seven hours to repent your sins before the airlock of your prison-compartment will be slowly vented into the void....”

“NOOOOOO!” Baelish suddenly lost whatever composure he tried to maintain and tried to flee the hall...only to be stopped three seconds later by the punch in the jaw of one guard. The treacherous Master of Information collapsed like a sack of potatoes and was dragged unconscious to his death.

“Lord Gilwood Hunter,” the Lord of Longbow Hall, of the three siblings, was the only one showing something like remorse. Given that he had probably supported Viserys Targaryen by conviction of reforming the realm, he was going to be granted some leniency. “Your treason is worthy of death, but you are given the choice between the sword and the black.”

“I will join the Night’s Watch, my Lady.”

“We will...”

“This choice is not given to you, Ser Eustace, Ser Harlan,” her father intervened. “You have proven you were ready to kill your Lord and betray the Vale for your greed and own advancement, not for any principle or loyalty to a cause. You will go directly to the gallows leaving this room, and may the Father just you equitably.”

When one took into account the magnitude of their crimes, this was very much a curse. The guards had to manacle them and drag them out of the room by force. At a sign of their Lord, most of the regiment assigned to the Arryn ship’s security departed, leaving them alone with Lady Janyce Baelish...well Lady Janyce Hunter once more, for Petyr Baelish was an attainted traitor, and had lost his rights to call himself a Vale Lord.

Alysanne wanted to demand out loud why the wife of one of the most dangerous enemies of the Vale was granted a private audience, but she kept her mouth shut as her father spoke to the red-haired woman.

“Lady Janyce? Existence is an absurd comedy which is played in front of a multitude and ends in solitude.”

The behaviour of Lady Janyce Hunter changed completely in the blink of an eye. Gone was the courtesan attitude, instead she stood to attention like a soldier, completely ignoring the fact part of her robe had not handled the stress very well and was now revealing several parts of her anatomy. It could have made her laugh, but her eyes...her eyes were cold and dead.

“Agent Four-Two, reporting for duty, Lord Arryn,” the Heiress of the Vale kept her uneasiness under wraps as a long interrogation started where Janyce revealed everything of her husband’s machinations from the last month. This was...ugly. And all the while the woman’s voice was emotionless, dead. This was a sort of mental conditioning Alysanne had heard which sometimes was going on the Free Cities, but it was hellishly expensive and the Seven Sectors had signed several accords in the past they would never hire specialists in this domain. Obviously, her father had violated these treaties.

“Are they many of them?” Alysanne forced herself to ask, hiding difficultly her disgust as Janyce Hunter left the hall by a secret door anonymously with a helmet and an Arryn uniform.

“No, thankfully not. At first, I wanted to have a few select agents in several critical power seats in case a new civil war was to be fought. Janyce volunteered to be a spy at the Twins under the condition her father paid the price for selling her to Walder Frey...but the Rebellion changed a lot of things and she was incredibly useful to keep an eye on the Royal court and Petyr Baelish.”

“She volunteered?” Heiress or not, politics or not, Alysanne was nauseous at the idea of...no better not even to think about it. “The treatment destroyed her personality, right?”

“No, I’m afraid this is her real personality you saw after I unlocked the mental-code.”

Alysanne shivered. Janyce Hunter had been a sociopath then...she still was one, for that matter.

“It’s not...how far are we ready to go, father, if we want to win this war?”

And yes, her voice was pleading. But manipulating the minds, creating lies and more lies, turning killers against killers...where was it going to end?

“If we had won the Rebellion with Robert to lead us, I would not have ordered it...but Robert is dead and I am forced to do a lot of things I don’t like, daughter. As will you.” And for a moment the armour cracked and Jon Arryn, father, Lord Paramount of the Vale, Warden of the East, Lord of the Eyrie and the Gates of the Moon, Grand Seneschal of the Vale, looked terribly old and exhausted...and then the image was gone and the warlord was back. “Now...the Blackfyre issue must be talked about. Our last scouts from the Iron Sector are back and they have dark news with them. I want to hear what the Blackfyre girl has to say for herself and I need an emissary.”

This command had least deserved a humorous quip.

“There are not going to be many volunteers...”

**Colonel Ayric Sarring, 29.09.300AAC, Great Wyk System**

Great Wyk was not an attractive system. The mere mention of using a picture of the star and its planets to attract the wealthy and the powerful men of Westeros may have been enough to declare you certifiably insane. Maybe the Seven and the rest of the Gods worshipped by humanity knew why the first Ironborn had decided to settle in such an inhospitable place. Personally, he had no idea.

Yes, the three gas giants present could provide fuel to entire fleets if the proper extraction facilities were built. But the gravitational pull and their erratic orbits combined were a hazard to any starship not having a proper cartography of the stellar system. Yes, the red-yellow star provided enough warmth and luminosity for human life to prosper. There was however a difference between ‘prosper’ and ‘thrive’.

Seen in a positive way, that the planet of Great Wyk had been somehow able to survive between the four asteroid belts, the collapsing moons and the gas giants was nothing short of a miracle. This spatial area was like a gigantic game of billiards, with planets playing the role of balls.

This was not the problem of their evacuation convoy at the moment.

There hadn’t been many volunteers for this kind of suicidal mission. Ayric had believed after the Fall of Pyke Gregor Clegane and Amory Lorch’s popularity could not descend lower but he had evidently been wrong and the rumours of a decade of atrocities had discouraged the fearless veterans and the rest of the Western military forces. Great Wyk was synonym with murder, genocidal purges and madness. It was supposed to be a warning from Lord Tywin Lannister any attempt to contest the rule of the Iron Throne was going to end in corpses, blood and tears.

This was not the problem of their evacuation convoy at the moment.

A lot of his subordinates for this mission were outcasts which had been judged too dangerous by Casterly Rock to be sent to the main war effort in the Reach.

His most experienced warrant officer was busy manipulating a black market spanning over several systems. The best swordsman among the officers was a snarky sellsword which would sell a fortress and a dozen starships if it gave him a Lordship. His most ruthless subordinate had his heart burning in anger day and night at the idea of killing his brother; that he way he would avenge the ‘accident’ which had disfigured him.

This was not the problem of their evacuation convoy at the moment.

No, the big problem was something which should not exist and that no man had reported having seen in the last thousand years – unless you were an Ironborn and you had drunk enough wine, ale and beer for your blood to be replaced by alcohol.

At the naked eye, it looked like the void of the stars was seeping in the system like a black plague.

The sensors – and thank the Gods the heavy cruiser *Black Panther* they were using for this journey had received the latest improvements in long-range detection and counter-electronic measures – gave an entirely different view.

It was a living being. Sort of. It was a mass of massive tentacles, four or five times the size of a ship of the line. Sort of. It was horrifying and a single glance told you all there was to know about this thing.

It was not human, and it had never been. It was...*other*, but not *Other*.

It did not radiate the same sense of wrongness the creature at Pyke had radiated.

And since it wasn’t one abomination and they were in the Iron Sector, the identification of the monster was not exactly complicated.

“Well, I suppose that after the fire demons and the shadow monsters, it was unavoidable the krakens were going to come out whatever hole they had disappeared the last couple of thousand years.”

Ayric kept his tone conversational, though this was horrific news. But he was supposed to be the ground commander, and if he panicked now, with ten thousand untrained young men who could be generously described as conscripts, they might as well run away in the next ten seconds. The morale of the troops was never excellent, but a commander was supposed to show the example, right?

“I don’t think lasers are going to be terribly useful against that big thing,” Preslan proposed with his usual good humour.

“According to the information transmitted by Captain Plummet, this...kraken...is somehow living, and yet constituted in part with anti-matter and the black matter the Ironborn use to power their void engines.” That was certainly not a coincidence, but he would leave this fact to the scientists to study the sensors data after they were a hundred light-years away from this thing. “I really doubt missiles are something it had trouble with, given the fate of Lorch’s squadron.”

In normal circumstances, he would have outright cheered at the fact the kraken was currently smashing the last scout cruisers of the Great Wyk defence system force into a cloud of debris. Not today, unfortunately. The Manticore and his band of rapists were murderers, rapists and the lowest of the low in the Western forces and associated themselves with sellswords able to present Bronn as a shining white knight, but they had a ship of the line, a battlecruiser, half a dozen scout cruisers and four hundred starfighters...to date, they were all gone save the *First Herald* of Ser Raynald Westerling. The fact the young man had survived where Lorch and his accomplices didn’t suggested that charging straight at the kraken might be a bad idea.

“Let give them their due,” Bronn said lightly. “They delayed the kraken a few hours.”

It was the only positive thing that could be said about Amory Lorch’s last battle. This slaughter had removed pretty much every hull in the Great Wyk System which could have served to evacuate soldiers and civilians. The transports they had come with from Blacktyde were not luxury liners, or fast and slender things reserved for the armoured companies parading around Lord Lannister’s cousins. The hulls were old, slow, and each had its environmental systems severely reduced compared to what they had been intended to do when they were built.

They were thirty of them and the transports were the size of battlecruisers, yes. In their best day, perhaps they could have evacuated a quarter million men, women and children.

Today? Ayric would be lucky if he could embark one hundred thousand without setting a few hundred strident alarms on every bridge. As the Western garrison on Great Wyk was over three million strong, there was no conceivable way he could evacuate a significant percentage of them in one travel.

“A few hours won’t be enough. The kraken will arrive at Great Wyk in five hours if it maintains its current speed and acceleration.”

What the kraken intended to do, Ayric had no clue at all, but it was best to assume it was very bad news. This monster was darkness incarnate, there was no way it had come just to say hello.

“Our transports will be in orbit in about two hours. So it is best to think of a plan which allows us to evacuate a maximum of people in three hours.”

He didn’t even need to look at the Lieutenants and the other junior officers he had been given as his command staff to know this was an impossible order. The military precision of Casterly Rock may have been able to accomplish this with some time to spare even with little to no warning.

Pre-Rebellion Great Wyk would have been unable to. The ruined infrastructure of the planet they were able to see ten years after Balon Greyjoy lost his head was crippled and controlled by men too busy murdering and pillaging. If one single orbital elevator functioned, it would be a miracle of the Smith.

And indeed the first protestation was not long to come.

“You ask for the impossible, Colonel.”

“The privilege of officers, I suppose.” Ayric thought it was good a score of golden-haired men chuckled.

“It’s still a tall order, Colonel.”

Ayric kept his eyes on the planet of Great Wyk. There was no point to pretend they could magically squeeze ten million people in each transport. There was also no point to pretend their minuscule flotilla could do more than distract the kraken for a few seconds when they had one heavy cruiser, one light cruiser and three scout cruisers to guard the convoy.

“Colonel, I can’t contact the authorities at the Lion spaceport and inform them of our arrival,” his communications officer stormed in the room.

“There’s a problem with the new encryption protocols?” A station at the edge of civilisation like Great Wyk should have been properly informed of the new war-time conditions but maybe the couriers had been intercepted.

“No Colonel, the communications work just fine...it’s just that there are no operators answering. The spaceport...if the ground communications we can hear are any indication can be trusted, there’s a massive insurrection in and around our headquarters...”

“Lorch and Clegane massively screwed up,” Bronn suggested when the exclamations began to be expressed in loud and unpatriotic fashion. “The moment the Ironborn knew there was no risk of the fleet bombarding them into submission, they revolted.”

“Come on, Bronn!” Raff Preslan protested. “A rebellion takes time to organise and coordinate. And they couldn’t be sure when Lorch departed he wouldn’t be back in a few hours!”

But as Great Wyk grew and grew to the naked eye, the effects of the ten year-long Clegane occupation of the system were impossible to miss. The planet was scarred and this wasn’t the result of the damage suffered during the Greyjoy Rebellion. It couldn’t be. It was too precise, too calculated...and there were too many impacts.

The surface of great Wyk had been torched and scarred with what had been hundreds of small kinetic strikes. The images which flowed on their displays revealed ruined cities and abandoned settlements. Tens of thousands corpses were lying unburied in the streets, and the carcasses of aircars, transports and buildings was all too evident.

“What have they done?” an Ensign managed to articulate before vomiting. He was far from the last to throw up. In this room, on the bridge of the *Black Panther*, in the different sections, the monitoring displays transmitted the images of Westerners horrified and vomiting the contents of their stomachs.

“It looks like the Tyrant-General has much to answer for.”

Gods and Demons, it looked like the rumours about Great Wyk had been understated. This was...butchery. What sort of madness had seized Clegane and Lorch?

And this wasn’t the worst. As they were less than half an hour away from reaching the planet, it was increasingly clear what little order the Beast and his sellsword lieutenants had been able to impose had been relying on having the guns of Lorch’s squadron pointed on the planet to provide fire support.

The strongholds of the Lannister army were under attack, and it was ugly. Screaming and baying crowds surged forwards to kill tarnished red battle-armours, and they were winning. The attackers were filthy. Judging by how frail they were, many men and women were starving or close to that point. They used obsolete weapons. Their tactics were poorly executed and it didn’t look like there was a hierarchy or something which could be considered a command structure.

And yet there were hundreds of thousands charging into the fray, ignoring their mortality.

Since it was obvious the population census of eight hundred and nineteen million was sheer non-sense in these conditions, this meant virtually every person in age to bear arms was in revolt.

“Gregor massacred them and now they want revenge,” Sandor growled.

“It’s difficult to blame them.” Ayric agreed before trying to examine the areas where shuttles and orbit-to-ground shuttles could land. Unfortunately, most of the spaceports were in the middle of the war zones and descending when the last batteries of artillery are firing could be described as...hazardous. “We aren’t going to save a lot of troops...”

“Do we have to try?” Bronn asked in a very serious tone. Ayric gave him a warning look, but Bronn shrugged in an unrepentant manner. “I know we are ordered to evacuate thousands of soldiers, but look at the images, Ayric. It’s not like these child-killers and rapists are able to fight effectively against a bunch of desperate starved Ironborn. They spent so much time killing those who could not defend themselves, raping and pillaging they aren’t even able to fight correctly. And don’t tell me you would trust people like that to your side.”

It was a nice speech...and it was treason. Ayric knew it, Bronn knew it, and everyone knew it. Things loyalty wasn’t what it could be in the Lannister regulars present...no one moved to arrest Bronn or raised weapons to affirm their undying loyalty to the Master of Casterly Rock.

“How many Ironborn are still alive on this planet?” Ayric demanded coldly.

“The best estimations are around one hundred and seventy million...”

In hindsight, butchery wasn’t appropriate. Genocide, holocaust and ethnic cleansing were far more appropriate.

From eight hundred-plus million to one hundred and seventy million in ten years. Stranger takes them, what kind of monsters had the bloodthirst to ravage a world like this?

This was something the Western armed forced were going to pay for all eternity. The Ironborn had surrendered after the Greyjoy Rebellion. That the living conditions had been so terrible they were willing to risk rebelling despite having orbital guns pointed on their guns...

This was a stain on his honour and everyone wearing a red battle-armour. Tywin Lannister of course wouldn’t care. Ayric did.

*Are you happy Tywin Lannister? Your dogs obeyed your will, the Ironborn were utterly crushed...and they’re still willing to rise against you*.

It was Tarbeck Hall over again, but this time done over a decade.

It was a slow Castamere.

And while Great Wyk was burning, the Lord of the Reach was beginning a new war against the Reach, no doubt creating more slaughter pits.

Seen like that, the decision was not difficult to take.

“No Bronn, we don’t have to try.” Ultimately, it was not difficult to admit, and every man relaxed somewhat. “Still, if there are any areas not yet in a state of insurrection, it would be good to save them. If there are cities which are not war zones, I must hope it’s because the regiments stationed there refused to obey the Tyrant-General’s orders for more atrocities.”

“I’ve localised four settlements which are not rioting,” Preslan affirmed. “I can organise their evacuation. Priority to the women and the children?”

“No,” Ayric replied quietly. “After what Gregor Clegane did, these people are certainly not going to trust us. We take the entire families together...they will believe the worst otherwise, and the kraken isn’t going to give us much time. Lieutenant Farr, you will have command to organise these evacuations.”

“I could do it, you know,” Bronn said with a smirk, which didn’t last when he saw Ayric’s expression.

“We have another task ahead of us, I’m afraid. Prepare one thousand men for an orbital assault against the Lion spaceport. Captain Plummet is to fire his plasma guns for a three seconds long barrage before we launch.”

“About time,” Sandor Clegane smiled, and it was something to give you nightmares. “For our vengeance.”

“For whatever honour we have left in our oaths,” Ayric corrected him. “The Beast must die.”

**Sandor Clegane, 29.09.300AAC, Great Wyk System**

He was going to kill his brother.

Kinslaying, according to these hypocritical septons, was a mortal sin.

Gregor had killed his baby sister and his father. Granted Sandor hadn’t cared that much about the man, but he was still family.

Where was the retribution of the Seven? Where was the judgement of the Heavens?

Rivers of blood had flowed after Gregor killed their sister. If there was one thing the monster knew to do well, it was to kill.

Had Gregor been dragged in chains and decapitated for his crimes? No, of course not. He had been rewarded, and by Lord Tywin Lannister, the Lord of Casterly Rock himself, no less.

Kinslaying was a sin that the Lords of the realm were all but too eager to forget if you killed their enemies. And Gregor had murdered his way through enough men and women to be considered a terror.

Today it ended one way or another.

Today the Beast of Lannisport and Pyke died.

There were gasps and noises of incomprehension as they rushed out of the shuttle. For an instant, Sandor shared their astonishment.

The Lion spaceport and the surrounding area was a war-torn landscape the likes which made look like the destruction of Pyke minor. Every starscraper and official building was down, blasted apart and re-exploded. There were clouds of dust covering everything. There were corpses everywhere, some weeks old, some killed minutes ago.

If the Seven Hells were war eternal, this was what they should be like.

Then the Ironborn came calling and the training and the battle-experience went back to the fore. Vibro-sword in hand, they cut down waves after waves, from time to time gunning down the enemies which carried guns.

The Western ‘volunteers’ – a joke as about two hundred out of a thousand had been true volunteers – had their helmet sealed and reinforced Mark IV battle-armours for this mission. Unless Gregor had lost some nasty gas stuff, they were safe from chemical barrages and light weaponry.

The Ironborn were in dusty clothes, half-starving.

They had no chance, but they continued to charge and charge again, their eyes filled with a hate Sandor knew very well.

They wanted to kill his brother and everyone serving the Lannisters.

Fuck them.

Gregor’s head belonged to him, and if they were so stupid to not realise they were gunning down sellswords and Lannister rapists like they killed damned Ironborn, they deserved what they got.

Damn the dust, though. Damn this planet. Kraken or no kraken, the world was going to take centuries to repair. Gregor was a mad dog which should have been drowned before his tenth name day.

They waded in seas of dust and blood.

“Kill for the living. Kill for the dead.”

“For vengeance,” he was roaring, his anger giving him strength and determination.

“For our salvation...”

There was no end to the Ironborn. But then there weren’t even trained soldiers. Some had knives and pistols, but seven out of ten had not even that. What they had was their hate...and they didn’t beg or raised their hands to show they were surrendering.

They did not believe anymore it was going to make a difference. But then one year close to Gregor was enough to make you regret life and every positive emotion.

The counter-attacks stopped and to his relief it had not lasted that long. Maybe five or six minutes, but it sure as hell had felt longer.

Dust obscured everything in a new gust and for ten seconds their advance stalled, as modern sensors refused to work. There was only dust, ruin and corpses.

Then the wind calmed. The dust stopped coming.

And he was here.

His massive carcass was still wearing the same armour, red with the blood of millions. He was a giant in a world of mortals. The double-handed vibro-axe in his hands, certainly taken from an Ironborn champion, was the kind of weapon no one would be able to wield with one hand.

Sandor swallowed. He hated Gregor. And yet...he could not help but feel fear.

“GIVE ME A TRANSPORT TO LEAVE THIS WORLD AND I WILL NOT GUT YOU.”

Demonslayer was drawn by the Colonel and close to one thousand vibro-swords followed the gesture.

“You are a monster, Beast. You will die here.”

“ONE MORE CORPSE...” the axe struck without warning but this time Gregor was not facing an inexperienced Ironborn. And was it Sandor imagination, or the moves of Gregor had gotten slower? Ayric Sarring avoided easily the blow and one part of the axe was removed when the Valyrian sword Demonslayer struck against it.

“FOR MY SISTER YOU DIE HERE!”

Sandor realised a second later it was him who had roared...and then his sword find a weak point in the modified Terminator armour. A decade ago, it would have not been possible, but the massive battle-armour used by the Beast had received improvised reparations after reparations. Thousands, no tens of thousands of battles had damaged equipment and weapons, decreasing its performance...he was not going to complain.

Many men died as Gregor roared in fury and seized one by the throat before bashing his skull against the ground in spite of the helmet protection. But one hundred men continued to fire their rifles in short concentrated laser bursts and strike after strike.

The Beast began to bleed.

And his screams were not of anger and rage anymore, but in pain and suffering.

One strike. One more.

The axe was shattered by Valyrian steel.

The laughing sellsword found the right leg and shredded it.

The Colonel took the right arm.

The wounds would have killed a normal human in ten seconds top but Gregor had always been a monster.

Wounded and dying, he still tried to seize them and kill them.

Sandor and two other men had to push the vibro-blades of the dead in his chest and many others cut down his arms and his limbs.

The helmet was disabled and at last Sandor met the eyes of his brother.

It was a picture of horror. The demons of the Seven Hells were not that scary.

“He...he wasn’t born like that?” one officer demanded.

“No, he wasn’t,” doses after doses of drugs had left Gregor with a corpse-like skull, his eyes were the colour of piss and his face was disfigured by black veins and green-shade pus. The blood he was spitting was not entirely red.

“How the Hell is he still alive?”

Sandor removed his helmet and handed it to another man, placing himself directly in Gregor’s line of sight.

And for the first time, Sandor Clegane saw something more than condescension, jealousy, anger or hate in the eyes of the one he should have called *brother*.

“Gregor Clegane,” and how it felt good to say the words even if he had no rights to do so and their actions today were making them all traitors. “You killed our father. You killed our innocent sister. For your crimes against our family, I sentence you to die.”

The blade took the head in one blow and for the first time in over a decade, Sandor Clegane felt at peace.

**Ser Raynald Westerling, 29.09.300AAC, Great Wyk System**

Was it wrong to say that treason had never felt so good?

“Colonel Sarring has confirmed it,” the communications officer repeated. “The Beast is truly dead. They are evacuating everyone from the surface now.”

Raynald smiled widely. This was good, very good indeed. The Beast – the nickname for the Tyrant-General was known in every Sector of Westeros – had terrorised this system for too long. A pity its death was arriving far too late to change anything for this system but at least the monster was gone.

“Acknowledge the transmission and tell them to hurry. The kraken is only twenty minutes away, and it looks like it is accelerating in our direction.”

In normal circumstances, the *First Herald* he commanded and the *Black Panther* should have died defending the planet before they authorised this non-human entity to devour a single subject of the Iron Throne.

But the circumstances weren’t normal. Great Wyk was wrecked beyond redemption and the band of murderers Clegane and Lorch had mustered under their banners was in the process of dying against Ironborn who didn’t even care if they died or they lived as long as they could take their tormentors in the afterlife with them.

Moreover, dying against the kraken would not save Great Wyk. Two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and three scout cruisers were nothing compared to this leviathan of darkness and if they tried to make a glorious last-stand, the legendary abomination was going to make it one of the shortest in recent history.

They could not stop it. The Seven forgive us, but he could not save the inhabitants of Great Wyk...they had to withdraw and regroup for another day where their ships might make a difference.

“How many people have the evacuation teams managed to save?”

“Less than the basic plans called for, Ser. The transports took twenty-one thousand regulars, most of them Banefort regulars who regularly refused to obey the Beast’s commands. Seven thousand Ironborn civilians and supporting personnel have accompanied them. A lot of them collaborated several months with the Banefort troops, and I think we all know what their neighbours will do to them if they stay...assuming of course the kraken doesn’t extinguish them before the day is over.”

Raynald shook his head in regret. This was far, far less survivors than he had hoped. But it would have to do. There were no other alternatives. There were no other transports available. Ninety-nine ships out of ten were on the frontlines in the Reach Sector and elsewhere fighting the enemies of Lord Tywin Lannister and-

“Void translation! Void translation in Sector B-4! Three million and six hundred thousand kilometres away!”

The announcement of the Lieutenant in charge of the detection department forced everyone to abandon the verifications and the logistics of the evacuation and to rush to the battle-formations.

“Whoever they are, they are too far to catch us. We can leave the system before we are in their missile range.”

“And thank the Mother they are,” the tactical officer said quietly, “if the signatures are not faked, these are Tyroshi and Ironborn signatures out there. I think we are facing the rebel fleet which burned Saltcliffe to ashes.”

Another enemy they had no hope to win against. No one had uttered the name, but Raynald was sure everyone on the bridge of the First Herald was thinking it.

It was Victarion Greyjoy, and by the myriad of black dots flashing in existence, the brother of Balon Greyjoy had come in strength to this system.

Too bad for him there was not much to rally and everything to lose.

“Let the Ironborn and the kraken fight,” the Heir of the Crag voiced to his subordinates. “They chose the kraken as their emblem, they can reap the consequences of their arrogance and our folly...”

**Shireen Baratheon, 30.09.300AAC, Griffin’s Roost System**

Over seven hundred years ago, after a particularly bloody stalemate which had seen dozens of warships reduced to crippled hulks, a Gardener King had made the remark that wounding Durrandons tended only to incite them to fight stronger.

Since at the time this Reach sovereign had lost one arm in duel against his half-dead Stormlander royal opponent, people had gravely nodded and taken good note of his misfortune.

The Masters of Storm’s End were ferocious warriors and commanders of men; it was in their blood. If you wanted to fear no vengeance from House Durrandon, you had better exterminate them their entire line. Half-measures didn’t work. Many times, the Stormlanders had been reduced to a single survivor, only to make a triumphant return and unleash great slaughter on the Dornish, the Reachers, the Riverlanders or the Valemen.

Apparently, Jon Connington and his spawns had allowed themselves to think that because House Baratheon had married and assimilated House Durrandon three hundred years ago, this truth was not applying to them.

But then the delusional dog of the Rapist had been on drugs for the latest seventeen years. It was the only possible explanation which made sense, at least in her opinion. Exorbitant taxes, ruinous reparations, penalties coming from nowhere, regulations shaming their culture and their customs, repeated humiliations...did Connington really think he was going to get away with this without fighting the greatest Stormlander insurrection of the last thousand years?

Maybe the Griffin had believed that. He was the damned servant of Rhaegar Targaryen, in the end.

Yes, Jon Connington had believed it, and for seventeen years, it had worked well for him and his home system. Obviously, an important part of the taxes and reparations went to Highgarden and King’s Landing, but the authorisations to tap five or ten percent of this money flux before it left the Sector.

After the Robert’s Rebellion, Griffin’s Roost and its one billion seven hundred million inhabitants had been able to enjoy a prosperity and a low unemployment rate found nowhere else in the Storm Sector.

It was no surprise Jon Connington, his idiotic eldest son Rhaegar and the rest of his cousins and children had been genuinely popular and thus had supported him without reserve in his political, social and economic plans.

Shireen would be lying if she said she had cried when she saw how they had died at Fawnton. No one deserved to be devoured by creatures of nightmare...but Jon Connington had crawled and licked the hands of madmen his whole life, it was a bit late to wonder what sort of demonic threats you had sold you soul to.

“And now it’s our turn to exact vengeance upon Griffin’s Roost,” the eldest child of Lord Stannis Baratheon whispered.

To her side, her second in command for this operation snorted.

“I think Operation Reclamation goes far beyond mere vengeance,” Lord Beric Dondarrion spoke with a satisfied smile. It was a smile which gave her pleasant feelings in her stomach and on her cheeks, if she was to be honest. Shireen had not tried to push further for the moment...but the Lord of Blackhaven was nice, extremely good-looking...and unmarried. Maybe she would have to broach the subject with father...

“Reservations, General Dondarrion?”

“No, not at all,” Lord Beric bared his teeth in predatory anticipation. “The only regret I have is that this...traitor of Jon Connington is not here to see the ruin of his ambitions. My forces are ready. We can begin.”

“The other task forces have all signalled their readiness...execute Operation Reclamation.”

Dozens of officers bowed and began to transmit the command to the hundreds of ships under her command.

An observer not in the know would have begun to wonder at that point why neither she nor her personnel on the bridge of her command battlecruiser was donning a battle-armour or any type of void-protection.

This was simply because there was nothing to fight against anymore.

Three days ago, the Baratheon forces assigned to the elimination of the Targaryen supporters had invaded the system and wiped out what few ships had avoided the ambushes across the Storm Sector and of course the cataclysmic annihilation at Fawnton.

The only reason they had to wait three days to arrive was to finish Lonmouth, which had been done thirty hours ago.

House Lonmouth was officially no more, and with it the only system – if one didn’t count those under Dornish control, naturally – not acknowledging Storm’s End authority was Griffin’s Roost. It was here Connington’s wife and whatever children and cousins had not been with the Fawnton muster had fled.

It was there they were going to die.

The shipyards of the Griffin’s Belt had been blown apart by the Dornish raid, and only a few scout cruisers had managed to evade the implacable hunt Lords Swann, Kellington, Tarth and Baratheon among others had executed flawlessly in the last month.

The inhabitants of Griffin’s Roost with an IQ higher than their body temperature had to know they had played the game of thrones...and they had lost.

Even if somehow a Targaryen fleet invaded the Storm Sector at this very moment, it would come too late to save them.

They were going to pay the price for seventeen years of humiliations and deprivations with their lives, but before that they were going to be crushed in mind and spirit. Operation Reclamation was not a military-focused plan.

Its main goal was to acquire, by whatever means Shireen judged necessary, the supplies and the infrastructure House Connington had invested millions and billions in while her House and the rest of the Noble Houses were bleeding under the unfair taxes and reparations.

House Baratheon, House Dondarrion and all the other Storm Houses needed these mining ships, these extractors, these refineries and these thousands of machine-tools. It was not illogical, many of these facilities and components had belonged to them before House Connington stole them.

Today it ended. On the tactical display, thousands of auxiliaries, tankers, transports and support ships fell on the defenceless infrastructure of the Griffin’s Belt and the orbital stations dispersed across the System and began to disassemble or tow away what they had seized once they were in full control of their prizes.

“I see several emergency pods being ejected from fifteen stations.” Lord Dondarrion informed her.

Shireen shrugged.

“I suppose they must have realised by now we don’t really care if any Connington loyalists are alive at the end of this operation or not.”

She certainly didn’t. As the daughter of a Noble House, she had been ‘invited’ enough time at King’s Landing to know that, while House Baratheon practised frugality and unpopular economic plans, House Targaryen and their Crown and Reach friends wallowed and debased themselves with the wealth they had stolen from the Storm industries and farms.

“Rhaegar and Jon Connington stole trillions, Lord Beric. Trillions, and it’s evident they never felt the slightest urge to pay it back. Well, my father gave me orders, and I firmly intend to obey them. Unlike them, we will not use it to swim in pools of pure gold and live a life of decadence. This wealth will be used to guarantee our independence, our culture, and the renewal of our economy. But we are going to take back everything from them.”

“Oh I certainly don’t disagree,” the warm and seducing smile was back. “My only question is what do you intend to do with the planet itself. Unlike the rest of the space stations, the outer forts and the foundries, they have not surrendered...”

“House Connington will be no more. Any boy or girl under sixteen with the name is bound for the Night’s Watch, the others will be immediately executed. We are also going to send to the Wall essentially every man who ever served in the military forces of Griffin’s Roost and anyone who swore personally an oath to Jon Connington. The women will have the choice between joining the Silent Sisters or the poison. The heavy industry on the planet will be dismantled and sent to other systems. So will the technology research labs, the refineries, the mechanical production lines, the aircar companies and the shuttle factories.”

“It will be...thorough. I suppose the next Griffin administration will have no choice but to return to a planetary ‘agriculture-first’ policy.”

“Yes,” the former Connington subjects were going to experience exactly what they had done to their Stormlanders neighbours. They would work every day in the fields, ankles deep in the mud to gain a twentieth of the fortune they previously enjoyed. And every day they would look at the stars, knowing it was denied to them. The orbital elevators and every orbital-to-ground vehicle would be crewed and owned by Baratheon operatives. They wanted Griffin’s Roost to stand on its two feet? House Baratheon was not going to deny their ambitions...

“And if they refuse?”

“We will torch their cities one by one, beginning with those above fifty thousand souls. If they don’t believe we will do it after Fawnton, then they deserve to be removed from this galaxy anyway...”

**Tyrion Lannister, 30.09.300AAC, Wayfarer’s Rest System**

“Personally, I’m delighted that these hundreds of warships are not coming in our direction.”

There was a time for bravery and a time for being fool-hardy. When the enemy fleet had at least three super-battleships and twenty ships of the line plus scores of escort, in his opinion discretion was very much the duty imposing itself.

Tyrion played with the piece of cyvasse – a black trebuchet – before advancing it one tile forwards Marbrand white army.

“Since this mass of warships didn’t jump to Atranta or Castlewood, I suppose there’s not a lot of doubt where they are going.”

“I completely agree,” Addam Marbrand answered while looking with a suspicious eye at the cyvasse board they had confiscated from a Vance merchant who had tried to bankroll a rebellion group in the capital city of Wayfarer’s Fort. “They jumped to Pemford, we know it, and from Pemford they will continue to High Chelsted unless they want to regroup with House Darry.”

“It would be a good strategic move for them,” Tyrion tried to stay emotionless as Marbrand pushed one of his heavy horse too far away from his dragon. “The River Sector is bloody chaos as we speak, and the Northerners are busy rebuilding the alliance and their conquest of the Usurper’s Rebellion.”

This had been a surprise, and not a pleasant one. Tyrion and Addam had known there were supporters of the direwolf in the River Sector, to hope for anything else would have been a grave mistake, but they had not thought there would be so many. And unfortunately, the lack of resources his Lord Father had devoted to this theatre meant Lannister forces were more or less useless. They had captured Wayfarer’s Rest quite easily and the administration of the system caused no major problem, but the offensive was stalemated.

The Starks had managed to take over Pinkmaiden and Riverrun intact, and the fixed defences, while not enough to repel a major fleet, were sure to wreck havoc on the few Lannister ships of the line if they were committed in a major battle.

“Yes, it would be,” the Heir of Ashemark recognised. “But they aren’t going to do it.”

“Of course not,” Tyrion sniffed. “They will want to reconquer the Crown Sector first before turning their eyes on the River Sector. And any sovereign who wants to rule the Crown Sector has one system to hold above all others. To make things better, it’s a straight line to High Chelsted! I don’t think Aegon Targaryen or whoever is in command of this fleet is going to be concerned with tactical refinement.”

“You’re right. I would have proceeded differently, however. First sending fast scout cruisers or escort carriers to Darry, in order to press the River loyalists they have to assault Mallery Wall and relieve Antlers and Langward. Then I would put many heavy cruisers in the Cressey Wall and try a rapid offensive against Stokeworth while my super-battleships advance through Bywater Rest.”

“This would be a fuel and supplies-intensive strategy,” Tyrion could not help but voice his doubt.

“It would also multiply the contingencies, increase the coordination within the loyalist side and decrease the possibilities of failure. That way a defeat at King’s Landing, no matter how bloody, would still be a defeat for Viserys Targaryen. Should Rosby and Stokeworth fall, King’s Landing is encircled and ready to starve...or experience the joy of internal revolt and bloody riots.”

It made a lot of sense, yes. To conquer an entire Sector, it was best to multiply the avenues of attack – assuming you had the ships for that – and to present so many threats the enemy was forced to choose the best choice among less than palatable options.

“It’s a good thing then, the Red and the Green Dragon haven’t chosen to follow your strategies.”

“I will not say the contrary,” the Vice-Admiral replied. “The Targaryen-Tyrell alliance may be very powerful, but the defences of King’s Landing are not those of a minor colony in the middle of nowhere, and I’m sure the Dragonstone forces have made their own improvements once they made their coup. Whoever wins will have fewer capital ships than they entered the capital system with.”

“Too bad we have no scout cruisers in position to race there in time. It promises to be something memorable.”

**King Viserys Targaryen, 01.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

Was this war avoidable?

It was a question which had stopped him from sleeping for the last several nights as mountains of slates reporting atrocities and massacres arrived in front of him. The Stormlanders were apparently busy torturing for days and days everyone who in the last seventeen years claimed to be a Targaryen loyalist. Between the nightmarish event known as the Fawnton Heresy and the uncountable purges, it was likely more than a billion men, women and children were dead. This was just for the Storm Sector.

It wasn’t better elsewhere.

The River Sector was...Viserys wasn’t sure there was a real Sector at all anymore. Sure, technically the stars were coloured in red, green or yellow depending on their allegiance depending on the last reports received, but his Admirals had sent scout cruisers and frigates inspect a few of the stars close to the Crown Sector. It was, honestly, a bloodbath of epic proportions. Centuries-old feuds were settled in the most gory and destructive ways imaginable known to man. House Darry and its allies were still technically on top, but in reality they controlled just a few systems around Harrenhal and Darry. Everywhere else, it was chaos and murder, with the law of the strongest dictating who was the new local King.

The Vale was burning too. The friends Rhaegar had paid with money and reconstruction projects were on the back foot, as the Arryns made the great purge they had been unable to begin after the Usurper’s Rebellion. There was also a Blackfyre girl thrown into the cauldron of war, killing septons and highborn right and left, and establishing Gulltown as her private realm.

The other regions were too far to have a good view of the situation, but there were already bad news about the Iron Islands, pleas for reinforcements and self-destruct confirmations drones which had been sent by dead people several weeks ago. The northern Reach had received hundreds of raids from Baratheon and Martell flotillas. What they didn’t wipe out, they towed with them back to their homes, crippling economies and killing by starvation or lack of air and environmental systems tens of thousands people.

And Viserys was sadly sure there were more and more atrocities he didn’t know about and probably never would.

Westeros was burning, and the modest crown upon his head was looking more and more ridiculous as each day passed. In one month of terror, bloodshed and loathing, there had been more Westerosi killed in war than in the last three wars combined and the escalation continued.

Could he have prevented this?

Could King Viserys Targaryen, Third of the Name, have prevented Westerosi killing each other if he proclaimed himself King a few years before?

In his most realistic hours, Viserys knew there had not been many scenarios to remove his brother before the moment he did. He was Admiral of Dragonstone, not Admiral of King’s Landing. As long as the capital fleet was at full strength around the capital world and convinced backing Rhaegar was an acceptable evil, overthrowing Rhaegar I Targaryen would require a fleet of forty-fifty ships of the line, and even with this firepower on hand, it was possible the current civil war would have begun nonetheless.

Let his brother die during the Greyjoy Rebellion and take the Regency for his nephew? Aegon had been a spoiled brat then, but not irredeemable. Alas, Mace Tyrell or Tywin Lannisters would have probably insisted becoming Hand of the King, and denying them would have been the guarantee for a new series of great insurrection.

And even if by an impossible miracle, he managed to content the Westerners and the Reachers, the truth was...he had not realised how much hate millions of Westerosi hated the Targaryen dynasty. His father, his elder brother...they were loathed by the North, the Vale and the Storm Sectors. According to his best spies, should he try to walk down a street in an Arryn city, there was a hundred percent chance he would be torn to pieces before the hour was over, battle-armour or no battle-armour.

Killing prisoners of war who had honourably surrendered by drowning them in molten metal or burning them on wildfire pyres, or fought to fight in depraved gladiatorial games...it left an impression on the smallfolk and the highborn.

The North and Dorne had never even acknowledged they had received his overture letters. That’s how bad the situation was in these distant Sectors.

Reassurance or not, all the claimants of House Targaryen had already lost the North, the Vale, the Princedom of Dorne and the Storm Sector, Stannis Baratheon ‘loyalty reassurances’ non-withstanding. You didn’t call yourself Warmaster because you wanted to bend the knee to the Iron Throne ‘at the earliest opportunity’. He was not Jon Connington, thank you very much, to believe these lies.

It was the Usurper’s Rebellion. It was the heart of the problem. Or was it? Maybe it was the Defiance of Duskendale which was the root of all problems...

No, it was the moment his father burned Rickard Stark that the North was lost. It was the Usurper’s Rebellion which had begun all of these massacres and vengeance rebellions. And since Elbert Arryn had been killed in the days after, any attempt to pacify the Vale would either require annihilating the Arryn name forever or offering fantastic sums as apology.

It was too late. And since he had a good idea how beloved House Targaryen was in the Iron Sector...fine, their control over the Seven Sectors had relied a lot on overwhelming force and not much subtlety.

In ancestor’s terms, they were behaving too much like Maegor the Cruel and Baelor the Befuddled, and not enough like the Conciliator and the Unlikely. House Targaryen had believed itself unassailable and taken its desires for reality, because no matter their crimes, they had won two wars.

They had forgotten it took only one big defeat for the fall to begin. And Rhaegar...Rhaegar had been many things, but popular had certainly not been included in the list.

It was his fault. Their father had not been the same since Duskendale, but the realm was functioning...until he decided to conspire with the Lords Paramount and organise these ridiculous –and ruinous – festivities at Harrenhal. And then he kidnapped a woman betrothed to one another, sundering the kingdom and humiliating his wife...

Maybe he should have killed his brother in 290AAC and tried his chance with the Seven after his death. It was not like he could make things worse with a crown on his head for a decade than the prophecy-obsessed buffoon had during his reign.

“It looks so calm, your Grace,” Lord Guncer Sunglass spoke, as he continued to watch the stars and wonder at the failings of his family.

“It is,” Viserys answered. “I think it’s the old proverb of the calm before the storm.”

“I would have preferred this battle to be anywhere else, my King,” the Crown Lord admitted.

“Oh?”

“It is the most populated system of Westeros. A lot of smallfolk and non-warriors are going to be caught in the crossfire.”

“A good point, Lord Sunglass. Unfortunately, we both know it’s because King’s Landing is the capital that it has gained so much population compared to older and more prestigious systems.”

Viserys asked his next question more for confirmation than anything else.

“My wife and my daughter have left for Dragonstone?”

“Yes your Grace, the Dragonstone convoy left two hours ago with many nobles’ and soldiers’ families.”

He was able to somehow relax hearing this. Whatever the outcome of this battle, he certainly didn’t intend Lynesse and Rhaella to pay the price for his failures. Some part of him hoped Aegon and his allies were not so far gone to order the murder of his baby girl, but the cynical part of him told him Rhaegar’s precious son had never shed a tear when it was time to dispose of certain girls desiring leaving his ‘service’.

It was better to put all relatives out of the grasp of the former Crown Prince. And he had already sent the old and loyal Lord Celtigar to the system-arsenal with Sal Blackrock. That way, should he perish, the Targaryens of King’s Landing would still survive and be claimants everyone would have to acknowledge. The Deep Space Fleet would close the Gullet to deep space foreign and internal trade. And without this trade, the capital was frankly more a burden than a boon...well, more a burden than it was at the moment.

So yes, he had sent away every non-indispensable Lord and fighter he could spare from the defence of King’s Landing. Betting the greatest battle he had ever fought to go his way when he was outnumbered and in charge of a decrepit war machine was not sounding like a very good idea, and most of his advisors agreed.

Propaganda and politics forbid him to flee the moment the battle began, but at least he had been able to put many contingencies in place...including the new fortifications at Stokeworth and Rosby. King’s Landing may not be able to stop the armada coming from Bywater Rest, but if they bled it enough here, maybe they could prevent it from taking other star systems.

“Are the defences around the Bywater jump point completed per the instructions I gave?”

“They are, my King. Fifteen million mines cover the jump point, and we have emplaced six other fields thorough the system. We have over four hundred star fortresses in second line, bolstered by half a million plasma, laser and missile platforms. We can count for the battle around the jump point on ten thousand starfighters, our two super-battleships, eleven armoured cruisers, and forty scout cruisers.”

At the mention of the super-battleships, his Admiral’s disappointment was obvious.

“You want to say it. You can.”

“With due respect, my King, the *Vhagar* and the *Victorious Dragon* cost an enormous price...”

“They should have been scrapped before their final trials were over,” Viserys gritted his teeth. “As you said, building and arming these monstrosities cost us too much. A fact I don’t find so insignificant now that I’ve been able to discover how much debt the ‘generosities’ of my brother have sunk the treasury into. What kind of super-capital ships can be considered battle-worthy when his engines are sure to be disabled before it meets the enemy?”

The *Vhagar* had to be towed next to the fortresses defending the Bywater jump point. The *Victorious Dragon* had escaped this humiliation at least, though the fact it had required six days to get in position was not exactly something to gloat about.

All the old and new ship classes his flag officers had considered expendable for the space battle had gone with the two space behemoths.

“And let’s not forget both our officers and those of the enemy have gone to the same schools, pushed for the same doctrines, prepared the same operations. Everyone before this war began thought it was madness to use ships of the line and bigger ships for a jump point battle.”

“To be fair...err, your Grace...it isn’t exactly...”

“Oh, I know most of these forces are going to be massacred.” He admitted. “But if they lost too many ships of the line entering the system, they will have no choice to retreat. In this instance, that our enemies have hulls and crew so similar to ours is a thorn in their side. They can’t exactly convince themselves that one of their ships is worth two of ours. And better tactics can only get you so far...especially when you’ve yet to fight your first real battle. We have twenty-five ships of the line and twenty-six battlecruisers. It’s not a fleet they can forget...and there are all the other surprises we have prepared for them this last month.”

Alarms screamed the next second and Viserys knew in his bones and heart this time it was not a false alert or a simulation to convince the troops to take their training seriously. No, this time it was the real deal...and as to confirm his thoughts the tactical displays began to flash in with hundreds of enemy signatures.

“So it begins,” Lord Guncer Sunglass said.

“So it ends,” Viserys corrected him automatically. “But ultimately, it is somewhat fitting when you think about it.”

The voice of the last living son of Aerys II Targaryen decreased to a murmur.

“Over three hundred years ago the Seven Sectors were created here. We forged a realm with three dragons...and now they are gone. If Westeros must end, I think it is appropriate to do it in this system. We raised our banner here for the first time...we will raise it for the last.”

Then he opened the priority channel and spoke. No great speech, his men had other things to care about in what promised to be very agitated hours.

“The enemy is here. They will not give you any mercy. Return the favour. FIRE AND BLOOD!”

“FIRE AND BLOOD! DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 01.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

During the battle-preparations, Aelyx and Adrian had agreed with Aegon that the traitors certainly hadn’t been able to increase the defences of the jump point, never mind increasing them.

This optimism, unfortunately, did last exactly the time it took them to see what was waiting for them at the exit of the jump point.

“FIRE! FIRE AT WILL!”

Three scout cruisers escorting the *Conqueror* were pulverised before they had the time to register they were under attack.

The proto-shields of the *Balerion* flared up and the massive super-battleship shook as hundreds of missiles exploded at distances far too close to comfort.

“Concentrate on the fortresses first,” Jacaerys gave the order, knowing very well this could be his last order. “Full salvo, don’t try to save any ammunition.”

It was destruction in its rawest form and it was impossible to say everything that was going on. The rebel defenders fired everything that they had, and by the Smith, how had they managed to find so many forts and platforms in one damned month?

The forts were tough but the armament of the ships of the line and the super-battleships was no joke. One by one the fixed star citadels began to die. The problem was that they weren’t dying alone. Mines were exploding by the thousands, engulfing everything, like the heavy cruiser *Courage* or the light carrier *Hornet*. There were plasma platforms firing at the equivalent of knife range for a space engagement, and no matter how resistant the durasteel armour, taking one hit like this was nine times out of ten the last thing a warship would see.

They were winning. Hundreds of Reach-built Paladin starfighters were decimating their Magma opponents – and the ‘incredible superiority’ promised by the Crown industrialists was nothing more than a giant scam, obviously – the fortresses were transformed into a pile of debris, the platforms were blasted apart and the anti-mine sweepers were at last creating safe lanes for the capitals ships to advance. There had been thousands of enemy starfighters, but the enemy had miscalculated, sending them too soon against their battle-line.

“The traitors are down to a third of their fortresses, Admiral. We should have finished them in fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Jacaerys thanked him, but there was no triumph in his words. They had already taken insane losses for what was just a mere jump point. At least six Crown battlecruisers and eleven heavy cruisers were gone or so damaged they were going to be written off as total losses. “Tell the *Meraxes* to advance on the main lane we have just removed the mines of, and Admiral Rowan will follow...”

“Enemy signatures, enemy signatures at five thousand kilometres!”

“What?” Theon shouted.

“Confirm...” Aelyx had not even the time to finish this command as the tactical displays revealed the presence of the *Vhagar* and the *Victorious Dragon*, flanked by eleven armoured cruisers and now accelerating towards their fleet while firing everything they had in their stores.

Plasma and laser armament was travelling at the speed of light, so at least the slaughter they observed was quick. It was the only good news he would find in the hours to come. Everyone had known in the capital fleet the engines of the *Vhagar* were fucked up, but Jacaerys had never imagined a strategist would decide the logical solution would be to order it for a jump point defence. And even if you decided to sacrifice one super-battleship that way, you sure as in the Seven Hells didn’t do it for two! Had Viserys Targaryen any idea how expensive a super-battleship was? Did he think capital ships grew on fruit trees?

The exchange barely lasted three salvoes, as the Crow and Reach warships poured all the firepower of their main batteries in these new opponents.

It lasted less than five minutes, and it was fought at such a short distance that even ‘knife range’ seemed an inaccurate metaphor for the bloodbath.

The *Victorious Dragon* died last. It died last, but it did not die alone. The *Meraxes* had broken in half and huge explosions continued to tear apart its prow and its sides. Ships of the line were venting air, water, parts, weapons and missiles...those which were still alive, that it. The *Anemone*, the *Summer Tree*, the *Flower of Hope* were nowhere to be found, disappeared in the fury of the battle...and the *Golden Grove* was no longer answering, its dead carcass drifting away from the battlefield with no life-signs aboard and a hole the size of a medium asteroid where the bridge should have been.

To sum-up they had just lost one super-battleship, four ships of the line – including the flagship of the 7th Reach Fleet and its Admiral Lord Mathis Rowan – and had three more ships of the line out of service for many, many months. And naturally they had also lost the warships which had already been battered in the first minutes of this violence-filled insanity.

In return, they had destroyed two super-battleships that they had hoped return to loyal service, eleven armoured cruisers having no place on the field of battle and forty scout cruisers which were definitely second-rate.

But what worried him above all was that there had been not a single surrender or an attempt for a loyalist commander to try to bend the knee to King Aegon. Not one. Granted the traitor Viserys was no fool and had certainly put forwards tens of thousands of his fiercest supporters in these defences to fight with this suicidal fury, but...

“The main fleet is waiting for us two million kilometres away, on the most direct path leading to King’s Landing.” Theon informed them fatalistically. “They have twenty-five ships of the line and twenty-six battlecruisers, give or take it. Our sensors don’t see a single Deep Space hull in this fleet.”

“The traitors probably sent back the Dragonstone squadrons to Driftmark and Dragonstone,” where they wouldn’t be able to assault without more help from the Arbor and Oldtown, Aelyx didn’t voice the problem, but Jacaerys knew it was there.

“It’s not that big a problem,” Adrian commented unhappily. “We can’t win in the first place against this fleet. We must retreat. We lost too much against the fixed defences. If we continue the slaughter, we are going to lose the *Conqueror* for sure, and more ships of the line.”

“I think you underestimate the firepower of the *Balerion*,” Theon became pale as he saw King Aegon rush towards them with a furious expression, but Adrian had his back turned.

“The Balerion can’t win a battle by itself, and it will take more damage as our other ships of the line are destroyed.” Adrian told loudly and at this moment Jacaerys feared the worst. “If we continue this battle, I suppose there’s a chance we will win the day and Viserys will lose his fleet...the problem is that we will have lost our fleet too!”

The Heir of House Buckwell was struck by his liege from behind and had not the time to say one more word as the Hightower Kingsguard seized him by the throat. Since one was in Terminator battle-armour and the other was in his officer’s spacesuit, there was not even a shadow of contest.

“Adrian is a bit too pessimistic...” Jacaerys tried to defend his staff officer.

“He’s a defeatist and a coward,” Aegon snarled. “Garth, kill him.”

There was no time to stop this madness. The Kingsguard drew his long blade, threw Adrian on the ground and decapitated him.

“So die all cowards and traitors...” the cousin he had sworn his oaths to said with a large smile. “You want to say something Jacaerys?”

“I hope you are proud of your butchery, your Grace,” he could not help but spat. “We have just lost the Antlers System.”

“Is it another defeatist talk?” And at this moment, Jacaerys knew his cousin was raving, barking mad. There was nothing sane to save in his mind. How could they have been so blind? They had invented excuses to justify their desires and their fears, but...

But Aegon was ready to kill them if they dared voicing the truth or opposing what they thought unwise courses of actions.

This madman would not hesitate cutting him down on the spot like Adrian, cousin or not cousin.

As the blood of House Buckwell coloured red the golden carpet of the *Balerion’s* bridge, Jacaerys understood what had pushed Houses like Baratheon, Arryn and Stark to rebel.

The Targaryens were mad. At least Aerys, Rhaegar and Aegon were. They were all mad...and if they were given the chance, they would take Westeros with them into the abyss of destruction and flames.

But opposing him at this moment would achieve nothing but add his body to the list of victims. And Jacaerys did not believe in dying for nothing.

“Your orders, my King, will be obeyed to the letter,” he curtsied and spoke in an obedient tone. Seconds later, Theon and Aelyx imitated him.

“Don’t worry my friends.” Aegon’s smile looked crazier than it was moments ago.

*We are not your friends*, Jacaerys wanted to scream before burying a vibro-sword in the gut of his cousin. *You don’t know the very meaning of friendship*.

“My Red Witch is going to succeed where you have failed.”

The Admiral of the Crown Fleet could not believe a sentence could put more dread and fear in his veins, but once more he was proven wrong.

**Lord Guncer Sunglass, 01.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

“What are they thinking?” Guncer knew he had not been able to remove the stupefaction from his question.

“I don’t think *whoever* is in command of this fleet thinks a lot,” Viserys replied grimly, his accentuation on ‘whoever’ telling he knew very well the man who was calling the shots on the other side. “A rational Admiral would have withdrawn after the hammering they received.”

Guncer could not say his King was wrong. The defence of the jump point had ended in a brutal defeat for their forces, but by the Seven they had made the bastards pay for it! The Reach-Crown alliance had lost six ships of the line and one super-battleship in this orgy of destruction, and at least five of the former were so damaged they were forced to stay back with the translating transports and supply ships instead of accompanying the rest of their fleet as they advanced in their direction.

That was eleven ships of the line out of commission...and since they hadn’t hidden the core of the Tyrell forces somewhere nearby, this was eleven out of twenty-eight and one out of three in super-capital ships. They had also lost ten or so battlecruisers and ten more were damaged to varying degrees. The stress of battlefield environment and the long travel between Highgarden and King’s Landing was more difficult to estimate, but by any conservative estimate, a good half of Aegon Targaryen warships was out of this war for the next year and possibly more.

“I don’t see how they think they can possibly win in a straight fight against us, my King.” He replied honestly. “They have seventeen ships of the line to fight against our twenty-five. I will grant whoever is in charge we have no super-battleships anymore, but given how badly the *Conqueror* is trailing in the end of their formation, I think only the *Balerion* is fully operational.”

As galling it was to admit it, it seemed the very philosophy of the super-battleship - at least the pre-war Targaryen ideas – had been utterly in the wrong. With three of them utterly ravaged in less than one hour and one seriously crippled, it was difficult to pretend otherwise.

“I suppose they have a few tricks to show us, but I’m bringing all the second wave of the starfighters and I have over thirty thousand of them with more waiting for the third wave.” Guncer continued. “I won’t say there’s zero chance they will win this battle...but if they continue to suffer an attrition like the one they suffered against our forts, their fleet will have worth only for the scrap-yard workers dismantling the dead hulks.”

And it made no sense at all. Yes, the Tyrells had obviously other fleets to fight this war – the last official pre-war reports gave them around one hundred and ninety-plus ships of the line and at least two more super-battleships – but the fourteen they had brought here were still a massive military investment and the fourteen Crown ships of the line were all the partisans of Aegon had until they triumphed in this battle and managed to ramp mass production in the shipyards.

Which was damn unlikely, in his opinion. King Viserys had shared enough of the Iron Throne’s critical financial situation for him to know there wasn’t any money to build a new fleet. Modifying the existing hulls had been done, and it had already created more debt they couldn’t afford. But let’s assume Aegon found the money somewhere, where was he going to find the materials and the manpower? King’s Landing was a hotbed of violence and rioting, only kept somewhat below the threshold of explosion by King Viserys’ reforms.

Ships of the line, moreover, weren’t exactly cheap or built with a click of fingers. No one in existence, not even Braavosi engineers, had built a ship of the line in less than a year. In peace time, the King’s Landing construction yards had been far closer to two years...and they had not the problem of crazy septons and rebels trying to sabotage every hour of work by strapping bombs to their chests and opening sections of the orbital stations to the void.

So yes, maybe this fleet was going to be crippled. But the fleet of their opponents would be too.

“Very well, you can open fire, Lord Sunglass.”

“At once, my King! Open fire!”

Missiles were pushed in the tubes and expelled for their great purpose of killing the idiots willing to follow the son of Rhaegar the Mad.

And then reality convulsed and shadows swarmed the bridge.

Guncer stared with his mouth wide open for a second...before running and pushing aside King Viserys as a thing of blade and shadows lunged for the head of his sovereign.

It was his right hand which was cut instead...and Guncer screamed in agony as pain devoured every part of his body.

“The King! Save the King!” His officers had realised the danger and formed a chain of bodies. But there were so many shadows...so many things lurking in the dark...

“Admiral, you must go!”

Who was speaking? He wasn’t seeing anything but light and shadows...

“The King, the King...”

And Lord Guncer Sunglass, Admiral of the Crown Fleet of King’s Landing, held his last breath.

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 01.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

“Yes! She did it!”

Jacaerys didn’t know what the Red Witch had done in the quarters she had been given inside the *Balerion*, and he had a feeling he really didn’t want to know.

Force to admit, that yes, it had worked. The enemy fleet had brutally and without explication lost its cohesion after the first missile exchange, and by now the men who had sworn their arms and weapons to Viserys Targaryen were fighting as lone units or in tiny squadrons.

What had been until minutes ago a certain defeat was now looking like a miraculous victory.

“We are going to destroy them, by R’hllor!”

Jacaerys looked at the display only to see the ship of the line *Arrax* disappear in a star-like explosion and gritted his teeth. One more ship of the line and over five thousand irreplaceable men lost. Five seconds later, it was the *Caraxes* which died as a laser warhead detonated in its ammunition stores.

There were no survivors.

By the numbers arriving in front of him, the defenders of King’s Landing were losing two ships of the line for one of the First Crown-Reach Fleet.

Their enemies had lost ten ships of the line so far and as they entered laser range, began to lose more. But the Admiral who had succeeded Mathis Rowan and Jacaerys’ own command were bleeding and terribly wounded. He had lost five more ships of the line and the super-battleship *Conqueror* was in so bad shape the cloud of air and debris was now visible to the naked eye.

Technically, not all ships which had entered the capital system were lost, but he had seen the first assessments of preliminary damage. Save one or two exceptions, these ships of the line were not worth the electronics installed on them. Repairing them, even with the specialised shipyards of King’s Landing, was going to take years and it would be less costly and easier to scrap them and build new ships to replace them. And this was for ships of the line and battlecruisers, the toughest warships of the fleet. The smaller and more vulnerable units were space slaughterhouses.

At this moment, the chief Admiral of King Aegon didn’t know where in the Seven Hells he was going to find the experienced spacemen to replace this insane list of casualties. In another time, he would have taken manpower from the other Crown squadrons but those were dying against their fire right now. The Dragonstone fleet was of course unavailable...and the Tyrells were already meeting challenges to crew their humongous behemoth-like fleet.

Spacemen took far more time to train and bring up to veteran level than mere infantrymen or tank pilots. They were also more difficult to recruit and their salaries were more expensive. The last thing you wanted aboard a super-battleship was for your engineering section to suddenly become displeased by the fact their pay was late.

“They are breaking! They are breaking off!”

And yet, the crazy murderer he was forced to call his cousin was not seeing any of this. He saw victory...and he had already killed one General and five junior officers who had dared presenting opinions and facts supporting the contrary.

The *Conqueror* died in a cataclysmic burst of plasma and lasers, and suddenly the Balerion was the first and last super-battleship in the system.

It gave Jacaerys the envy to weep. The two older super-battleships had cost massive sums of gold dragons in their time, and there were more than ten thousand men aboard. But the *Meraxes* and the *Vhagar* were far larger than the *Victorious Dragon* and the *Conqueror*, with a crew of twelve thousand each. And they were losing so many capital ships alongside them...

“Yes, they are fleeing, your Grace,” and it was a good thing they did. The enemy fleet had lost something like sixteen ships of the line and twelve battlecruisers with more crippled and heavily damaged. But their fleet was more or less gone too. They had begun this battle with two super-battleships and seventeen ships of the line; now they had one and five operational, with several more limping and trying to maintain their structural integrity.

For all intent and purpose, this fleet was finished.

The Crown Fleet was finished. The Dragonstone squadrons were the last formation worthy to be called a fleet in this Sector.

Short of a miracle, it was likely they would need more than five years to rebuild the Crown order of battle to a fraction of what it was five years ago. It would be far more difficult to replace the men...

“We must pursue! Pursue them and finish them!” the madman barked.

This time he had to intervene.

“No.”

“What did you say?” In the purple eyes, Jacaerys saw his death but he didn’t flinch.

“I said no. Our missiles are nearly exhausted, they are around eight percent at this very moment, our plasma and laser batteries are overheating and our starfighter screen is completely gone. If we try to pursue them, we will have nothing to shoot them with.”

“My Red Witch will...”

“Can your Red Witch refill the missile magazines with new missiles in the next minutes? Can she remove tiredness and exhaustion with one word? The men of this fleet have been fighting and bleeding for hours. They need to rest and they need to work on repairing the fleet’s warships.”

Those that were still salvageable, at least.

For something like half a minute, he was forced to look in these demented eyes...and internally wondered if he was going to die like Adrian.

“Admiral, the rebels are fleeing towards the Rosby jump point. They are...they are abandoning King’s Landing!”

At last, King Aegon VI Targaryen, a young man obviously crazier than his father, cackled and turned around. Jacaerys would have sighed in relief.

“You have five hours to repair and resupply, Admiral. Then we will attack King’s Landing.”

“By your orders, our Grace,” Lord Jacaerys Velaryon answered, feeling nothing but scorn. The casualties were astronomical and as the enemy fleet continue to run away, Jacaerys wanted to grimace. There were still nine ships of the line and fourteen battlecruisers out there...and while all of them were more damaged than his warships, he doubted it was a coincidence they were fleeing towards Rosby. Especially as several small mobile shipyards he had visited in the past were clearly absent in the King’s Landing System.

And then there was the planet itself they had to conquer. If Viserys’ land commanders were as determined not to surrender, the armies they had brought with them were also going to be hammered and destroyed like the navy had just been.

“Jacaerys, there are massive explosions around several orbital habitats. I think the garrison is blowing up several shipyards and military orbital facilities,” Theon announced in a low voice. Aegon had left the bridge, but Barristan Selmy was still there.

This was one more reverse he had hoped to avoid...their supply difficulties were going to be daunting for the next days, and likely catastrophic for the next days.

“This victory is going to be worse than a defeat,” Aelyx whispered, throwing fearful glances all around. “We won’t be able to rebuild anything in a couple of months, and for the Kingslanders we will be the one who will have massacred their fathers, their brothers...Sweet Maiden we destroyed so much infrastructure I think High Chelsted will be able to provide more repair facilities than the capital.”

Jacaerys didn’t answer but wrote a few words on his personal data-slate before removing them and thus preventing the consoles from registering what he had told his two friends.

Theon and Aelyx saluted, before the three of them returned to their duties.

In the void, the crippled warships continued to bleed air, water, corpses and many things he didn’t want to identify.

The First Crown Fleet and the Seventh Reach Fleet had won the space battle of King’s Landing.

**General Janos Slynt, 2.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

Janos was the last to return to the command centre, having taken the time to escort his Celia, Donos and Alia to the transports leaving for Dragonstone. In the past, he had believed it just to be another privilege of the highborn, but this time he was very glad to be given the access for his loved ones. He could only pray for Jothos’ return...the losses of the navy were high and the only reliable report indicated Lord Guncer Sunglass had perished but King Viserys Targaryen yet live, though the sovereign was wounded and in the hands of the healers. And Morros was in one of the bunkers somewhere, waiting for the imminent assault among one of the armoured divisions.

“I will not lie to you,” Lord Baelor Staunton, Supreme Commander of King’s Landing by the will of the King, began. “Whatever you think the invasion is going to be, it is going to be ten times worse. The Reachers and the brutes sworn to Aegon Targaryen see us as traitors to be exterminated, and they will kill us all after we throw down our weapons and negotiate our surrender. You saw the images of these killer-shadows. That’s seriously heretical stuff, and I have no doubt they have more damned things to torture our bodies and our souls if we are imprisoned in the cells of the mad butchers.”

The aged Lord who was one of the most respected Generals of the Crown Army in his time coughed before continuing.

“Do not believe this is something I like. Whoever controls the orbital, controls the planet, and let’s not pretend otherwise, they will have in three or four hours the control of everything above our heads. After that, they will be able to bombard us at will. Sanity and logic tell us to surrender in front of a reasonable enemy in order to prevent further atrocities, but I don’t believe we can expect much mercy and compassion from the enemy. Please raise your hands if you believe otherwise.”

No one raised his hand. They had all heard the screams transmitted from the fleet communications. Whoever was able to organise that was not going to smile, pat them on the shoulder and proclaim a general amnesty for everyone having bent the knee to King Viserys.

“Our King is wounded but he lives. He sacrificed much to help us. Are we going to let his sacrifices and his reforms in vain?”

“No!” It was Ser Justin Massey, in charge of the Behemoths. “DEATH TO THE MAD KING!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

“FIRE AND BLOOD!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

The skies reddened and began to burn above King’s Landing.