**The Dying Peace Arc**

**Chapter 3**

**The Lies of the Long Peace**

*According to the Targaryens-bought maesters, the Long Peace was a period of peace – the name supposedly spoke for itself – and prosperity. A new generation was born and lived without experiencing the atrocities of war and bloodshed. Cities were rebuilt. The damage caused by rampaging armies and orbital strikes on countless planets was erased. Tempers and feuds were forgotten. Hastily recruited young men returned to their homes and enjoyed a long period of rest and celebrations. From the date of 18.04.290AAC onwards, Westeros was at peace and the Seven Sectors united benevolently under the Iron Throne.*

*This was nothing more than a huge lie.*

*Every Lord of importance was increasing his military forces. Overtly or secretly, hundreds of new warships were built in the orbital shipyards. Tanks, aircraft, rifles, anti-air artillery, battle-armours and countless other devastating weapons were produced. The former supporters of Robert’s Baratheon had not forgotten their grievances of the Usurper’s War. Among the Houses who had supported House Targaryen during this civil war, many were feeling unjustly sidelined by the Iron Throne. Dorne in effect if not in name was independent from the rest of Westeros. The River Sector was divided like it had never been before. The Storm Sector was at the edge of bankruptcy. Riots and attacks against symbols of power were spreading throughout the realm.*

*For the common smallfolk in the streets, the sensation was not one of peace. Many planets had established new systems of conscription. Taxes were on the rise, and the monthly income next increase was not coming, despite the promises conveyed by Galactic Targaryen News. New regulations came out of nowhere to become the law, and few of these texts were to the taste of the population.*

*This was peace. No Blackwood trooper was shooting at a Bracken-owned building. Lord Jon Connington was recognised as the legitimate Lord Paramount of the Storm Sector. There were no Dornish raids in the Marches. The great merchant companies were free to trade at will. But it was a very uneasy coexistence. The erratic commands signed with the Royal Seal were not inspiring joyous thoughts to the highborn and smallfolk.*

*And in reality, even this peace was a lie.*

*The Iron Sector, defeated and forced to surrender on 18.04.290AAC, was burning again in the fires of rebellion and insurrection.*

*When one examined the facts, it was completely illogical. The Ironborn had been crushed during their ill-fated Rebellion. The survivors had learned hard the price of treachery and the occupying forces had lengthily and methodically destroyed most of the arsenal built on Balon Greyjoy’s orders. There was no money to buy weapons from outside sources, no great resources which could interest foreign interests and no friends to come to the rescue. For millions of Ironborn, the survival of Victarion Greyjoy was a cruel rumour and besides the man’s reputation was tainted by his monumental defeat of the Arbor. The Regents and other high-ranking Westerosi Generals and Admirals had bluntly delivered speeches where they were warned fighting their new masters would be an extremely quick death sentence.*

*Rebellion in these conditions should have been close to insanity. But there was a little condition Rhaegar and his councillors had forgotten while they were carving the Sector for their bannersmen.*

*The life under military occupation had to be bearable.*

*Many conquerors had forgotten it time and time again on the galactic scene to their dismay. Each time, the oppressed people broke their chains and fought to reclaim their freedom. And why would the Ironborn be so different?*

*The ‘peace’ King Rhaegar Targaryen, Lord Tywin Lannister and Lord Mace Tyrell had imposed to the Iron Sector was not to last long. By 05.09.290AAC, the Tyrant-General of Great Wyk Ser Gregor Clegane, more infamously known by his nickname of ‘the Beast’, wiped out an entire village. Its inhabitants had apparently had the temerity to protest the rapes and the murders of several young women. They were incinerated by plasma guns in retaliation.*

*This day was the last one the planet of Great Wyk knew peace. The Ironborn had seen the true face of their conquerors, and knew they had no justice, no prosperity and no mercy to wait from them. The insurrection organised in the shadows and struck the Western soldiers at their most vulnerable moments. Gregor Clegane counter-attacked by seizing thousands of people in the streets and giving them to his torture experts. With the assistance of his subordinate Ser Amory Lorch, a regime of terror was enforced on Great Wyk. Tens of thousands Ironborn were killed, and yet the bloodier massacres never stopped the attacks and revolts. The reparations the Nobles Houses were supposed to pay were close to zero. The illegal weapon trade was flourishing, blockade or not blockade, laws or no laws. The ground garrison of Western soldiers, initially one million and a half strong, was reinforced each year to reach three million and a half regulars by mid-300AAC. Great Wyk was costing House Lannister billions of gold dragons to hold for no return save harsh critics of non-Westerner parties. Gregor Clegane was uncontrollable and killed many Ironborn lords, driving the rest underground. These new rebels did not wait long to take up arms with the old ones and strike back. The Western soldiers were assassinated right and left, and the most spectacular terrorist attacks saw sabotaged shuttles slamming in military bases at Mach speed.*

*Great Wyk was unsalvageable and the pleas of the other military governors to King Rhaegar Targaryen and Lord Tywin Lannister were ignored, with predictable results.*

*Out of eight planets inhabited in the Iron Sector, there was a single stellar system which was not erupting in violence every week: Harlaw. The authority of Lord Paramount Rodrik Harlaw and the reasonable stance taken by Inspector-General Axell Florent had until 300AAC managed to keep the occupation calm and the economy functioning – though the benefits were invariably swallowed by the reparation payments.*

*Unfortunately, it was the exception in a dark ocean of violence. Sellswords, pirates and corsairs were circling around the Iron Systems, lending their strength to one side or the other. It was bad enough most of the military governors had arrived without a strategy when they were nominated for this task; in their minds, the occupation had been a way to fill their pockets with gold, platinum, trade agreements and raw resources. The Westerosi Lords didn’t want to hear that before taking that wealth, there was a lot of investment and rebuilding. The Ironborn would have gladly accepted a return to their pre-war lives. Ser Desmond Redwyne, Ser Lyn Corbray, Ser Tygett Lannister and Lord Corwin Musgood –among others – weren’t willing to let this future exist. The religious persecutions started by the end of 290AAC, generating outrage and disgust. The reforms of the justice system – giving the garrison forces a free hand on practically everything – antagonised further the population of Pyke and the other major urban centres. The heavy and light industries were owned by Reach, Western, Crown and River companies. Licences which had been property of Ironborn elites were sold to their ‘benefactors’ for ridiculously low sums.*

*These were exactly the measures required for a maximum of unrest to spread. While the disobedience and the revolts never reached the level of Great Wyk, the garrison forces from the Lonely Light to Orkmont were firing their guns every month and not for the customary training exercises.*

*There were a few optimist commanders to report at home these problems were going to be minor nuisances in the long term. After one decade of military occupation which gained them the hatred of the Ironborn, these voices had long been silenced. The garrisoning was thankless, sabotage of the production lines was business as usual, the workforce was poorly educated and unmotivated, the sums they squeezed from the destroyed economy were smaller than in their darkest nightmares and worst of all, the duty never ended.*

*In a failure that was sadly typical of the final years of the Targaryen dynasty, there had been no rotation system to garrison the vanquished Iron Sector. There was also very little supervision; one of the reasons the Beast could remain in post no matter how many atrocities he caused. In the Florent-Harlaw case, the consequences were positive, as the young Lord Alekyne Florent was perfectly willing to endorse his uncle’s actions as long as they remained bloodless. In the Saltcliffe case, it was the complete opposite: Lyn Corbray and the forces he had gained from Houses Corbray, Lynderly and Grafton had no one to answer to: Lord Jon Arryn had not given his assent to this move and never provided any help.*

*Balon Greyjoy was long dead, but his sins continued to haunt the living of the Iron Sector. As long as the Long Peace continued, the loyalists could strangle the Sector for another decade. It was a very unreasonable condition, when Reach and Western men vied for total supremacy at court...*

Extract from the Lies and the Vengeance, Anonymous author, 320AAC.

**Ser Axell Florent, 08.07.300AAC, Pyke System**

The meeting opened, as usual, by the customary ten minutes of silence.

“Let it be known,” said finally Ser Desmond Redwyne in his authority as host of the council, “that the representative of Great Wyk has failed to present himself or to send a delegate speaking with his authority. Again.”

Ser Lyn chose this moment to snigger loudly, an unpleasant sound if there ever was one. And unavoidably, the ire of certain senior military commanders was roused.

“You find the insubordination of Clegane amusing, Corbray?” snarled Lord Corwin Musgood. The Storm Lord looked tired, in Axell’s opinion. His usually great beard was getting shorter year after year, and a lot of his hairs had turned grey and white. His eyes were bloodshot and there were new wrinkles on his middle-aged visage.

The Lord gathering in a single body the titles of Musgood Hall and Sentinel-General of the Lonely Light was not fifty name days old yet, but he looked like a man fifteen years older. Priceless medical treatments could do nothing when the patient was killing himself to save his fleet and his army from ruin.

“I’m finding amusing by the fact you still pretend we have any control over the Beast’s actions.” Ser Robin Ryger flinched when the name was uttered by the Vale commander. “The only person Clegane and Lorch listen to is Tywin Lannister. Only the Lord of Casterly Rock and the King can recall the monsters of Great Wyk...and last time I checked they were both busy ignoring us.”

The words were certainly blunt, not that it was a surprise Lyn Corbray was not a diplomatic man. But that didn’t mean he was wrong.

“I resent your accusations,” growled Ser Tygett Lannister, slamming his hands on the polished round table they were all seated around. The staring between the Valeman and the Westerner was impressive.

“Well, what do you wait to challenge me in duel?” Lyn’s smirk was back and becoming clearer by the second. His fighting hand went to the hilt of his long Valyrian blade. “It has been too long my Lady has tasted a warrior’s blood.”

It was amazing how fast the vast council room where the military governors of the Iron Sector had gathered could get frosty. One second, they were watching each other calmly, the other they were ready to kill each other. Idly, Axell wondered if the Small Council’s meetings were that interesting...probably not.

To his credit, Tygett Lannister continued to stare and didn’t react to the provocation. Good point for him, because Lyn Corbray was not a man who bluffed his way out of duels. The wielder of Lady Forlorn had ended many lives on the field of honour and thousands more. There were nasty rumours the younger brother of the current Lord Corbray was organising illegal fighting rings in the underground arenas of Saltcliffe with himself as the prime gladiator. They might be true, for all he knew.

“Enough,” ordered Ser Desmond, quickly followed by his second-in-command, Ser Humfrey Hightower. “Corbray, if you want a duel so badly, go to Great Wyk and challenge Ser Gregor Clegane.”

The tone employed by the cousin of Lord Paxter told the others men no tears would be shed for the one who lost this duel.

“Clegane is a Beast, not a swordsman...” The grumble was half-disdainful, but there was a light of fear in the Lyn’s eyes.

Seeing the biggest problem present around the table placated, the Regent of Pyke turned towards Ryger.

“How fares things on Old Wyk?”

Big, bald and old, the Riverlander was not an impressive figure and by the stone-faced expression he was harbouring, the answer to this particular question was all too predictable.

“Bad enough, Lord Regent.” In his brown uniform, Ser Robin Ryger had tacitly acknowledged the Regency of Pyke gave Redwyne a superior position to his title of Castellan-General of Old Wyk. Whether it was a command coming straight from House Darry or not, Axell had not managed to discover it. “The destruction of the last two Void Temples two months ago has enraged the population. Taxes collected have decreased by five percent, eight orbital mining extraction centres have been damaged, sabotage and disrepair on the ground are taking their usual tolls and I’ve lost over six thousand men dead with another fifteen thousand wounded in the last fortnight.”

Axell showed a grim expression of circumstance. He had not to force it, really. Once more, the soldiers were paying for the mistakes of their commanders. What had Ryger been thinking destroying religious cults right and left? If there was one poison they really didn’t need to throw into the toxic bath, it was the holy war of faith...

“And how many Void Priests did you kill?” The worsening economic situation left Desmond Redwyne and the subordinates he had come with insensible.

“Between four hundred and four hundred and thirty,” revealed the River Vice-Admiral. “The leaders of the *Prophets of the Void* have all been sentenced to death and their followers will dig in our darkest pits for the rest of their lives.”

“Very good,” the smile of his fellow Reacher was not feigned at all. “Soon the Void Religion will be utterly annihilated and the orders from our beloved King will have been accomplished to the letter.”

Ser Jarmen Buckwell coughed very loudly in the seconds after this declaration.

“You disagree, Admiral?”

“Oh no, Lord Regent,” There was something dark in the Crownlander’s posture. “I am sure we have methodically destroyed this heretical worship to the root. Their temples are blown up, their priests are dead, their holy texts and grounds have been burned and their material wealth has been confiscated. The few Priests we haven’t been able to kill are hidden in holes so deep they’re for all intent and purposes dead.”

“I’m not hearing a question,” remarked lightly Humfrey Hightower, and many junior officers behind him chuckled.

“Ah yes, how forgetful of me,” agreed Jarmen. “My interrogation is: what exactly was this feat supposed to accomplish?”

“We are paving the ground for the Seven!” How Hightower and his subordinates achieved this virtuous look in all sincerity, Axell preferred not to know, thank you very much. “Once the Void Religion will be utterly eradicated, there will be nothing to stop us from declaring the Faith the true and only religion of the Iron Sector!”

“Yes, because the Ironborn are going to flock to the septs by the thousands any day now,” Humfrey and Desmond’s face went red when they heard the sarcastic sentence.

This might be a little unfair. There were about one hundred thousand Seven-worshipping Ironborn these days...all on Harlaw granted...and for a Sector of around five billion people?

“All we need is a decade or two and the Ironborn culture will be forced to assimilate our religion and the traits we want,” added the Redwyne officer in a more composed affirmation.

“We don’t have a decade,” there was no irony in the Crown Lord’s words now. The man was deadly serious. Square and black-haired, the knight of House Buckwell serving as Defender-General of Orkmont was like a solid rock in the middle of a tempest, preparing to defend his point of view against all enemies. Not that he risked much: House Buckwell and his Lord were openly keeping their hands off this mess, and the worst which could happen to him was his recall at home...an unlikely possibility assuredly.

“My analysts have studied the numbers. The Orkmont System is in a better state than most, but their conclusions are I have a maximum of three years before the situation on the ground gets out of control and I’m forced to resort to extraordinary measures. I have not yet received a third of the money and a quarter of the materials I need to rebuild adequately the planet, and the men, women and children on the ground are tired to hear my excuses.”

“You’re right: these are poor excuses,” the glare which was directed at Tygett Lannister showed this intervention had damaged a bit more the relationships between the Western Sector and the supporters of the King.

Axell was ready for another dispute when a messenger ran inside the conference room, his face looking somewhere between horrified and terrified. The brown-haired youth in a superb green uniform handed the data-slate to Desmond Redwyne.

Whatever information was in it, it was sufficient grave for the Regent of Pyke’s face to become livid.

“There was a chemical attack on Great Wyk several days ago.” The commander of all space forces in the Pyke System managed to articulate after a moment to consider the news. “Gregor Clegane wanted to gas thousands of rebels...and ended launching the bombardment on his own men.”

Axell Florent had the sudden urge to hit something. He had come to build a power base safely away from Mace Tyrell’s reach, but idiots like Clegane and Lorch had ruined his plans before they had even begun...

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*According to the whispers spreading after the Greyjoy Rebellion, the antagonism between House Baratheon and House Connington started when Lord Robert Baratheon made a joke about Lord Jon Connington’s friendship with the then-Crown Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and matters escalated from there.*

*This was partially inexact, according to the archives of the Citadel and other old historical documents. While no one can doubt the enmity between Storm’s End and Griffin’s Roost reached its worst point after the Greyjoy Rebellion, this was far from the first time Lords of these two stellar systems had loud disagreements.*

*One jump away from Storm’s End itself, the system ruled by House Connington was a tenacious opponent for the Durrandon Kings in their conquest of the Storm Sector. Many fleets of the stag were lost in offensives to destroy the shipyards of the Griffin’s Belt and the numbers of armies bloodied trying to gain a foothold on the planet was not small. The Kings of the Storm fought many wars in order to see their stubborn neighbours bend the knee, and it was said with some justice that save House Swann of Stonehelm, no enemy proved as difficult to vanquish.*

*The victory of the Durrandon Kings and their unquestioned domination over the Storm Kingdom was not a boon for House Connington and tensions remained high for generations. Griffin’s Roost was a critical system to hold as it controlled the nexus of jump points making possible to get in and out the Rain sub-sector and exploit its vast resources. Taxes were high, and House Connington never received the authorisation to build more than the bare minimum of shipyards and orbital fortresses. Griffin’s Roost had been a powerhouse when it was independent, but under the Durrandon rule, the red and white banners were at best a second-rate power. The Lord of the Marches received the greatest part of the war investments and Griffin’s Roost had to arm its warships and army groups with very limited funds.*

*Yet House Durrandon disappeared with the Conquest, and the new House Baratheon proved far more amenable to their pleas. Orys Baratheon was named first Lord Paramount of the Storm Sector by the Conqueror himself. The formidable General needed political support to counterbalance the ambition of House Swann, House Grandison and House Fell. Lifting several military restrictions and taxes in exchange of the undying support of House Connington must have appeared like a good bargain to the new Lord of Storm’s End. Obviously, House Connington was never going to be authorised to challenge the centre of the Storm Sector but thanks to them, the southern flank of Storm’s End was going to be heavily guarded.*

*Two hundred and eighty years later, Lord Robert Baratheon discovered at his return in the Storm Sector they must have kept a better surveillance on their bannersmen. Lord Jon Connington stayed loyal to King Aerys II, delaying the mustering of a third of the Storm Sector by weeks and forcing the man who would be called the Usurper to fight three battles in the Summerhall System in a disadvantageous position. When Lord Mace Tyrell invaded the Sector after the Battle of Ashford, House Connington proved to be the dagger which destroyed every defensive effort made by the Storm Lords to stop this relentless offensive. Storm’s End was blockaded, and at the end of the war Lord Jon Connington for his unconditional loyalty was made the new Lord Paramount of the Storm Sector.*

*A new era began, but it was not one of prosperity. Indeed since his ascension to the Paramountcy, the domination of House Connington is by all unbiased accounts an economic disaster without precedent...*

Extract from the Tumultuous History of the Griffin and the Stag, by Novice Krael, a work censored by the Maesters for its pro-Baratheon stance in 298AAC.

**Stannis Baratheon, 08.07.300AAC, Storm’s End System**

If he was given the choice between eating rat’s meat and granting an audience to his prestigious visitors today, he would have chosen the rats. After all, the worst which could happen by devouring such vermin was death by poisoning. If only he could say the same thing about the delegation which had come straight from Griffin’s Roost...

Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End, readjusted his black cloak as he entered the vast hall the Durrandons had once called a private throne room for hundreds of years. The main difference between the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ throne room was a question of size, for those who wondered. In this place renamed an audience room in subservience of their dragon overlords, there was sufficient space to parade a regiment with ease. The great throne room of the Storm Kingdom, on the other hand, was so vast they could build a ship of the line there and still have room to spare. It was also completely unsuitable unless you had to summon tens of thousands people for a great ceremony.

Walking in long strides, the eldest Baratheon alive sat on his seat. It was a comfortable and practical armchair, not the huge thing Robert had ordered for himself before fleeing to the Vale Sector for a life of debauchery and weapon training. No, that seat had been sold in the weeks after the end of the Rebellion to pay the ruinous reparations the Targaryens and their bootlickers had pushed for and that Storm’s End could not refuse. Not that it had been a great loss, really. Robert had always found it easy to spend money he had done nothing to earn and his throne-chair had had so many gemstones, gold and onyx on it that it was seriously indecent. Truly, Stannis had several times shivered in his personal solar these last years at what would have happened if the roles were reversed. Had he died in the great battle of the Trident and Robert surrendered after the long siege...well, there would have been really unpleasant consequences. Stannis had done his best to present to his people the image of a Lord conscious of his duties, a good husband, a father of two children and a planetary governor burdened by the taxes, penalties and other punishments that King’s Landing and Griffin’s Roost loved to torment the Stormlanders’ population. Many important wages and privileges had been severely cut down, centuries-old tapestries and paintings that had been collecting dust for the last decades were sold, and sobriety and austerity had made their way in the lands he ruled.

It was purely imaginative by this point, but Stannis had large difficulties seeing Robert of all people adopt his lifestyle. His eldest brother had never been fond of ruling but the best wines, the best battle-armours, the best prey birds, the most impressive parades and the most expensive weapons were all somehow finding their way to him in his youth. He had also sired many bastards during his campaigns. It would have been difficult to force him to listen to the ugly truth of harsh numbers and the sad reality of poor finances...Stannis was realist enough to know he was not and would never be Jon Arryn or Eddard Stark.

“The audience can begin,” he gave the command to one of his most trusted Morrigen captains on his left. “Let them enter.”

The man saluted and left by a door hidden behind a two centuries-old Baratheon battle-armour. Silence fell on the audience room, only troubled by the fifty guards aligned against the walls and his own respiration. In other circumstances, Stannis would have loved having his beloved wife Ryella by his side, but the last times they had received a Connington at Storm’s End, it was his wife who had exploded first after one insult too many of these arrogant dragon-lovers. His children were away and most of his senior councillors were too busy with important duties to be recalled for what was going to be anyway a waste of time and thus he was alone to receive his ‘guests’.

The four metres-tall doors opened slowly and majestically to reveal a black-gold herald and a group of about twenty people. And then the Baratheon announcer shouted the names of the highborn which had arrived yesterday and rudely demanded a moment of his time.

“Ser Rhaegar Connington, Heir of Griffin’s Roost, Marshal of the Rain Rift, Master of the Griffin Belt and Defender of the Loyal!”

The first teenager who advanced before him was a Connington, of this there was absolutely no doubt. Red-haired, a few bristles on the chin, the eldest son of Rhaegar Targaryen’s most lovesick sidekick was so in love with his own importance it was a minor miracle the ground wasn’t giving way under his shining black boots.

His appearance was sadly one very similar to the young men frequenting the capital these days – which was fair, since Rhaegar Connington definitely belonged to this category – an atrocious attire in red, white, black and blue. Stannis had seen spectacles where the mummers didn’t wear so many colours. And because bad taste was never satisfied by itself, the fifteen years-old boy had a sort of necklace with five diamonds around his neck and rubies encrusted in his costume’s sleeves.

To add insult to the injury, there was no salute or mark of respect coming from the son of Jon Connington. Perhaps this moron thought the title of ‘Marshal’ his father had given him dispensed him from protocol. Stannis hid the anger he felt in his heart with an unfeeling face. He had practised on many occasions in the last decade.

“Ser Loras Tyrell, third in line to the Lordship of Highgarden, the Knight of Flowers, Knight-Commander of the Eighth Spacefighter Fleet and Spear of the South!”

The Connington spawn had decided to be presented in outrageous clothes; the proud son of the Fat Rose had decided to wear a full set of battle-armour minus the helmet. And not just any common armour. It was a customised Terminator model, with finely engraved flowers of platinum as primary decoration. As a result of this silver colour and the thorough polishing, the extremely expensive battle-armour was so perfect it almost could serve as a mirror. It was beautiful...and Stannis knew this work of art cost probably less than four or five battle-tanks bought together.

It went without saying the quality of the protection offered was minimal when like Loras Tyrell you didn’t wear your helmet. Seven Hells, the Reacher had not bothered to come with it today! The new generation of the Reach had really abandoned all its survival instincts in the last decade.

“Ser Renly Baratheon, third in line to the Lordship of Storm’s End, the Knight of Stags, Admiral of the Fifth Battle Squadron and Blade of the Storm!”

It was painful to see his youngest brother strut like an insipid Reacher and wearing bright gold-blue clothes. He didn’t care what the Tyrells did between themselves, but watching the brother he had done his best to shield from the awful reality of war eighteen years ago was a dire wound.

What would they parents think of their little boy, now that he was a caricature of a Tyrell vassal?

All these years, Renly had been the dagger the Tyrells and the Conningtons were happily showing him every time they invented more unreasonable demands or simply felt in a mood to anger him. And for this alone he hated the Tyrells, the Conningtons and the Targaryens more than he believed possible.

Worse, the lovesick looks Renly was giving the young Tyrell were obvious even to him....

“Lord Bryce Caron, Lord of Nightsong, General of the Twentieth Army and Grand Protector of the Marches!”

The only Noble House the Lord of Griffin’s Roost had managed to convince to side with him politically since the Greyjoy Rebellion. Bryce Caron was young, dashing...and like the ridiculous Knight of Flowers, he wore a Mark 6 ‘Terminator’ battle-armour. At least his would not seem out of a place on a battlefield...provided the colour orange didn’t horrify you of course.

Unlike Rhaegar Connington – a name which gave him the urge to grit his teeth every time he thought about it –Bryce Caron had the decency to avoid strutting around at Storm’s End...maybe because he had a clue or two who had the greatest number of Storm Lords answering to him in the room.

The rest of the young men and teenagers in the group were quite unimportant in status and mediocre in intelligence. Parmen Crane, Emmon Cuy, Richard Farrow, Edmund Ambrose and Mark Mullendore were names that were now firmly associated with the entourage of the Crown Prince. Connington had really gathered a sizeable number of idiots to his banner. On the positive side, there were going to be easy to get rid of. On the negative side, his brother was in their ranks...

Looking at them as they tightened ranks before him, Stannis could say without reluctance Mace Tyrell had well-trained this generation to be pathetic excuses of soldiers and Lords. These teenagers and young men had all been handed titles, rewards and income they had done nothing to earn. Examining them one by one, Stannis searched in them one reason, a single excuse, not to execute Operation Cataclysm.

He didn’t find it. Not in Renly, not in Bryce Caron...and certainly not in Rhaegar Connington or Loras Tyrell.

“Welcome to Storm’s End, Sers.” He saw some of the idiots in the group facing him one metre and a half away murmur between themselves. By the Father, Stannis really hoped these young highborn had expected to be greeted one by one with the usual bowing and courtesies they took for granted. He was the Lord of Storm’s End and if he gained a reputation for bluntness among them...well, it was not like their opinion was going to matter a lot in the next months. “You requested an audience.”

The tone he used made obvious they better have a good reason for intruding without sending a raven-drone of warning beforehand.

“Alas,” said Rhaegar Connington. “It is of treason we must warn you Lord Baratheon.”

The words should have been full of gravity, but the smiles of his sycophants and the poor manners of Rhaegar Connington made the accusation look like a poorly-made joke.

In fact it was so ridiculous Stannis had to wait a few seconds to realise the red-haired threat and his friends were serious. They had caught none of his preparations; they were just trying to involve him in one of their dreadful ‘conspiracies’.

“Prince Viserys Targaryen is conspiring against the Crown Prince,” continued the Heir of Griffin’s Roost. The revelation was made to provoke the maximum of shock, but personally the incentive was to yawn and order one of his guards to bring him a pillow. “His heinous actions include usurping the authority of the Prince of Dragonstone and authorising illegal military patrols in the Blackwater Rift and the Narrow Void, embezzlement of funds, hiring several unrespectable sellsword companies, refusal to obey Royal Orders, and allying with enemies of the realm.”

“Awful,” The master of Storm’s End replied. “These are grave accusations against a Prince of the dragon’s blood and must be reported in all haste to the King and the Small Council with all urgency.”

Whatever answer they had awaited from him the disgraces of the Reach and the Storm Sector had not counted on this one.

“The Small Council and the King have not yet been informed,” spoke Loras Tyrell, all arrogance momentarily banished from his traits. “The Crown Prince lacks the evidence to move against Prince Viserys but his presence near Dorne offers us an opportunity...”

This was no lamentable Stannis wasn’t finding the words for it. They landed screaming ‘treason’ and ‘betrayal’ without any evidence. It was clear their master had ordered them to secure Storm’s End support without informing anyone in power at King’s Landing. And he was ready to bet Jon Connington had not given them a signed order of his own hand too. They wanted to use him as a scapegoat to get rid of a potential rival before the first shot was fired...they really cared for nothing but their games of thrones and power, weren’t they?

“So there isn’t any evidence.” He dearly hoped his voice conveyed how unimpressed he was. “And by your own words, the Small Council has not been warned of these terrible accusations.”

 And since the Small Council was divided these days, such accusations could have initiated the largest political crisis of the decade.

“Is our word not enough for you, Black Stag?” Emmon Cuy’s arrogance was really something. Truly the Lords of the Reach had failed utterly when they had to teach their Heirs respect and wisdom. As for the nickname, it was just a name nothing more. He was not always wearing black, contrary to the rumours spread by these courtesans and dragon-flatterers.

“No, it isn’t.” The steel expression he sent at the buffoon in gold-pink clothes was not faked. “You barge in my home without warning, you accuse a Prince of Blood to be a traitor and you lack the most basic evidence to support your accusations. Be thankful I’m not imprisoning you immediately for high treason, there are Kings who would have already demanded your heads for the sentences you have just proclaimed.”

Aerys would have killed them all, that was a certainty. Rhaegar however was not going to move against the friends of his eldest son but Stannis was going to send a message or two to the capital before the day was over. Everything spreading a bit of chaos in the corrupt machine of the Seven Sectors was a good thing.

“You are going to regret this, Baratheon,” the Connington spawn hissed like an injured animal, his ugly face taking a colour on par with his hairs. “When my father hears about this, you and our pitiful allies will enjoy paying new taxes.”

About two thirds of the group seemed to rejoice hearing this, and Renly was in it. It hurt. He wished to speak face-to-face with his brother in private once more, wrest him away from the Tyrell’s corruptive influence.

But he had already tried it and it had not worked. It never worked.

“Guards! Escort them out of this room. The audience is over.”

“I am the Heir of Lord Paramount! Lord Jon Connington will be informed of this perfidy!”

Stannis tried hard not to smile. He had received thousands of threats like this from the Targaryens and their minions, after a while they were very boring. He would have to do his best to circumvent a few edicts of his ‘Lord Paramount’ in the next days. Doing so never failed to enrage the Master of Griffin’s Roost. The red-haired flatterer had almost had an aneurysm when he had learned Stannis was indifferently recruiting men and women in his armed forces. His poor medical personnel, underpaid and understaffed, truly lacked the manpower to recognise if a person was male or female.

Stannis sighed as the last of the Reach youngsters disappeared from his view. Things were going to get bad before there was any improvement.

In the end, his duty to the Storm Sector and his family was far more important than saving a ‘brother’ who preferred the Tyrells to his own blood.

**Margaery Tyrell, 08.07.300AAC, Highgarden System**

The Green Gardens of Gardenia were particularly beautiful this year. Margaery was feeling somewhat guilty watching the thousands of golden roses surrounding her. The Tyrell-owned lands where the Green Gardens were located were not on Highgarden Prime, which was honestly the main reason she rarely visited it. Her lessons, ceremony obligations, art patronage and other duties left her little time to travel to the other planets of the Highgarden System, no matter how interesting the travel promised to be.

The rains of the last month had been a benediction for the flowers and the vegetation. The centuries-old garden built fifty years before the Conquest was resplendent as all the colours of life flourished and developed in a fantastic spectacle. The famous Highgarden roses were dominating the floral competition as it should be, but there were other flowers and fruit trees too. Large trees were providing huge shadows where the highborn and their servants could avoid for a few hours the warm and hot rays of the yellow sun. Thanks the Seven, the Green Gardens had their own canal, providing much needed water to the plants and the little squirrels so common in the parks of Gardenia. More important, the humans could refresh themselves in these pure blue waters and the temperatures were far more pleasant than they would have been otherwise.

For now, Margaery was seated on a flower-decorated chair under a massive oak tree which had probably been planted when the Tyrells were still the Stewards of Highgarden and not its Lords and Masters. She had just finished eating two peaches and a servant had just cleared the white table of the remnants of her lunches.

The Gardens were strangely peaceful to her ears. Margaery was a Tyrell of Highgarden, and it was a rare moment where she was alone. Most of her days, the daughter of the Warden of the South was expected, no encouraged and volunteered to speak with hundreds of people. The fact most of her interlocutors would never be in her presence again was something she had accepted years ago. So was the nearby presence of dozens of cousins, the betrothal with the Crown Prince, and the activities she was to excel in. For the common smallfolk, the life of a highborn lady must appear absolutely wonderful, but Margaery knew how much work and preparations it really entailed.

Birds sang in the branches above her head and Margaery for countless minutes listened to their joyous thrills. The music, the soft caress of an afternoon breeze and the silence made the moment absolutely divine.

It did not last. It never did. In the distance, she heard loud human voices, and since her escort had been commanded to be as discreet as possible, it left only her invitees. Shifting her attention to the platinum-covered watch her father had gifted her on her last name day the daughter of Highgarden had to stop a grimace from appearing on her traits. She knew the tradition of coming late to an appointment you didn’t want; she had practised it several times herself this last year. But two hours past the agreed hour had to be some kind of performance in itself. Fortunately, the wait was almost over.

On the neat path carefully maintained by hundreds of gardeners and servants thorough the year, two young women of her own age were walking with expressions telling her the fierce conversation of the last minutes had been anything but friendly.

One of the women was a cousin and a trusted ally. The other was not her cousin, and had caused her grandmother and the women of the Reach plenty of headaches in the last years. Today it was going to end, at last.

On the left, wearing a modest magenta robe with curt sleeves and subtle gold jewellery similar to the ones Margaery possessed was her cousin Desmera Redwyne. House Tyrell and House Redwyne had married and tied their destinies in blood and politics for several generations that they had met each other a lot of time in their childhood. Desmera was a good friend, intelligent and well-mannered, and had cute freckles to complement her orange hairs. When Margaery left for the Crown Sector and her grand marriage, Desmera would go with her as one of her handmaidens.

On the right was a young woman which had nothing in common with them save their age. Calla Rowan had celebrated her seventeen name days like Margaery, but it stopped there. Where Desmera and she had their long hairs carefully dressed in all occasions and cut regularly not to go lower than their shoulders, the golden mane of her second invitee was wild and descending to the hips. The highborn women of the Arbor and Highgarden had chosen robes that were both tasteful and fashionable; the Heiress of Goldengrove was dressed like an expensive prostitute. Her slim pale yellow robe had no sleeves. Calla Rowan was showing so much flesh it was indecent and the transparency of the yellow material indicated the daughter of Lord Mathis Rowan was obviously wearing nothing underneath this outrageous robe.

Oh yes, it was time for this Heiress to stop causing problems in the heart of the Reach. House Rowan was one of the most powerful and trusted Noble Houses of the Reach Sector, it was out of question for this brainless courtesan to imperil the strong alliance decades of effort had been necessary to build.

“Now that you’re here, I suppose we can begin,” her eyes were of course facing directly Calla. She had asked Desmera to wait for her reluctant guest in a pavilion at the entrance of the Green Gardens and to give her a good tongue-lashing for her punctuality failure. Desmera’s lips slightly twitched in amusement; the visage of the Goldengrove Heiress took a moderately embarrassed expression.

“Your behaviour at the last Solstice Ball was completely unacceptable of a Lady of the Reach, Calla Rowan,” yesterday she had thought when she had prepared this discussion that her interlocutor would receive the message better if it came with the usual courtesies. After two hours of waiting however, she wasn’t in the mood anymore.

But the bitch simply pouted and smiled.

“Not everyone has already a husband coming to her, Lady Margaery.” The Tyrell daughter had to force the anger back inside, but by the Mother how she wanted to slap her. “I want a good match for my House. There are no rules against speaking with promising candidates for my hand.”

No, but there were rules of modesty and protocol. The Rowan girl outfit had been on the same level of indecency as today, and the methods she had used with the ‘candidates’ were simply not done.

If it had been limited to this, perhaps it would have stopped there and her grandmother would have reluctantly endorsed the proposal of a few aunts to let the daughter of Lord Mathis Rowan stay under close guard for a couple of years.

But it wasn’t.

The young men Calla Rowan had all but invited in her bed were Lord Alekyne Florent and Lord Samwell Tarly. And as much as she wanted to laugh at the hypothetical marriage of ‘the Fat One’ or the ‘Mediocre’ to this slut, it would be a political disaster to let a Tarly-Florent-Rowan bloc take shape.

“Well, in this case you’re going to be happy, my dear. Your father has decided it is time for you to be married.” Margaery smiled widely and her interlocutor frowned. A white letter in old-fashioned paper – a rarity if there ever was one - was placed on the wooden table.

Betraying her lack of composure and education, Calla seized the object and opened it without waiting. Now there was just to wait for the explosion...the tanned visage became pale, then furious...and then there was the explosion.

“Lord Peake? You have convinced my father to marry me to Lord Titus Peake?” Fury and incredulity were fighting in the whore’s voice. Margaery savoured it like the meal she had eaten before this meeting. It was absolutely delicious to demolish the arrogance of this girl. She had never liked the Rowan Heiress and now hopefully her two younger sisters would be more promising candidates for the Ladyship.

“Yes, Lord Titus Peake has manifested a deep interest in a union with House Rowan.” It was not exactly a surprise. The Blackfyre Rebellions had been a heavy blow to the power of Starpike, and the Peakes were definitely not key players in the Game of Thrones anymore. “You might remember the beloved wife of Lord Peake has sadly passed away six months ago and Lord Titus has alas no heirs of his blood.”

 The demise of Lady Margot Peake born Lannister had of course been ordered by her grandmother. The lioness had tried to use her family ties to spread the influence of Tywin Lannister in the Reach Sector, a betrayal which could not go unchallenged.

“I remember,” there was fury in the blue Rowan eyes. “I also remember Lord Peake of Starpike is over fifty years old!”

“No, it’s actually forty-eight, not fifty,” corrected Desmera. If looks could kill, the venomous glance Calla Rowan sent to her cousin would have killed her on the spot.

“You married me to an old man,” and the expression of despair on the Goldengrove young woman was a bit comical, Margaery had to admit.

“A shuttle is waiting for you at the starport,” she tried to keep the satisfaction out of her voice but it was a bit difficult. “You leave for Starpike tonight. Lord Mathis is on his way from the Northern Marches and will arrive in time for the wedding’s day.”

It was extremely fascinating to see all the multitude of feelings expressed by Calla Rowan’s visage and gestures. There was despair, rage, anger, betrayal...and after a minute or silence reading and reading the letter, there was a tear at the edge of her left eye. It was immediately removed and her traits became stone-like.

“Do you want to know the reason I wanted to be betrothed to the Florent or the Tarly Heir?” Her voice had lost all anger, and for a moment Margaery didn’t know what to think about this change. As such, it was Desmera who answered the question.

“You wanted a husband who didn’t care about being a cuckold,” and yes, this had been her reasoning too. “Tarly is always speaking of his wonderful machines and Alekyne interests have never been with women.”

A humourless chuckle answered Desmera’s words.

“No, I chose them because you are going to lose.” The disgraced Heiress of Goldengrove stood from her chair, not departing of her emotionless expression. “House Tyrell has shackled itself to the corpse of a dragon and you are all going to fall into the abyss with it. Have fun with your Crown Prince, Margaery. I heard he’s bedding five different women each night.”

No more words were spoken and Calla Rowan marched out, neither asking leave nor giving any sign she had been in presence of persons of higher station than hers. It could have been a dignified march, but the breeze in the Grey Gardens was showing in a limpid manner how lightly clothed she was.

Her cousin waited for her invitee to have disappeared before she scoffed.

“You are going to lose,” the imitation was not perfect, but Margaery and Desmera had a good laugh. “Like this stupid whore understands anything which does not include selling her body.” The daughter of the Master of the Arbor did not spit on the ground, but the envy was definitely there. “We have the biggest fleet of the Seven Sectors assembled one jump away from here, you are going to be Queen and soon the Lannisters are going to be humbled. If she can’t understand this, she really deserves her new husband.”

Margaery nodded in approval. The alliance of the Crown and the Reach Sectors had now the military strength to crush all opposition and their influence at court had never been stronger.

“I completely agree, but in all fairness I must recognise Calla has at least been useful to point a major problem.”

“That Lord Tarly and Lord Florent are not married, I take it?” As Margaery confirmed it with a simple smile, Desmera made a concerned gesture with her right hand.

“Absolutely, those two Houses are the loudest voices against us.” The rest of the Reach Sector was completely obedient before the Highgarden-Arbor-Oldtown alliance. Right now, Brightwater Keep and Horn Hill were the only sources of opposition to their power inside the Reach. Unity of purpose to win the Game of Thrones had never been closer.

“I suppose Lady Olenna has taken steps to remedy to this?”

“Indeed,” Margaery smiled while watching the Grey Gardens in all their greenness continue around them their peaceful vigil. “Indeed.”

**Samwell Tarly, 09.07.300AAC, Horn Hill System**

“I have to do what?”

Until his dying breath, Sam would swear he had not shrieked after the sentence had been spoken. He was the Lord of Horn Hill, the son of the great war-hero Lord Randyll Tarly, who had given his life to kill the treacherous Usurper Robert Baratheon.

He didn’t shriek like a little girl. He just manifested his surprise loudly and vigorously, yes it sounded better in his own head.

“Mother, there must be a mistake,” he hated how his voice was trembling when it had been so assured moments ago. But Sam couldn’t control it. Give him a speech including engines, fusion reactors, laser weapon conception and the construction of orbital defences, and he could recite it with his eyes closed. But when it came to anything else...he was a bit cowardly. Not much, but the world outside his research and development labs, simulations rooms and mechanical engineering stations was a bit too frightening and bloodthirsty to his taste. Sam enjoyed designing new technological marvels. He couldn’t say the same thing about politics and the game of influence and backstabbing between the different Noble Houses. “I never said I wanted to marry anyone.”

His mother smiled, but he could recognise the frustration behind it.

“Evidently someone at Highgarden disagrees, my son.” The choice of the words gave him pause. Throwing a new look at the fragile sample of expensive and old-fashioned paper in his hands, Samwell could see the officials seals on the lower part of the document included a very infamous rose symbols with a lot of thorns. The message did not come from Lord Mace Tyrell or one of his councillors, it was the Queen of Thorns herself who had written it – or at the very least dictated it.

“But mother...why do they want me to marry *Asha Greyjoy* of all people?” His question was uncomfortably close to a whine, but he ignored it.

And his mother chuckled. Chuckled!

“Maybe they saw you speaking with Mathis’ daughter at the last ball and decided there was no reason for you to remain unwed any longer.”

Samwell blushed, the embarrassment seizing his entire body. He knew this had been too true to be good: girls never listened to him when he attended formal receptions, festivals and balls. They never cared about his inventions, the new class of ships of the line which had emerged from the Horn Hill shipyards. The girls found him fat. They wanted to hear poetry and songs, but he didn’t manage to utter one verse without becoming a gibbering mess and he was clumsy when it came to play music instruments. He didn’t understand the girls, they might as well be a foreign species for all he understood them. And he really didn’t like Lady Margaery, her cousins and her massive court. He may be the youngest Rear-Admiral in the engineering hierarchy, but the sole preoccupation the daughter of Mace Tyrell and her little army cared about was spreading ugly rumours on him and his cousins. Alekyne had suffered a lot last year when they had spread rumours he loved men.

Calla had been different. She had stayed when he had told her the very concept of the battlecruisers championed by House Fossoway was a complete mistake. The Rowan Heiress had debated with him for a few hours, giving him genuinely her opinion and correcting him when he made a mistake. And she was rather pretty, he had to admit. In hindsight, Sam figured, it had probably been too good to be true. No good deed goes unpunished and all of that crap.

“I can disobey,” he received a very firm stare from his mother and was forced to look away. “Mother, Asha Greyjoy has killed the last two men the Tyrells tried to wed her to. Everyone knows that! The first didn’t get to the altar, and the second died before the bedding! I don’t want to be the third!”

“The marriage will take place here at Horn Hill. You will be surrounded constantly by hundreds of guards,” replied his mother in a patient tone she gave him when she believed he behave like a spoiled child. “And let’s be no mistake, my son, this union is not a suggestion. Should we fail to comply, there would be unpleasant economic consequences for House Tarly.”

For a second Sam wanted to scream and rail against House Tyrell. After all the loyalty his father had given them, these up-jumped stewards were really prompt to throw him under the tank column. Oh sure, they had built a big statue of his father and given his name to several streets here and there. But when the gains and the titles were ready to be shared, House Tarly and the Houses which had bled at the Trident were put on the sidelines. Lord Mace and his friends were generous like that.

“And the dowry?” He asked in a last attempt to escape his doom. “House Greyjoy has lost everything in its failed Rebellion, including their money and their warships.” He could care less about it, being the Lord and Master of a stellar system where two billion and nine hundred million souls lived, but it was the kind of argument his mother appreciated. “Lady Asha Greyjoy may be the daughter of a Noble House officially, but the Ironborn Houses do not rule their systems anymore. In status and in wealth, House Greyjoy is a fifth-rate Knight House, not a Noble House like House Tarly, Florent or Oakheart!”

“Lord Harlaw has graciously accepted to give his niece a dowry worthy of her noble birth.”

His mother made a side-step to observe the stars and the warships on the other side of the supraglass bay.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t an insult, Samwell.” For the first time, he heard in his mother’s voice something like bitterness. “But you will have to accept.”

Truly he hated politics and the ‘Game of Thrones’ the uncountable legions of boys and girls of Highgarden loved to play. Unfortunately, he had to curb the chin, bend his knee and play along. His father would have said ‘no’, but Sam was afraid and he didn’t have a lot of allies.

“What happened to Calla?” Sam was not aware of all the considerations behind the Tyrell spider spinning its web behind the Lord Paramount of the Reach. But he knew the young Tyrells loved mocking him.

“She is to be married to Lord Peake before the end of the month.” Despite himself, the Lord of Horn Hill felt a cold shiver on his neck. The Bard Guild could play the *Rains of Castamere* all they wanted for everyone to have in mind the brutality of the lions, but the Tyrells were as dangerous in their own way. Marrying a young woman to a Lord twenty or thirty years her senior...Margaery Tyrell was really a bitch.

Not that he would ever call her like that in public or in private, Samwell Tarly wanted to keep his head.

“Fine, I will graciously accept the bride suggested by our esteemed friends of Highgarden.” Sam said it with all the enthusiasm he could muster – and it wasn’t a lot. In fact, it sounded to his ears like his funeral eulogy. “When is the marriage supposed to take place?”

Dreadful question and he wasn’t eager to know the answer.

“One month,” and just like this the urge to take a starship and depart for the Free Planets had never been higher. This was not cowardice, not exactly. It was...self-preservation.

“One month,” he repeated morosely before leaving the hall and returning to the test-trials of the new SAM-3000 missile (called for Superiority Anti-Ship Missile, not because he wanted something with his first name). Maybe he could console himself with the satisfaction of humiliating the Javelins AS-21 equipping the Tyrell warships...