**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 10**

**The End of the Beginning**

*From: Agent JP-X-6*

*To: Western Crown Intelligence Agency Headquarters*

*Lord,*

*The situation in the Iron Sector has long passed the point of no-return.*

*According to the latest information available to our agents, over thirty of the space-faring creatures we will refer to as ‘krakens’ for simplicity’s sake have been localised in the Iron Sector. So far, five reconnaissance ships have been lost for little gain. As far as we have been able to ascertain, the only method of extermination of this threat is overwhelming firepower, preferably at long-range.*

*Alas, I fear the krakens are the lesser problem we have to face here.*

*The dead are rising to kill us. Even here on Blacktyde where the fleet of the cursed Ironborn have made no appearance, the graveyards have erupted in bloodshed and destruction. The rear-guard of the Lannister troops is trying to incinerate as many as they can, sometimes wiping entire areas by orbital strike if the resistance crumbles, but I fear their efforts are doomed in the long-term. Orkmont is in no better state. Monsters haunt the night, and ancient ruins are emerging from the seas. Those who try to go examine them never return.*

*And of course Victarion Greyjoy or whatever thing is now giving orders by his mouth has left Old Wyk, mustering new armies of the dead and leaving a slaughterhouse for the krakens pursuing him.*

*Unless a miracle happens, the former Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet will reach Pyke on 24.10.300AAC.*

*As much as I want to believe the forces of House Redwyne, Hightower and their allies can triumph here...the forces they will face are considerable and the former Tyroshi and Ironborn are suffering alterations one may call demonic in nature.*

*Since Great Wyk, Saltcliffe, Old Wyk and Lonely Light are de facto if not the de jure lost, I implore for immediate reinforcements to be sent, if nothing else to incinerate the remaining planets. Victarion Greyjoy will not limit his deathly ambitions to the Iron Sector, and if sufficient assets are captured by him...*

*I fear...I fear this will be our end.*

*I remain his Lordship’s loyal servant and will relocate my centre of operations to Harlaw tomorrow.*

*Raven-drones new coordinates are...*

**The Stonehouse, 24.10.300AAC, Old Wyk System**

He pushed his vibro-sword into the traitor’s guts and the agony’s scream was absolutely delicious.

Brutally, the Stonehouse removed the blade, in order to provoke the greatest amount of pain as the blood flowed out in a crimson river. The Iron King had appointed him High Executioner, and he had a reputation to maintain.

“You betrayed your King, vermin of Codd. You collaborated with the enemy!” His voice thundered over the holy Void altar-plaza of Old Wyk, and thousands of Ironborn cursed the name of the traitor. “You have committed the gravest crime against you liege. And for this you have to die.”

The white-bearded traitor opened his mouth, but no sound came out. And then after a couple of heartbeats his eyes closed and his torso stopped moving.

A familiar cold shiver blew across the plaza, and the eyes of the dead traitor reopened. They weren’t the dark brown he had fixed mere moments before, but a pale, magnificent blue.

“Rejoice, for even your betrayal is of no importance to our great and mighty Iron King!” The Stonehouse laughed and the population of Old Wyk, true Ironborn from the first to the last, laughed with him. “Rejoice, for what is dead may never die but rises again, harder and stronger.”

The body of the Codd, a lifeless husk bound to the will of the Void God, rose and joined the long lines of dead waiting to be transported to the transports in orbit. So would an enemy of the True Ironborn be used in death to bring more devastation and death to the unbelievers, the traitors, the greenlanders and the murderers of Tywin Lannister, Mace Tyrell and of course the incest-lover Rhaegar the Mad himself.

The Stonehouse laughed again. How long he had waited for this moment. The ‘legitimate authorities’ of Old Wyk, a long cohort of traitors, collaborators, heretics and greenlander’s lovers, they were all chained and awaiting his judgement. Nine years he had waited in the hellhole they called the Dark Pit, sent there because he had dared raising his voice in support of the sole and only King worthy of the name.

They had called him mad and a traitor. They had broken their oaths and refused the loyalty calls that he, the last of House Stonehouse, had the courage to remind them.

They had promised him King Victarion would never return, before throwing him with the rats, the lice and the rest of the garbage and the vermin. But in that, they had been wrong, like the rest. Their King had returned, more powerful and terrible than ever. And the planets of the Iron Sector were, at long last, reminded what words like ‘loyalty’ and ‘until death’ truly meant.

Former reaver, he had been released from the Dark Pit, and his King had rewarded him highly for his unbreakable loyalty. All it had taken was forsaking his first name, and he was the High Executor, and the power of the Void God was flowing in his veins.

“Bring me the next traitor,” the eternal follower of the Iron King growled while watching the grey sky. What a pity his liege hadn’t been able to stay a few more days on Old Wyk. The treacherous collaborators had pissed themselves in fear when the army of the dead had come.

The flock of his assistants dragged in front of him another fat white-haired betrayer. To his surprise, the Stonehouse vaguely recognised the visage.

“Ah yes, Norne Goodbrother...the so-called Merchant of the New Reavers. I remember you.”

“Balon Stonehouse...the Ripper of Lannisport,” the traitor answered.

His fist struck the face of the fat whale by reflex. It was extremely satisfying to see this ugly nose broken and bloodied.

“I do not go under this name anymore. I am the Stonehouse, but I am above all the High Executioner of the Iron King.”

“You are the mad dog of forces that have made the last of the big ox a puppet.”

“Do. Not. Insult. The. Iron. King.” And he plunged his blade in the leg of the Goodbrother. But he wasn’t rewarded by a scream of pain. The traitor’s had gritted his teeth, but he was still looking at him with defiant eyes.

“Maybe there is something of the old Ironborn blood in you,” the High Executioner spoke. “You will make a nice addition to the armies of the Void God.”

The Goodbrother prisoner gave him an incredulous look.

“I will certainly do nothing of the sort, since you do not serve the Void God more than I am, monster.” Before the Stonehouse or one of his assistants had the time to strike him for his treacherous words, more sentences came out. “But it does not matter. Old Wyk is doomed, and we are all going to die here.”

“Oh? And what doom are we talking about, oath-breaker?” The loyal Ironborn asked, deciding to humour the vermin a last time. “The vengeance of the false Seven? The non-existent strength of the Dragon’s fleet? The wrath of the sheep-like Reachers?”

“I was more thinking about the krakens your Lord was fleeing from when he came to this system.”

“Our King does not flee,” the executioner snarled before stabbing three times the Goodbrother collaborator, taking great care to injure him in ways that would take his prisoner a long time to die. “And we have many captured warships and a great Tyroshi battleship in orbit...”

Something flashed about his head. Explosions, thunderous explosions arrived to his ears. The skies began to burn in fire and in the distance columns of smoke began to erupt.

“Death...to...Victarion...the Puppet...”

The Stonehouse was so enraged he cut the head of the traitor with a loud roar, realising too late his enemy had managed to trick him into giving him a fast death.

“It does not matter,” the new Lord of Old Wyk spat. “Your head will be stitched back to your body, and I will put you in the transports myself after this accident has been dealt with.”

Because this was an accident, nothing more. It was certainly one of the old depots who had taken too much damage during the liberation war.

“My Lord...”

The Stonehouse turned and his heart broke as he saw a gigantic tentacle emerge from the clouds with the prow of a warship firmly in its grasp. Only the gigantic appendage threw it like a sport ball...and they were the target.

“Why? By the Void God! Why?”

**Urrigon Greyjoy, 24.10.300AAC, Pyke System**

The Lordsport of his grandfather era would never have won contests of ‘most beautiful Ironborn city’, but compared to the post-Fall sights, this defunct version of Lordsport might have been a door to the greenlanders’ Seven Heavens.

At least it was if Urrigon could trust his memories after over a decade of greyness.

There was always a temptation to look fondly after a long extinct past when the present was so dark.

And maybe his memory was guilty of this little sin. Lordsport had been tolerated by the Lords of House Greyjoy because it was a hub of industry and manpower for the ground and orbital projects of Pyke. House Botley had paid high taxes to stay in the good favour of his grandfather, his father and then his brother.

When the time had come to increase the size of the Iron Fleet and prepare the Ironborn forces for Balon’s Rebellion, Lordsport had without question played an important role, delivering a large contribution in metal and blood to their liege lord. Balon would have launched his ill-conceived rebellion anyway in the end, but without Lordsport and the dockyards and investments of House Botley, it was decidedly unlikely the Ironborn would have been able to do more than the attack on Lannisport before running out of supplies and spare parts.

Not that it had done much good to House Botley in the end.

Battle after battle, the Ironborn had bled until they were pushed back to Pyke, thousands, no tens of thousands men, slaughtered with each new disaster between the Arbor and the Iron Sector.

The void had been turned red with reaver’s blood.

And then the Targaryens, the Lannister, the Tyrells and the might of the Seven Sectors had turned their angry eyes to the seat of the man who had betrayed his oaths and destroyed so many of their plans.

Ah, if only Balon had been less prideful, more devoted to his smallfolk, less willing to live the dream of the Old Way...but Urrigon supposed that then, this ruler would not have been the man known as Balon Greyjoy.

There had been no talk of negotiated surrender. Balon had wanted a slaughter. Looking at the ruin of what had been a residential area, Urrigon was going to admit readily his eldest brother had got one.

The Fall of Pyke, they had called it at first, and the name had stuck in the popular imagination.

These were four words, and they were dark, terrible ones, but in many ways completely insufficient to describe the shock and the traumatism of what had been done. Urrigon had not been there, of course. But in the last decade, he had seen the marks, the haunted eyes. He had listened to men and women scream during countless nights as their nightmares tormented them with the distorted memories of the carnage.

With great shame, Urrigon remembered having scoffed at the ‘timid’ and ‘soft-hearted’ war customs of the ‘greenlanders’ fifteen years ago.

As always, Aeron and he, as well as all their brothers save maybe Euron, had completely missed the point. The Lions, the Roses, the Dragons...they weren’t afraid of war and the bloodbath it entailed. They were deliberately sticking to inefficient conventions, prudent tactics, and limited ‘honourable’ skirmishes because they had an idea or two about the damage they could do to a planet if they really went out.

Urrigon had learned the lesson, though too late to do any good. In some way, he supposed he had surpassed his brothers and his cousins. Of course, it had taken him years to face his demons and acknowledge fully the problems of the Ironborn traditions and culture but he had done it. Some never learned.

All it had taken was the Fall of Pyke. All it had taken were dozens of cities burning in the pyres of orbital strikes. All it had taken was the endless assault of one of the greatest armies the galaxy had ever seen descending upon his homeworld.

Even today, well a decade after the fact, there was something unreal about it. There were still people stopping in the streets to cry hysterically. There were still young men who flinched when a flyer passed over their heads. There were still people who ran away at the first sound of armoured boots on the ground.

These were the sins war left when waged to its total, merciless conclusion.

This was the retribution House Greyjoy had received for a rebellion which had been the folly of one crowned idiot and shared by eight billion men, women and children. The cost had been over a billion deaths and the powers-that-be only knew how many millions crippled, destitute, orphans, and mad people it had created over the last decade.

“Do you watch your work from the bottom of the Hells, Balon?” Urrigon whispered to himself. “Does it please you to see how far House Greyjoy has fallen? You were always speaking about what we deserved and the natural superiority of the Ironborn. Does it please you to see how poor and diminished our people are?”

There was no answer, evidently. There never was an answer. And there never would be. Not from Balon.

“Even in the matters of succession, you couldn’t help but screw everything,” Urrigon continued to mutter. “You could have named Theon your true Heir. You *should* have named Theon! It was the only smart thing to do! Our customs and our laws would have been respected. Our enemies would have been content to let it stand, for they had him to mould as they wished.”

The King of the Iron Sector had been many things. In hindsight, being politically astute had never been included in Balon’s mortal flesh.

“You chose Victarion. Victarion of all people after having sacrificed Rodrik, Maron, Aeron, Robin, Euron and myself on the altar of war...I hope you’re pleased with your choice. The Iron Sector burns again, and this year will see the final extinction of the Ironborn.”

There had never been a great hope to save the Ironborn from their sins and bloody legacy, truly.

When it came down to it, the faith of a few priests didn’t weigh enough compared to the harsh reality of numbers.

Even assuming optimistic facts, there couldn’t have been more than five billion Ironborn when this cursed year started. Five billion men, women and children, were living in ten stellar systems. They were by far the smallest Sector in Westerosi space, thrice or four times weaker than Dorne.

The loss of one system would have irremediably crippled the structure as a whole.

They had lost three: Great Wyk, Lonely Light and Saltcliffe, and with few refugees to escape the nightmare.

And Old Wyk had fallen to the insane lunatic-abomination he had once called a brother, so in many ways these were four systems they had lost.

Eight hundred million had been lost with Great Wyk. Two hundred and seventy-four million – at least – had shared the doom of Saltcliffe. Twenty-five million had perished with the kraken invasion of the Lonely Light. And one hundred and sixty-four million people or close enough were undoubtedly experiencing the reality of a rule dominated by death-cultists and monsters in human skin at this very moment.

And now it was the turn of Pyke to suffer.

“Nine hundred and twenty million bodies...when will it stop? Will the hatred and the folly will stop before we are all animated corpses and radiated abominations?”

There were tiny shreds of hope in this dark era. His young niece had returned, and had provided some beacon of hope to women and children. It wasn’t much, and not many families would find a refuge in the Reach. The Ironborn culture wouldn’t survive. But some with the blood and the traits would live, and had he really the right to ask for more?

Urrigon continued to walk, and with each step he came closer to the restored districts. The number of people he met increased significantly. The houses looked far less damaged; the roads were not half-blocked by debris and the results of some insignificant riots and minor rebellions. A few children were playing with some toys the Reachers sometimes delivered for holidays’ free presents.

“The Ashen Priest!”

“The Priest of Ashes is here!”

Yes, this was his title now. He could not say it was undeserved. No, Urrigon had not tried to earn it or anything like this. But he had worked so long rebuilding hospitals and whatever buildings to protect those in need from the population that in or two years, most of his working clothes and even a few who weren’t had been tainted by the ashes cloud pouring their poisonous content on the hills, cities and plains of Pyke.

The ‘Priest’ part had begun as a joke. He had certainly not been a religious man before the war – the things Aeron and he had done and the speeches they had blasphemed half of their life!

And after the Fall, listening to the droning of the Void Priests...it had pretty much killed any religious fervour that might have burned in his heart.

There had been a truth impossible to deny after the harsh terms of the future peace were made known to the Ironborn as a whole: they had lost. The Ironborn had lost. House Greyjoy had lost. Everyone in the Iron Sector had lost. And those who were dead often weren’t the one you had to mourn. Many children had been burned so badly there had been mercy killings. Acid rains had crippled many families living in cockroach-filled slums. Veterans of a thousand raids had been left to die in blood-soaked slums because there was no medicine and no healers to waste a single minute on them.

Where was the Void God when the Ironborn had been dying? Where was the deity most of them had gone to war to accomplish the tenets?

Nowhere, that was what the embittered men, women and children had said.

The Void Priests of Balon’s ridiculous plan had tried to spread the word Victarion Greyjoy would lead them to a new age of epic victories and untold prosperity.

They had success at first. Urrigon and the reavers who had desired peace and forget the massacres had been in the minority.

But as he walked in the streets of Lordsport today, not a single Void Priest was in view. And this for a single reason: they were dead. Dead and their ashes were dispersed somewhere in an asteroid belt, as far as he was aware.

The messages of the Void Priests had never been tolerated by the Reachers, and the Redwyne troops weren’t the Lannisters. Oh, they had been a lot of massacres, reprisals and counter-insurrections all over the planet, but at least three-quarters of them had been provoked by the Void Priests or die-hard supporters of Balon who somehow had managed to not get torn apart in the last battle.

And yes, it was funny how so many people had sworn to ‘fight to the last round of ammunition and once they were crippled, a knife in their teeth’ but revealed themselves to be alive months after healthy and in a position of power in the underground cells.

In the end though, the resistance of the Void Priests had been sailing from disaster to disaster. Recruitment efforts had floundered. It was impossible to date an honest woman when half of the missions were suicidal attempts to blow something up. The female part of the population which was still attracted to them included prostitutes, informants, or bombers of the same unit.

But what had really killed the rebellion movement in the first place was the reality the Reachers controlled everything. Only the commanders in orbit had the funds to rebuild some city quarters, they were the ones with the food and the clean water, and of course they had the weapons to protect their valuable goods.

Money, food, water, and Urrigon supposed one could add the employment offers too, though here it wasn’t as much as a monopoly as the occupants might have wanted, with different Reacher companies competing with each other.

The Void Priests had been unable to find a solution. And then the news of Saltcliffe had arrived. The last cells which had not been eliminated had been sold to the authorities in record time.

The ‘King’s return’, that mostly everyone had thought would happen at the date of ‘never-never’ was rekindled in the most horrible manner possible. Victarion Greyjoy, insane pirate, eunuch if the rumours had any foundations, and now necromancer of the worst sort, was back. And he had destroyed Saltcliffe and killed everything living on it.

This, needless to say, had pretty much killed any dreams of a triumphant vengeance for the last war.

As planets after another fell, every Ironborn of Pyke that was not completely insane had to face the truth: should Victarion the Necromancer win the Battle of Pyke, there would be no rejoicing and no military parade. They would just be one after another slain to increase the ranks of the armies of the dead.

This was why unlike countless other times, he didn’t turn left at the last intersection before the Ruined Square. Instead the Priest of Ashes marched straight on, trying not to wince as the empty locations where two fountains of kraken should have stood.

He didn’t stop where some two or three market-merchants were trying to amuse a few children with some useless trinkets.

Instead he climbed on the stone where some speakers tried to harangue the men and women of Lordsport. Urrigon paused for a moment, smiling faintly as he saw plenty of his co-workers and people who were regularly listening to his speeches had come to hear what he had to say.

The last Greyjoy living on the soil of Pyke took a large breath before proclaiming in a strong voice.

“Victarion Greyjoy, traitor to his own blood, is coming to Pyke. In this dark hour, I loudly affirm that the man leading the armies of death and horrors is not a man I will ever call my brother! House Greyjoy had many faults and committed many mistakes, but we never fell so low as to try to violate the sanctity of the human body once the last breath of life had left someone’s body! We were reavers, warriors, sailors and miners! We were pirates, corsairs and explorators! But we weren’t, we were never Master of the Dark Arts and servants of the Dark Ones! In our blood flow the strength and the will of the Grey King! We were the slayers of monsters once, not their puppets or their masters!”

Under his eyes he saw the square fill itself. Thousands of Ironborn were arriving by the minute, as well as many green battle-armours. Fortunately, the Reachers’ leader was clever and the soldiers were staying away.

“Victarion Greyjoy, may his name be forever cursed, has forsaken his oaths of Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet! As the blood-representative of Lord Theon Greyjoy, legitimate Lord of Pyke, I, Urrigon Greyjoy of the Ashes, declares Victarion guilty of unspeakable necromantic massacres and planetary genocide! And we have a word for these criminals! HERETIC!”

“HERETIC!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KRAKEN!”

“KILL THE HERETIC!”

“I do not like the men of the Reach. Their cheese is too smelly, and their wine is too soft,” loud laughter rose from the crowd. “But whether we like them or not, our enmities can wait another day. If the monsters triumph, we will all be raised to serve in the armies of death.”

Urrigon raised both his hands, and he could not help but be humbled by the number of people who had come to hear him.

“And so on the eve of the last battle the Ironborn will ever fight, I beg of you to resist the forces of darkness. One last time, in the name of House Greyjoy, I humbly beg you to participate in a last battle. I do not promise victory. I can only swear on the ashes of my home...”

He didn’t know what he would have begged in these last moments; the cheers and the shouts of support made sure this wasn’t heard by any mortal ear.

**Lord Samwell Tarly, 24.10.300AAC, Pyke System**

Unlike most of his strategic decisions, Mace Tyrell had not been neglectful when the strength of the Pyke defence fleet had been decided after the Fall of Pyke. Six ships of the line, twelve battlecruisers, eighteen heavy cruisers, twenty light cruisers, sixty scout cruisers, one fleet carrier, eight light carriers, thirty escort carriers, twelve thousand starfighters, and for the fixed defences no less than eleven orbital forts were deployed to the homeworld of House Greyjoy, with the firm expression no Iron King was to rise again in the Iron Sector without receiving a moon-shattering bombardment.

This was, by any standard, a rather powerful fleet.

By any standard, it should have been twice or three times sufficient to blow up Victarion Greyjoy’s flagship and then disintegrating the ex-Tyroshi battle-spheres the monster had somehow managed to obtain.

Of course if it was, there was the minor question why the Reach fleet had stayed so long in the Pyke system while the rest of the Sector burned or disappeared into mass killings and darkness.

The simple and ugly reason could be summed-up in one word. And this word was ‘maintenance’.

It should have been evident to any Admiral worth his rank that without proper maintenance, any fleet was just a very expensive of useless pile of metal and electronics. Ser Desmond Redwyne was unfortunately not someone Sam would say was equipped to do more than organise a party for officers of excellent aristocratic pedigree.

To be fair – not that the Lord of Horn Hill particularly wanted to be under the circumstances – it was not entirely Desmond’s fault. The funds for the maintenance of the Pyke fleet had indeed been cut down severely in the last years, as Highgarden prepared itself for the conflict against the Lannisters. On the other hand, if the idiots in charge like General Ser Humfrey Hightower, commander of the Pyke ground forces, were not busy using the subsidies of the Reach for their own profit, maybe they would be actually able to keep respectable levels of maintenance, spare parts, fuel, and all the other details a battle-fleet may or may not need when a war was fought.

“Victarion has chosen perfectly his moment to come back,” Sam commented, looking at the ship of the line *Unconquered Arbor* trying to keep formation with its sister-ship the *Spear of Victory*. Feeling generous, the spectacle presented was like too old men trying to march to war only to realise they would need canes and a great need of help to do so.

“I admit,” Gerion Lannister said with a chuckle, “that their squadron’s formation look a bit...lax and not up to proper standards.”

“They are going to die horribly,” a Lannister veteran bluntly remarked, his face hidden under a threatening leonine helmet. “They have wallowed in complacency and dreams of victory for a decade. Their ships are utterly obsolete, and Desmond Redwyne has refused to adopt the Colonel’s plan.”

Samwell Tarly grimaced, and he was sure at least two-thirds of the men on the bridge imitated him. The envoys sent to the Council of Harlaw had indeed agreed with the general strategy established by Ayric Sarring, but Ser Desmond Redwyne and Ser Humfrey Hightower had refused to listen to their arguments. Seven Hells, the two of them had only decided to fight after realising that since Axell Florent was not on their side, they had not a sixth of the transport capacity to evacuate the five million soldiers of their respective Houses who constituted the majority of the Pyke ground garrison.

As a Rear-Admiral specialised in Engineering, Sam had learned things about Reach logistics and priorities in the last days he wasn’t sure he should cry or laugh about. One thing was sure though: for the inspectors sent by Mace Tyrell to compliment Ser Desmond Redwyne and criticise Axell Florent, either the inspectors had switched by mistake the reports or there was something incredibly wrong with the Lord Paramount of the Reach and his senior Admirals.

“I could care less about the ships,” from the biggest ship of the line to the tiniest scout cruiser, all of them should have been sent to the scrapyard at least five years ago given the general incompetence of the Redwyne staff and the age of these venerable warships. “Many were in service during the Usurper’s Rebellion and were kept long past their service-limit date and they weren’t rebuilt to extend their life expectancy. No, what I’m the most concerned are the men. The ‘Regent of Pyke’ has refused to disclose us the content of the raven-drones he receives from Highgarden, save that it is critical we win a ‘total, unprecedented victory’.”

In other words, this was a confirmation the civil war was really, really not going Highgarden’s way at all. Decisive victories would have been proclaimed everywhere before the last missile was fired. Expensive and bloody victories would have been on all the holo-news channels, increasing the losses of the enemy and minimising the Reach’s losses.

But for the commandment of Harlaw and his squadron to be deliberately kept in the dark while only a small number of officers were in the know...it was all but an invitation to think a gigantic disaster had just engulfed the cause of His Invincible Majesty Aegon VI and his Most Peerless Servant Mace Tyrell the Supreme Admiral.

As such, it was indeed vitally important to return to Highgarden as fast as possible...after they had defeated Victarion Greyjoy.

“First enemy signatures detected, my Lord,” somehow Sam found weird the idea of Asha not being there to announce this. But his wife had decided to join the suicide mission, and the empty scabbard next to his comfortable seat told him exactly why he had agreed with this insanely risky tactic. “Unless they’re trying to misdirect us somehow, I think these hulls have jumped straight from Orkmont.”

Sam acknowledged the information, trying not to show his dismay at the fact four hundred-plus million inhabitants were more or less confirmed dead with this sentence.

And the worst part? If the pirate ships were this early, it meant that the rear-guard of Crown forces which had stayed behind had sterilised the planet in nuclear and other continent-shattering explosions to make sure Victarion Greyjoy received no reinforcements from Orkmont, be it dead or alive.

“New update on the enemy fleet, Admiral. So far, it looks like they are sending their wight-filled auxiliaries and a lot of obsolete longships they have managed to take out of mothball. We have one hundred and twenty-four of the former and sixty of the latter.”

Sam read the speed estimates and arrived immediately to an unpleasant conclusion.

“All the power must be diverted to the engines to achieve such speeds.” And when he said ‘all’, he meant ‘all’. The guns would be unable to fire, not that it would be a problem for most longships, who were venting debris into space as he spoke. “They are not going to try to fight our warships.”

For the first time, he heard Gerion Lannister’s voice be tainted with an emotion close to horror.

“This is a ramming fleet and Ser Desmond Redwyne has adopted a tight-close formation...”

“Immediately take evasive actions and contact the Unconquerable Arbor! Immediately!”

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

Ramming was not and had never been a valid tactic.

Ayric had not been and never would be a naval commander, but at least he knew that much.

But when he had heard rumours of some stupid manoeuvres from one side or another in the immediate aftermath of the Greyjoy Rebellion, he had thought a day or two with some like-minded officers raised from the rank like he himself was.

Past the usual declarations of disgust for the commanders who used their men in this manner – the bitterness of seeing entire divisions used as cannon fodder by their Lannister and Tyrell was still fresh in the minds – ramming had widely been recognised as impractical.

First, ships were expensive. Sacrificing millions or billions of gold dragons for a bright explosion was never going to be popular with the tax-payers. Even an old iron-fisted ruler like Tywin Lannister had never tried eliminating his enemies that way, and the Old Lion had the wealth of Casterly Rock at his disposal. Whatever happened during the attempt, there were ninety-nine chances out of a hundred the ship was going to be blasted apart.

Second, experienced crews didn’t grow up on trees. For the sort of precise manoeuvres needed for a ramming attempt, you needed a full crew on the doomed warship. Since in general sailors and officers had not signed to die horribly, no matter how loyal to their liege they might be, having a large amount of volunteers for this was a non-trivial challenge.

Third, a single ramming attempt was unlikely to be decisive. One ship destroyed for another might sound a good trade if the ram-ship was a destroyer and the target a ship of the line, but in practise battles were rarely decided by the destruction of a single starship. And the flagships, the very heart of a fleet, were on average defended by the rest of the fleet and no easy preys.

Fourth, the ram-ship needed to catch its target. And if it was faster than its enemy, why not try to kill it with its weapons when it was in missile, laser or plasma range?

Fifth, once you began to use this sort of strategy, all the conventions and rules of warfare tended to go by the airlock. Balon Greyjoy had learned it to his sorrow after Lannisport. Yes, launching a sneak attack on Lannisport had granted him an early strategic advantage, but it had also convinced every Sector to go after him or at least to say nothing as the fleets mustered and then burned the Iron Sector.

It was thus a strange kind of irony that Victarion Greyjoy, a pirate most renowned for his stubbornness, inability to grasp elegant tactics and general servility to the will of his dead brother, was the one who had created a situation where using ram-ships made perfect sense.

Ships were expensive? Not that much when one was speaking about wrecks and crippled hulls which should have been sold for their durasteel decades ago. Crews were expensive? Wights were cheap and obeyed every order, crazy commands or not. One strike was unlikely to be decisive? Then why not try to launch an entire ram-fleet at your enemy? When everything was expendable, you might as well play it for the maximum of insanity.

Longships and doomed auxiliaries could be really fast when there was no need for air, weapon fire or any life-support. And last but not least, why care about customs and conventions when you intended to murder your way across the galaxy until final victory or someone stopped you in a nova-like explosion?

No, using ram-ships like Victarion Greyjoy did wasn’t stupid. Especially as the squadrons of Ser Desmond Redwyne had wanted a close-quarters action and their agility sucked.

“This doesn’t like Victarion at all,” Asha Tarly, a woman he had trouble to not think as Asha Greyjoy remarked, especially as the way she held the two-handed sword by her side was not really what one might called ‘normal’.

“We don’t even know if a Greyjoy is truly in command of this force,” Bronn replied, rolling his eyes. “The images our spies managed to get out from Old Wyk saw something with monstrous blue eyes wearing dark armour and a gold kraken on dark blue. For all we know, it might be an Other or another inhuman abomination hiding there.”

“I suppose it’s possible...” The sole and only daughter of Balon Greyjoy answered. “But I wonder how he got so many ancient codes dating from the old Rebellion and some secret locations my uncle and the other Lords of the Ironborn weren’t aware of. These were things only the Lord Reaper of Pyke and his closest advisors and high-ranking officers were.”

Bronn nodded, conceding the point. It was true that if the Lord of Harlaw wasn’t aware of several caches where many of these obsolete pieces of junk had been hidden, a non-Ironborn wouldn’t have known where to begin searching. Contrary to what the holo-dramas said, space was incredibly vast and legions could truly hide in the void as long as they needed no food or air.

“Here they come,” announced Sandor Clegane.

“Here the Reachers die,” finished gloomily Raff Preslan.

If it had not been the final proof they were against an enemy that simply had no value for life, the scene could have been appreciated as a grand spatial spectacle, though with the scout cruiser *Silver of the Hills* in furtive mode, they had very basic sensors.

Over one hundred and eighty starships accelerated at speed so high their vision was more similar to shooting stars than men-of-war.

The Redwyne-Hightower formation at last acknowledged the suicidal behaviour of the Ironborn ships, and began evasive manoeuvres.

But it was too late.

In one last change of course too coordinated to have been directed by human reflexes, the old longships and auxiliaries threw themselves at the ships which over a decade ago had celebrated and swore no Ironborn Rebellion would ever rise again during their watch.

It was a bloodbath.

The wights-filled ships had no means to defend themselves, and all counter-defences had been powered down to increase the acceleration levels. This meant in turn that every shot which struck true was a death sentence for the ram-fleet; wight or no wight, when your warship became a ball of light and plasma, no one was ever going to find your corpse.

The first wave of missiles from Ser Desmond Redwyne erased over eighty ships in a few seconds. The lasers accounted for eighty-plus more.

But that left eight of them, and with the insane acceleration they had, the old warships had not the fire control to lock on their plasma batteries and order a few desperate evasion measures.

They were eight ramming attempts. Two missed, and were disintegrated by the heavy cruisers of the screen.

Three destroyers perished as they tried to protect the larger capital ships from the enemy’s murder sentence.

The battlecruiser *Tide of Dreams* died, his long shape certainly mistaken for a true ship of the line.

The ships of the line *Unconquered Arbor* and *Spear of Victory* exploded the next instant.

**Regent of the Reach Willas Tyrell, 24.10.300AAC, Highgarden System**

There were hours Willas managed to convince the reluctant voices in his head that he was doing a good job. There were hours where he found genuinely good solutions to the problems plaguing the Reach, and he was able to stay calm and acknowledge that maybe, just maybe, highborn and smallfolk weren’t shouting for his head because they recognised no one could do better.

These hours were few and far between.

Most of the time Willas was utterly convinced that everyone knew the situation of the Reach Sector was truly hopeless and as such, no one wanted the duties and the responsibilities of Regent of the Reach. Why push for the most powerful seat when there was every guarantee the one on it was in position to become the bigger scapegoat in three hundred years of history?

The Lords, Masters, Knights and various influential nobles having survived the initial phases of defeats may be very ambitious, but they weren’t completely stupid where politics and influence bargains were involved. They could read holo-maps and newspapers. The potential turncloaks could guess how awful the odds of victory, not ‘total victory’ or ‘glorious victory’, had fallen to.

The Reach and the coalition led by House Tyrell and House Targaryen had dominated the political and military spheres of the Seven Sector ten months ago. It wasn’t any more the case. Now they were collapsing, taking a relentless series of blows, and the coffers were empty.

Already, Willas considered it a minor miracle he had avoided bankruptcy. But by the Father and Mother Above, how many acrobatic bureaucratic manoeuvres had been necessary to arrive to this!

First he had to cancel outright ninety percent of all foreign debts, and in this case ‘foreign’ meant ‘outside the Reach Sector’. For enemies like the Lannisters or the Baratheons, this was a perfectly legitimate tactic since he was sure they had done the same for the Reach debts, and likely far earlier than him. For star nations like Myr, Braavos or Volantis and their merchants, it wasn’t. But since they couldn’t afford to pay anymore a lot of goods and luxury items, it was something he would have to deal with.

Then he had ‘temporarily’ stopped all obligations to the systems under enemy control, with a zero percent interest rate. That too had left him a horrible feeling in the head and the belly, but he hadn’t any choice. The pensions for the hundreds of thousands, no the millions, of fallen and heavily injured soldiers were devouring his budget faster than he believed possible.

The rest of the measures would have lead to an insurrection if he had tried them in peace time. Banks had been returned to the full control of Noble Houses or House Tyrell itself. Many organs of information had been sold to loyal men and women, as long as the strictest censorship measures were enforced. A gigantic amount of war bonds had been issued. Secondary palaces had been sold for a fraction of their value. There had even been talks among his financial assistants to profit from the crisis to mint a new currency and devaluate the ancient golden dragon!

The last measure had been averted...for now.

No, the current edicts, taxes and problems would be sufficient for seeing them hold until the year’s end. How long they would hold in 301AAC was an excellent question, and frankly Willas was rather trying to ask questions about it to his councillors and inner circle of primary advisors.

The Reach economy was in a state of organised chaos, and in the last month the Regent had become intimately familiar with the true strengths and weaknesses of his home Sector. Now on an average of ten times per day, he discovered that the proverb about ‘knowledge is power’ was utterly in the wrong. He agreed more and more with ‘ignorance is bliss’.

All the little favours, the small insults, the petty feuds...all these things which had taken place under his grandfather and –especially – his father’s rule, were now slammed into his face.

The betrayal of House Peake was likely the worse of the lot. Calla Peake, formerly Calla Rowan, had excellently anticipated the possible declaration of war, sultry prostitute clothes or not. To be honest – and Willas wished he wasn’t at the moment – he would have dearly liked having an assistant like her in his service.

Many large loans the former Goldengrove Heiress had made were borderline genius – several purchases made in the Westbrook and Old Oak shipyards had come a fortnight before the Dornish set the entire region aflame.

But the hate between Margaery and Calla had truly burned any shred of loyalty the daughter of Mathis Rowan might have felt for House Tyrell. And Willas knew the price for this idiotic vendetta was going to be extremely heavy. Starpike by joining the Martells had jeopardised many war plans, devastated the entire southern-eastern flank, and crippled many mining and transport mega-corporations.

And he had a feeling he had only discovered what the traitor Lady had wanted him to dig up.

Someone knocked at the door. Willas shouted a tired “Enter!” and considered for a moment cleaning up his office, before ultimately rejecting it. To his relief, it was Garlan and not another tax specialist arrived to announce him the latest financial catastrophe.

“Garlan, please me you have good news.”

“We have taken back the Dunn System from the Lannister?” His younger brother tried.

Willas smiled in relief.

“That’s good news,” the de facto Lord of Highgarden said. “How intact is the system?”

“Reasonably intact, all things considered,” Garlan replied. “Apparently Tywin intended to drain it economically and in every way which mattered, but the preparations for his steel-fisted punishment weren’t complete when the battle of Highgarden started. And in the days after it, I think the Lannister had other problems to think about. Of course, the majority of their forces managed to escape and the fixed defences have been destroyed, but...”

“But it wasn’t like they were worth much in the first place.” Willas finished with a nod. “I see. I will decide a light punishment for Lord Dunn tomorrow. By all accounts, he did his best to defend his system and we weren’t able to provide him any reinforcements...unlike Lady Oakheart, he obeyed orders.”

The rulers of Old Oak had better pray their castles and lands would never be reconquered by House Tyrell, because a lot of stellar systems and millions of Reachers were really, really unhappy with Lady Arwyn and her children, commanders and relatives. Thanks to their behaviour, the Lannister had a strong position extremely close to Highgarden and would be able to threaten Highgarden by their mere presence.

This was what happened when one of your supply hub fell into enemy’s hands intact. And it was going to get worse, because Dustonburry had been trashed and would need a lot of investment to rebuild, and Coldmoat had taken large casualties to resist the Lion’s offensive for mitigated results.

“That’s very good news, because we are not meeting any success on the other fronts.”

Garlan grimaced in return.

“If it was only the Lannisters, we would have a chance.”

“With ‘ifs’, I would be Lord of Casterly Rock in a month or two,” Willas sarcastically replied before returning to a more serious tone. “Even assuming we had ‘only’ the Lannisters against us, the past litany of disasters I’m forced to swallow day after day does not give me great enthusiasm we would have been able to prevail against Tywin Lannister if Father had tried to smash the defences of Crakehall like he wanted a year ago.”

No, Willas wasn’t going to take for truth the wild assertions his family was unable to beat a Dornish unless it had one hand tied behind its back, the eyes blinded and was suffering from a drug overdose.

The victory here at Highgarden had proven the Reach Navy still had teeth when it prepared for battles adequately with good information on the enemy fleet.

Unfortunately, there was no denying that as long as His Lord Father had directed the deployments of the fleet and participated in the war plans, the outcome in real space fighting had been nothing short of calamitous.

“This is severe but true,” Garlan spoke. “There are a few captains that have promising asymmetric plans to allow us some pay-back against the Baratheons and the Martell, but I will need at least four or five months. And under this schedule...we are going to lose most of the north-east Reach. Stannis Baratheon has taken Leygood Fields, and a secondary fleet has defeated the defences of Sloane.”

It wouldn’t be long, Willas knew, until Tumbleton and Uffering followed. And that was just south of the Mander. In the north, only the Bridges, New Barrel, Lyberr and Inchfield stellar systems could be said to boast impressive defences. The rest would be easy meat against a determined attacker.

“I have already begun a general recall of Deep Space and Jump Space interstellar merchant ships from the entire region, save those of a critical nature like medicaments.” It was another measure that was going to be very ‘appreciated’ by the systems about to be conquered by the Stag. “We can’t afford to lose more of our merchant navy.”

In reality, the bleeding was likely going to continue, and for a long time. Put together, interstellar and intra-system starships owned by the different Reach aristocrats, merchant corporations and guilds was estimated at a number roughly in the one hundred and seventy thousand.

According to the best figures he had in his possession, ten percent of these ships had been lost in the first two months of war. Fawnton counted for one percent alone. The betrayal of House Peake had earmarked for two point five percent.

And if they could rebuild civilian transports far easily than warships, experiences sailors were hard to replace and were in hard demand after the crippling losses of the Harvest Graveyard and other major defeats.

“In this case, I will warn you we may have to abandon New Barrel before long. I know, I know. Its defences have been largely improved by deployment of new platforms these last days, but there has been a massive upsurge of carrier strikes in the Mander Rift.”

“You think Rhaenys Targaryen would let her Admirals go away with a trans-rift assault?” The proposal was...very audacious.

“She or the Red Viper,” Garlan shrugged. “I think they have proven with the Harvest Graveyard, the slaughter of Nightsong, the flanking attack on Cider Hall and their Seven-cursed sneak attacks that they aren’t afraid to think big and unconventional. Under the circumstances, I think it would be best to stay...on our guard when we think we have bottled up the Dornish squadrons. The last thing we can afford is to believe we are safe, and lose a few more systems when the vipers teach us a new military lesson.”

That, Willas acknowledged, was a very good point. The loss of a system like New Barrel would be more cosmetic compared to being ejected from Cider Hall, but propaganda-wise, it would be another morale-crusher, especially if they were caught as much by surprise as the Graveyard had taken them.

The Regent consulted his files for a few seconds before shifting back his attention to his brother.

“You know, we may use it as a test-bed for some new tactics and materials.”

“I’m not against the idea, but who do we send? I need to command the defences against the Dornish on the main front, and Baelor Hightower is busy with the Lannisters. Plus there’s the very real possibility the commander in question might very well not survive this mission. So far, the number of our Admirals who survived the ion cannons and the hellish starfighters is not large.”

“I know.” Willas sighed. “I will try to find someone fast.” How and where, he hadn’t the faintest idea, but that’s why the number of people he hired every day now for special missions was for...maybe. “The question of the war pensions, on the other hand, I’m still afraid we have just delayed it before we reach the precipice. I want to know a few things about the laws voted in the days after the Greyjoy Rebellion...”

**Lady Nymeria Arkadyr, 24.10.300AAC, Ashford System**

Nymeria had expected rebellions the moment she had been granted the Ladyship of the Ashford System. Hells, the very reason the Red’s Viper half-Volantene daughter had been chosen before many other candidates was the high likelihood of rebellion.

Well before the war had begun, Dornish spies had noted the upper classes of Ashford were openly boasting of their ‘anti-Dornish’ policies to Lord Mace Tyrell. Overall, Lord Ashford and his sons had been extremely vocal of their disdain of what they called the ‘Sunspear degeneracy’.

Add to that the reforms Rhaenys had ordered to implement, and it would have taken a miracle to avoid rebellion. And neither Nymeria nor her sisters believed much in miracles.

The goal had thus not been to avoid the unavoidable insurrection, but to make sure this violent upsurge of bloodshed would not be a popular one. The factory workers and the farmers as well as the rest of the smallfolk class, had to be on her side, since they represented the next best thing to ninety-five percent of Ashford’s total population of two billion eight hundred and sixty million.

Nymeria had not expected the opposition to make her task easy. In her preliminary plans, the newly legitimised Lady had tabled on the memory of the now destroyed House Ashford to encourage dissent. There was no point denying that House Martell had exterminated the entire line at Harvest Hall, evidently. And by rousing the flames of dissent every time a reform was enforced, the unhappy aristocrats may very well be to launch a general insurrection. If this was the case, Nymeria may have no choice but to order orbital strikes. The ground forces under her command were barely reaching three hundred thousand men and women. Should the cousins and distant relatives of the Ashfords manage to rally their subjects to their views that the occupation of their planet was something to be fought to the death, her rule was not going to be a long river of peace.

The woman who had been last year Nymeria Sand of the Sand Snakes had not expected the Ashford nobility to be so stupid to launch their insurgency merely five days after they swore their oaths to her and three days after the first tax reform.

And to say that a couple of hours ago she and Tyene had been debating on the name of potential suitors for her to use some of the local power-brokers for her own purposes...

The idiocy of Lord Quentin Ashford, who had placed his three sons, a dozen cousins and himself aboard five or six ships of the line in the Grand Fleet of House Tyrell had obviously contaminated the gene-pool.

“I’m disappointed,” The new Lady of the Ashford System confessed to her audience. “Five days ago, each and every one of you was so glad to tell me your oaths were stronger than steel and that not even death would be able to break them.”

Nymeria allowed herself a faint smile.

“It seems the word of the Reach Masterly Houses is worth as much as the military leadership of House Ashford.”

Nothing.

She didn’t voice it out loud, but she was sure everyone had understood her point. And maybe they finally got the point, because of the hundred-plus prisoners in chains, nearly all glared at her.

“We will not bow to a bastard born of a damn prostitute foreigner who indulges in incest! Death to the foreign whore! Death to Rhaenys Sand, traitor to her blood and arch-heretic!”

Nymeria and her guards watched the vociferating septon in the first rank of prisoners with undisguised amusement. Did he realise the clerks were writing every insult and accusation he had voiced? The proverb about selling someone his own rope before the hanging had never been more appropriate.

“Ah, but how could forget? The self-proclaimed Most Devout Hoster...”

“I am a Most Devout and was chosen by a conclave of my peers!” the white-robed fanatic shouted.

“Strange,” Nymeria deadpanned. “As far as our spies have reported, the surviving Most Devout of the Faith of Seven and the Starry Father of Oldtown have never elevated you to this exalted position. To my best knowledge, the High Septon never did either before he was assassinated. And being the favourite advisor of Lord Ashford before he met his end at the Graveyard is not a proper reason to self-proclaim you ‘Most Devout’.”

The Masters of the Houses of Black Ford and Golden Fields had the good grace to look embarrassed by the accusation as they kneeled on the marble. As well, they should. Their rebellion was already difficult to justify on moral grounds, but the fact they had used a man who was not a true Most Devout to declare their oaths null and void was really a fascinating excuse.

“What does a bastard born of incest and fornication know about the true mysteries of the Seven?” the ‘holy’ man screamed, his eyes filled with a hate that wasn’t rational at all. For the third time today, Nymeria Arkadyr was very grateful this man and his associates had managed to rally the nobility and launch their disastrous uprising now and not in six or ten months when the roses of Highgarden would be in position to launch a counter-attack.

It had merely taken a day to crush them and less than two hundred of her own soldiers had been wounded or killed. Surprise, surprise, shouting in a cathedral the rebellion was about to begin and that a decrease of their taxes was witchery and heresy was not a great motivator for smallfolk treated like dogs to rise up in arms.

“Taxing the churches of the Father Above is heresy! You dared-“

“But for the last year alone, your church received five billion in various donations,” Nymeria sweetly spoke. “I wonder where all this money went?”

The ‘Most Devout’ reddened and hurriedly went silent. They both know the answer. The Faith of Seven in the Reach was utterly corrupt, paid by the Lords to make sure the smallfolk of all horizons knew their place, which was to work from morning to dusk in the factories, the fields or the agricultural storage facilities until exhaustion ensured they were no longer able to feed their families.

Nymeria had been raised by the Dornish culture, and while she was aware of many flaws, at least the system promoted by Sunspear was meritocratic. Several Commanders of Fifty Thousand and One Hundred Thousand which had accompanied her to Ashford were born sons of butchers, farmers and humble shop owners.

Needless to say, under the laws established by House Ashford and generously supported by House Tyrell, social ascensions of this type were truly and completely impossible.

“If your Ladyship executes us, others will take our place,” the Master of the Golden Fields brazenly declared as Septon Hoster was not in any hurry to sell more religious lies and insults for the benefit of her guards. “We were the first to rise against your tyranny, but we won’t be the last!”

“But you will not be executed,” the shock on the hundred-plus idiot’s visages was something to cherish, absolutely. “Have you ever looked at the penalties of the chart for oath-breaking you signed five days ago?”

Judging by their embarrassed faces, not a single one had. They must have been so convinced of their imminent successful rebellion. Their stupidity, her gains.

“No? In this case, let me inform you that you have all volunteered for twenty years of hard labour in the Hellholt mines. It goes without saying that your titles, your privileges, your palaces and your bank accounts are returned to my office.”

In one day, approximately seventy percent of the Ashford aristocracy would be as poor as the smallfolk they had exploited for centuries, and this was for the ones who would be judged non-guilty of participation in the rebellion. The main conspirators in front of her would be lucky to survive two or three years the rigour of the Hellholt climate.

“Ashford will never tolerate this. This is against all tradition and customs! Your bastardry is an insult to the Mother and the Maiden! Your-“

Well it had been fine while the Most Devout stayed silent.

“Ashford’s smallfolk are cheering at the first chance they have to be somewhat prosperous this millennium. Now I advise you to save your saliva, ‘Most Devout’. Water is precious where you are going.”

**Ser Gerion Lannister, 24.10.300AAC, Pyke System**

There had been some questions asked about how the Redwyne-Hightower squadrons would fare if their top commander was removed early in the battle.

That Ser Desmond had discarded this possibility with a raised nose and an offended expression had not reassured him at all.

And now he had his answer...and it was exactly as bad as he had feared. The destruction of the *Unconquered Arbor* had completely disintegrated what little discipline the Reachers’ central fleet had in its central body, and now it was every captain for itself.

Under Gerion’s eyes, the squadron which had been Redwyne-led until a moment ago now reacted like a panicked mob. A large mob armed with extremely destructive weapons, but a mob. And mobs were not particularly famous to win battles against the odds.

And of course the enemy was exploiting the opportunity and emerging from the void with its most dangerous warships.

“Numbers of the enemy fleet?” He asked.

“Three Tyroshi flag-dreadnaughts, twenty-four Tyroshi battle-spheres and what looks like an impressive bunch of transports and every starship having ever sailed the stars, my Lord.” For some reason, the positioning of the Reach lieutenant, almost right behind him, was not feeling right. Gerion dismissed the thought, though. They were more important things to take care about.

“Many Tyroshi warships are missing compared to the fleet observed at Great Wyk” Samwell Tarly, the slightly overweight son of the legendary Randyll, remarked.

“Either the kraken really hurt them, or they suffer from the same maintenance issues you told Ser Desmond to be wary of,” Gerion replied. The advice had obviously been ignored and that the Redwyne-Hightower coalition was paying a terrible price against. “What are your orders?”

“We will have to stay at long-range,” the young man told him. “I can’t risk my squadron, not when Victarion Greyjoy or whoever controls these ships is too eager to launch fleet-scaled ramming attempts.”

The brother of Tywin Lannister didn’t blame him at all.

“Bombard the transports. We have to destroy the largest amount of wights before they reach orbit. And order someone to raise the Pyke orbital command and restore the formation of their fleet. The way the captains behave is utterly disgraceful. It’s like they’ve never heard of a chain of command.”

The next minutes were particularly humiliating for the Reach armed forces. One more ship of the line and three heavy cruisers were lost, for slim damage on two battle-spheres.

The transports the Tarly force was targeting however did not fare as well. Over one hundred were destroyed, and judging by the terrifying power of the explosions, it was not only wights which had been stockpiled in these hulls.

“Two or three more salvoes and we will have destroyed hundreds of thousands wights.”

“This is certainly true,” Gerion agreed, “but they can replenish these numbers by killing the population of Pyke.”

And since the former bastion owned by House Greyjoy had a population of nine hundred million souls and extra-large cemeteries from the Fall of Pyke, a dead-raiser could very easily replenish forces for a nightmarish army.

“They may do that,” another Tarly flag officer said, “but I don’t think these Tyroshi hulls are going to travel further than Wyk. Their speed is thirty percent less than they were recorded to have at Great Wyk, and there are a lot of weird emissions all over the board. I think these warships are in dire need of repairs.”

“Then let’s win this battle. I don’t want them to kill any more planets.”