**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 block, 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 all 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 few refugees had escaped 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 minimum 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 among 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 who 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 massacre after another 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 they 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!

This 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 avoiding 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 worst point of the lot. Calla Peake, formerly Calla Rowan, had excellently anticipated the possible declaration of war, ‘sultry clothes of a prostitute’ 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 extremely unsatisfying 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 to really work on them. And under this schedule...we are going to lose most of the north-eastern 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 healing supplies.” 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, experienced 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 opinion. 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 execution 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 it before he was assassinated either. 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 truly 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 core of the wights’ army 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.”

**Sandor Clegane, 24.10.300AAC, Pyke System**

It was a good day to die.

The entire battlefield was seeing dozens of warships burn and sent at each other super-heavy warheads. The lasers and the plasma super-cannons were murdering tens of thousands of Reachers.

It was war and now it was their turn to play their part in the slaughter.

Their scout cruiser accelerated and accelerated once more, before releasing in a thunderous boom the assault shuttles.

It could not have come fast enough. Six seconds after the catapults had ejected them into the void, the ship they had left behind was added to the growing list of wrecks which were going to crow Pyke’s space.

Sandor wasn’t angry knowing this fact. At least their goals were simple now: board the flag-dreadnaught of Victarion Greyjoy, and remove with extreme violence everything blocking their path. Then teach the Undead Kraken you didn’t screw with death, life and a lot of other things these monsters had failed to respect in the last couple of months.

A glimpse of their target was enough to give nightmares. The ex-Tyroshi was shining in lights which were not powered by human-built sources, by the Seven Hells! By the bloody sword of Maegor, what was wrong with Victarion Greyjoy and his pirates?

Sandor didn’t like it. And what he didn’t like, he was going to explain it to his enemies with laser and a lot of free violence.

“THE IRONBORN MUST DIE! DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

Their assault shuttle crashed more than it landed in the hangar bays, but Sandor had experienced far worse, and as long as there were no deaths, a boarding operation on an enemy warship was never going according to the plan, so why bother make a precise one? You boarded, you killed everyone in your way, you found the weak points and you wrecked their stuff and decapitated their shoulders.

It wasn’t difficult to understand!

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!” He was the first man to jump out of the hatch, vibro-sword in hand. Despite the fears of the Colonel, the bays were still operating under artificial gravity and air. Maybe because there were living humans transporting pallets of ammunition and other supplies. Or rather, they had done it before Sandor and the other platoons arrived. Now they were trying to fight with weapons he wouldn’t have given to Gregor; at least four of five generations late, and that was generous of him.

“DEATH TO THE TRAITORS!” The twenty-plus wights finally reacted and shrieked before charging, the breathing Ironborn trying to flee the war zone. They were too late. Sandor caught up with them, and decapitated them before leaving the support behind him to finish the remains with a flamethrower. They were scum and undead vermin to kill!

“DEATH TO THE WIGHTS!”

More running corpses flooded out of the potential exits, but they were undisciplined, attacking in two and three. They received exactly what they deserved: a big beating, a large dose of laser and durasteel, and a pyre to warm them up before the Seven Hells!

“KILL THE DEAD!”

“FOR THE LIVING!”

The Colonel had joined the fray now. Preslan in tow, Sarring was a whirlwind of death, and the smirking sellsword on the other side was not bad either.

“PURGE THEM ALL! BY COURAGE AND FIRE WE WILL PREVAIL!”

Sandor had known it was easily feasible to pack of a lot of corpses on a capital ship, but in the next seconds it was like the gates of undead hell had been opened completely.

“FORM THE WALL! VOLLEY ON MY COMMAND! FIRE!”

Hundreds of wights were decimated by the volley of laser rifle, but more were always coming. Soon the two hundred-plus warriors who had been chosen for this suicide operation had no choice but to abandon their arrival point. It gave the opportunity for too many wights to concentrate on them, and of course the wights weren’t the only enemy.

The ship was full of traitors Ironborn. Most seemed under a sort of spell, because they sometimes wore battle-armour but also occasionally their void suits. All however had the unnatural blue eyes and all screamed in guttural languages things Sandor was glad he couldn’t understand their tongue of betrayal and damnation.

“We are using too much ammunition!” The Balon’s daughter, Asha Greyjoy, snarled while stopping to fire only to reach a monstrously big Valyrian sword and wasted no time separating the wights in two or three parts.

“Use your blades!” The order arrived a couple of seconds later on the command channel. “The long-range weapons are for the living monsters!”

Sandor drew a shorter bastard sword for his left hand. Usually, he would have been reluctant to use one weapon in each hand. Ironborn weren’t famed duellists, but the Hound wasn’t a Kingsguard of the old tales. But the enemy wasn’t Ironborn. These were corpses of Ironborn they were sending back to their graves by the droves, and by the Gods and the Demons of this damned galaxy, they were doing it very well!

“Come on bastards, don’t push! There is enough durasteel to make everyone happy!”

The nearest wight apparently didn’t like his words. Too bad, Sandor didn’t like undead and he pulverised the skull into a lot of obsolete parts! He decapitated the next one, brutalised the third with lateral strikes and cut the legs of the fourth. Then he pushed and kicked, launching more of the dead reinforcements into the masses of creatures baying and shrieking for his death.

“NOT TODAY!” Sandor realised after an instant of silence he had begun shouting again. It was good and he decided to continue. “VICTARION GREYJOY! WE ARE COMING FOR YOU! IRON BASTARD! WE COME!”

The ship’s master didn’t come. More living traitors didn’t come. They were just wights and more wights. The only way to notice the difference were the armours and the clothes, though sometimes the bodies were so old the dead-raiser must have taken them from old-style graveyards.

“How many corpses can one you store on a ship of the line?” He asked Bronn the sellsword as they wiped out another garrison of dead men bearing old-fashioned River battle-armours.

“You don’t want to know the answer to this question,” the other warrior replied, smiting four enemies and taking a step right to let the flamethrowers incinerate part of the corridor.

“Maybe there won’t be as many as we feared,” the only woman to be part of their team said. “Corpses and wights rot when there is air in a ship. Unless my bastard of an uncle want to overwhelm the environmental systems, there must be a limit to the number of corpses he transported on his flagship.”

“And the true number?” Sandor grunted as he decapitated three wights in quick succession.

“Less than twenty thousand,” the not-reassuring answer came immediately. “If you have a better idea, be my guest.”

It took them three minutes to massacre something like one full corridor of wights. One of the living blue-eyed traitors had closed the armoured doors behind, but nothing that several demolition charges couldn’t handle.

Behind the doors, a hall filled with wights awaited, but this time the atmosphere had changed.

“Twenty thousand, eh?” Sandor laughed as the hundreds of Reacher, Westerner and Ironborn corpses charged despite no order or instruction having been given.

Sandor was far wearier about the state of this section. Until now all they had met were wights-filled compartments and a lot of blue lights. But here the walls seemed distorted and almost transparent. It was almost like the ship was pulsing and transformed by the sorcery.

“FOLLOW ME! DEATH TO THE FALSE KING! CURSE BALON’S NAME AND REMEMBER! WE HAVE BEATEN THEM BEFORE, WE WILL GIVE THEM A SECOND LESSON TODAY!”

**Lady Alysanne Arryn, 24.10.300AAC, Redfort System**

The good news was the fact the Vale and House Arryn had taken back the Redfort System with minimal losses.

The bad news, unfortunately, was that the losses were so minimal because the Blackfyre small squadron supposed enforce the rule of the Black Dragon over the system had chosen to escape, not to fight.

Alysanne could understand it. One ship of the line against ten would have been a last stand worthy of some bard’s saga, but the outcome would never have been in question.

The young Heiress of the Vale privately wished they had a more manageable and incompetent enemy. Sure, Queen Rhaenyra Blackfyre, to give the Black Dragon her self-proclaimed title, looked like she was entirely sane, unlike many rulers with silver hairs and purple eyes. The septons and several important guilders aside, there had been relatively little arbitrary imprisonments and even less executions. As long as the citizens paid their taxes and didn’t denounce her as a heretic or fought against her, the last descendant of the Blackfyre line seemed content maintaining the status quo.

It was pleasing, because the moment loyal Vale soldiers had landed on the planet sworn to House Redfort, the transition of power had been non-violent and unmarked by the sort of atrocities so common in the nearby Crown and River Sectors.

But it made the job of expelling the Blackfyre forces significantly harder. After Gulltown, the holo-channels had been ready to begin grand propaganda campaigns against the atrocities of the Blackfyres and inform Westeros from Sunspear to Winterfell of their awful tactics. This incredibly efficient information campaign was still waiting in shadowy rooms. Yes, House Arryn could have lied, but falsehoods had a disturbing tendency to turn back against their speakers sooner or later – House Targaryen could certify this.

“At least we have reconquered the Redfort. And since the forces of the Reds are finished in the Vale, we will be able soon to concentrate all our forces against the Blackfyres.”

They had also been forced out of the Moore System two days ago. Like the beginning of this war, every front that advanced for a moment was compensated by a setback on another.

“The Braavosi have promised to intensify the pressure,” Ser Edmund Breakstone declared. “If the Black Dragon has to withdraw her most powerful warships to Gulltown...”

“The problem Ser Breakstone,” Alysanne cut her vassal with a respectful tone, “is that despite the promises of our Essossi ‘allies’, I have yet to see or hear the confirmation a Braavosi warship has fired on one of the Blackfyre’s hulls. I would be able to live with Braavosi captains capturing Blackfyre supply ships and selling them at Old Anchor too, of course. But so far there are no signs of the Braavosi, and the Blackfyre ‘Arch-Dominarch’ can transport tons of ammunition, spare parts and food between Gulltown and Pentos.”

And House Arryn could not stop her in one strike or establish a blockade on its own. This, clearly, was the greatest weakness of her home Sector. By her imbecilic brother’s fault, the Deep Space fleet of Gulltown had been defeated and destroyed.

Fine, maybe it wasn’t entirely her brother’s fault. Lord Grafton and his allies had been in contact with King’s Landing or other inimical parties for decades, and ‘sweet Robin’ and the harridan she had been forced to call Mother for too long had been the leaves and the branches, not the root for this rebellion.

“Maybe the Braavosi have some mobilisation issues. It’s been a lot of time since they’ve fought a serious war,” proposed an Egen commander.

“In this case, you don’t promise your allies an immediate blockade of Gulltown,” the Rear-Admiral in Corbray colours to his right grumbled.

The daughter of Jon Arryn completely agreed with him. Whether your Houses’ words were about honour or not, if there was to be trust between House Arryn and House Stark on one side, and the Braavosi on the other, the different big power-breakers of the oceanic Republic had to respect the accords and rules they signed. And for the moment, they were more interested in the great pursuit of profit.

Yes, House Stark had benefitted from some technological exchanges and Braavosi corporation experts. But so far, these very expensive sales had been in the interest of a few interstellar mega-companies of Braavos, not its government.

Neither her father nor she had met an official representative of the Sealord. Had she met and bargained with Braavosi? Yes. But they were all either industrial magnates, or unofficial tech-exchange conduits like sellswords. The point they were fighting in the greatest civil war in hundreds of years and had a possible extermination threat was of no great importance to these Essossi.

No, on the other side of the Narrow Void, humanity was worshipping not a thousand Gods but a single one: the God of Profit, and its words were ‘I want more!’

One could only be thankful it was the Vale which was located on this coastal side of Westeros. Alysanne shivered to think what would happen if the Lannisters would have been the closest neighbours of the Sealord in a different reality.

“Has your Lord Father been informed?”

This was the question she had been expecting and dreading for some time.

“Yes, he has. But the Lord of the Eyrie is recovering, and during the short moments the healer-wardens have authorised him to speak, he delegated all authority to me on the matter, since the tyrants holding him prisoner in his bedroom refused him access to the documentation.”

Many captains and bannersmen chuckled, and the topic shifted to the next target of their offensive, Wydman Hall.

Alysanne could only breathe in relief a few hours later when everyone was dismissed from the post of command of her super-battleship minutes later.

Because she had not been very honourable with her bannersmen...yes, she was very much aware of the hypocrisy.

Her father had not regained consciousness since his stroke, and while the healers remained prudent, their opinions weren’t optimistic.

She, Alysanne Arryn, was in command of the Vale effort in this war. And she didn’t feel prepared for this burden.

**Captain Humfrey Waters, 24.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

Five years ago, no, one year ago, Humfrey Waters would never have considered speaking with a fanatic wretch like the ‘Sparrow of the Seven Forges’. The man may worship the Smith and the Warrior, but there was a fanaticism in the bald man’s eyes that bore ill for everyone.

Humfrey Waters didn’t really care anymore, to be honest. A few months ago, he would have a family to protect, superiors to obey, and a mission: to protect King’s Landing. The first had been reduced to ashes when an orbital strike reduced to molten scraps his wife, his children, the starscraper where was their home and most of the surrounding area.

This had not been a citadel, an ammunition depot, or anything militarily important, but did the Reds care about that? No, of course they didn’t.

His superiors, may the Gods judge them justly, had perished to the last, beginning with Janos the Hero, who had given his life to slay the Red Tyrant.

The capital, Seven Hells the entire planet, was ruins and more ruins. What the invasion had not ruined the murderers and pet killers of the Targaryens and the Tyrells had finished in an orgy of massacre, blood and looting.

Humfrey coughed, and he coughed blood. This was coming more and more often. His time was running out. He needed medicaments, like most of his men. Their battle-armours had suffered too many malfunctions in the last days to protect efficiently against the radioactive ashes and the increasingly hostile environment of the cities blasted into a greying landscape of wrecks and abandoned buildings’ carcasses.

And this was why he had accepted meeting the representative of the Seven Sparrows, even if the man was a damned terrorist and likely a crazy madman. The galaxy had stopped making sense, and now there was only survival. In his case, survive as long as possible to take his revenge against the Reds, their sorcerers and their beasts.

“Are you sure?” The man who had been Captain of the Dragon Gate for six hours before everything exploded in light asked. “I’m not questioning your integrity or your intelligence, Sparrow, but I must be sure. My men are exhausted, and each deployment so close to the Red Keep is certainly going to result in dozens of deaths from unhealed injuries, exhaustion and enemy action.”

“Your precautions do you credit, Captain, but I saw the depots and the secret hospital with my own eyes,” the dark-robed ex-terrorist smiled and this wasn’t a pleasant sight, yellow teeth or not.

“There isn’t anything on the maps we were given,” protested one of his men.

“Evidently,” the Sparrow serenely answered. “Do you think the Secret Police of His Crazy Majesty was in the habit to reveal the location of its secret hide-outs to other organisations?”

Nearly his entire surviving force twitched, winced or shivered, and those who didn’t were in general those heavily injured or dying in a corner. Even after the last two months, the terror inspired by the organisation had never faded. It did not help that for all King Viserys’ proclamations after his coup, no one had really been sure how much of the murderous bastards had survived. Sure, many prisons had been opened and their wardens been executed for their crimes. But for each thousand liberated from the jails, there had been five or six thousand people still missing, and the men of the reviled Alliser Thorne had disappeared in the darkness of the under-cities. No one knew how many, or at least if some people knew, they weren’t talking. But there had been plenty of black uniforms to help the Reds when they landed with fire and blood.

Hopefully there shouldn’t be less of these treacherous torturers now. They had been a favourite target of snipers and scouts, and every policeman captured had not died quickly.

“Yes, I suppose they weren’t going to inform us...too much risk we would have protested.” Given that the rumoured budget Rhaegar the Prophecy-Crazy had poured in his ‘political officers’, ‘self-defence national units’, ‘loyalty battalions’ and the like, the Gold Fists and Goldcloaks’ accusations would have happened, one way or another. “Very well, I suppose you are going to put conditions for your help.”

“I want you and your men to join the Faith Militant of the Sparrow,” the septon – assuming he was a true septon – spoke. “You will remain in command of the military operations, but I will be in charge of religious affairs and spreading the word of the Seven. The Sparrows have discovered many abandoned secret hideout of the Crown Intelligence and the Secret Police. Many are still completely operational and have everything for a regimental-sized force to continue the fight for months.”

“The Faith Militant was forbidden by the Old Conciliator,” one of the men missing his left arm, Bernard or Aemon, shouted.

“This isn’t exact,” the Sparrow of the Seven Forges, “while we may be declared terrorists, my brethren and I never declared the Faith Militant reborn, because, while we were disgusted by the corruption and the excesses of the septs and those calling themselves Priests of the Seven-Who-Are-One, the Faith and its chosen people were protected from heretics and the demons.”

The terrorist-septon opened his hands, and suddenly they flashed in small lights. This was no artifice or trick, the hands of the man were truly shining. Astonished and loud expressions were uttered.

“For the first time in millennia, the Faith is threatened both on the outside and the inside!” Word after word, the voice was becoming more and more powerful. “For the first time in three centuries, the Targaryens have broken Maegor’s edict! They brought sorcerers and devastation to our homes! They invited the very forces of heresy and untold abominations to flay our bodies and threaten our souls! They will tell you that you are traitors...but what have King Rhaegar and the monstrous creature he called Aegon done to you? Every time you rise or have the ill-luck to be caught in their quarrels, millions of Faithful are killed!”

“I am the Sparrow of the Seven Forges, and I say the war is not over! It won’t be until the banners of the Faith, the True Faith, are raised again in triumph over hundreds of worlds and the demons casted back into the abyss. DEATH TO THE DRAGONS! SAINT JANOS BEGAN THE SLAYING OF THE INFIDELS, AND WE WILL NOT LET HIS MATYRDOM BE IN VAIN!”

“SAINT JANOS!”

“SAINT JANOS!”

“THE GODS WILL IT!”

**Lady Asha Tarly, 24.10.300AAC, Pyke System**

Westerners were crazy.

If someone had another explanation, Asha wanted to hear it in the next ten seconds.

Who else activated plasma grenades at sword’s range? Who else considered charging hordes of dead with roars of joy?

They were madmen, all of them. Asha understood better that so many had survived the Doom and so many battlefields of the Greyjoy Rebellion.

Whoever or whatever the enemy was, they charged and hacked it into very small parts before incinerating it. In the semi-darkness of the corrupted Tyroshi flag-dreadnaught, the Lannister red armours shone in eerie crimson light.

The recently married Lady Tarly was never going to say these men fought like Lions. Feline creatures were perfectly rational and sane animals, and would have stopped fighting of exhaustion or lack of hunger hours ago.

The Westerners fought like demons the tide of undead, skeletons and other abominations, and Asha, whatever God may hear her prayer, was stuck with them, the only non-Westerner of the entire party. It had not been the case in the first minutes of assault, but the Tarly soldiers Sam had given her had died very quickly. No offense to them, but they weren’t just good enough. And the same had been true for all the Ironborn and the Reachers who had volunteered. There had been six detachments supposed to board the flagship of her treacherous necromancer-uncle, and so far they had met the animated corpse-remnants of the five other formations.

Whatever fate awaited them, Asha and the Westerners were alone. They were no reinforcements available, given the sights of the battle raging outside, and even if there were, all the suicidal warriors had already volunteered to board this capital ship.

How many hours had they been fighting? Watches and chronometric displays had begun behaving very, very weirdly the moment they had invaded the warship. Some part of her wished to believe it was the fault of these eldritch blue lights everywhere, but instinct told her they weren’t that lucky.

Something was perturbing sensors, communications, machinery, and whatever laws humanity believed to be impossible to break. Too many times they had seen what looked like ‘normal’ Essossi machinery crumble to dust only to reassemble on its own minutes later with several eldritch lights and more cold.

The last rounds of incendiary ammunition were reserved for those.

For the rest, you survived or you died by your weapon skills at close-quarters. On this point, Asha had to admit, she was one of the luckiest warriors. The wights and other enemies appeared to have a mortal weakness for Valyrian steel, allowing her to reap half a dozen kills with every swing of the two-handed sword. It was also one of the big reasons why she was alive and far more prestigious and experienced men weren’t.

And no, this wasn’t an attempt to be humble. Asha knew she was good with vibro-axes and vibro-swords, but a lot of the Westerners who had been chosen for this mission had, by their own admission, ‘been swimming in the rivers of blood of the Fall of Pyke’ a decade ago, and their killing counts were in the three or four digits. Granted, they weren’t necessarily used to terminate undead opponents.

But one after another, even these legendary veterans were dying in this warship of horrors and damnation.

In fact, were they were truly inside a starship once more? Judging by the mountains of true dead they had left behind, the ex-Tyroshi ship could not possibly have transported so many wights...and in fact certain wights shouldn’t have been there in the first place. The Reachers, Westerners and Crownlanders corpses, Asha could understand, but it had been confirmed days ago that the Corbray commander of Saltcliffe had wiped detonated his entire nuclear arsenal and shattered the planet rather than let Victarion use his armies beyond death. But whether the reports were true or not, there shouldn’t be any cohort of dead Northerners and Dornish armours with them. These two Sectors had done the minimum of fighting they could get away with during the last war, and most of them had been on Pyke itself, which obviously the forces of necromancy and profanation didn’t control.

“The bridge is close, I feel it,” the sellsword commander, the man calling himself Bronn, announced. Asha hadn’t taken him very seriously at first, his light boasting and his perpetual mocking sneer had been incredibly annoying, but the moment he had started to fight his worth had been incontestable. “If this ship still follows the same architectural rules as most Tyroshi hulls, there should be one more final hall, the ‘honour stairs’, and then the bridge.”

“What are we waiting for?” Sandor Clegane roared, throwing one of his last grenades in a nearby corridor and crushing a crawling wight with his right armoured boot. “An invitation from his royal ugliness?”

“KILL THE DEAD FOR THE LIVING!”

“DEATH TO THE UNDEAD KING!”

“DEATH TO THE ABOMINATIONS!”

One by one, thirty-plus exhausted voices shouted their battle-cries. There was no point in exercising discretion after all; the monster at the helm knew exactly by which direction they arrived.

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KRAKEN!” The young woman shouted when her time came.

“FOR ALL HUMANITY, LET NONE SURVIVE!”

Ayric Sarring was the first to charge inside the hall, his reaper-sword Demonslayer massacring right and left the wights which had imprudently tried to form the first line of defence. In several seconds, an ungodly amount of skeletons and oily mutant-things were shrieking and falling apart, or simply burning internally from their wounds. The Colonel and senior officer of their suicide force was a storm of death and steel. They followed into the ocean of violence. They couldn’t emulate him, but they could very well try. Striking putrefied and bone-things with every step, Asha and the surviving Westerners exterminated everything that stood in their way.

And suddenly, everything stopped. The wights stopped rushing to their demises. The shrieks of undead ceased to be heard. The blue lights flickered, and the darkness grew more pressing.

Loud footsteps resonated, and a company of Ironborn warriors.

Or rather, men who had once been Ironborn warriors. Now their midnight-class armours were wrong, the sigils and colours of their Houses completely altered to represent horrifying monsters and everywhere there were baleful eldritch energies surrounding them.

And behind them came a titan of darkness and evil.

“**You will not prevent my triumph, greenlanders. You will not prevent the final victory of the Creator. We are His Champions! We are His Chosen**!”

And as the sensation of cold increased by ten in intensity, all hope Asha had left that this wasn’t Victarion Greyjoy leading the forces of evil died when the massive blue-eyed monster raised a gigantic vibro-axe.

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

Sam was not going to say everything that could possibly turn wrong had - his personal command was slightly damaged but overall intact and he didn’t want to tempt the Stranger – but a lot of things could have gone better in the last couple of hours.

“Give me some good news,” the young Lord of Horn Hill tried after a disgusted look at one more crippled Hightower cruiser.

“Rhaegar Targaryen is still dead?” tried Ser Gerion Lannister.

Sam turned his head in direction of the brother of the Lord of Casterly Rock and gave him a deadpan look. The red-clad Lion grinned unrepentantly.

“I should have said goods news relevant to the current battle,” he huffed after a couple of seconds. “I don’t think the corpse of our previous King is likely to be raised and sent to the frontlines. King’s Landing is a bit far from Pyke.”

Besides, the Seven Sectors were paying seventeen years of governance from this crazy silver-haired King by one of the largest and most destructive civil wars ever seen. As a bannersmen of Highgarden, Sam refused to think what sort of catastrophic war an undead Rhaegar Targaryen would be able to unleash on Westeros.

No, it was better not to think about it. Nothing but madness waited on this path.

“Will we have time to destroy the warships escorting the two flag-dreadnaughts before the krakens catch up with us?”

It wasn’t a question he had ever thought he would have to ask seriously. Father Above, this war was utterly crazy...

“No, my Lord. Judging how...unconventional modifications the battle-spheres have manifested in this battle, we will need two or three more hours to finish with them. The thirty-plus krakens which are coming this way will have engaged long before that.”

Unconventional modifications? Quite often, Sam loved how the flowery language of Westeros was turned by gifted speakers. The modifications were sorcery, purely and simply. No Essossi shield had ever been built to be so powerful, and these battle-spheres and flag-dreadnaughts were decommissioned hulls. Their shields should have been less powerful...but then the Tyroshi shields were not an eldritch blue and didn’t send regularly the warrant officers watching the screens to the infirmary screaming like possessed men.

“We’d best increase the frequency of our volleys, then.” They were already doing that, unfortunately.

The ‘wight fleet’ of the Iron King was crippled beyond recognition, but unfortunately, the Hightower-Redwyne obsolete ships had perished with them. But the real bad issue was the thousands of reports on Pyke itself reporting the dead had begun to rise. And they weren’t speaking just in entire platoons or by entire companies.

These were entire armies which were mustering against the living.

And unless they killed the mastermind behind this atrocity in the next hour, the number of fatalities was going to rise in the tens of millions.

It was a nightmarish prediction...and it was certainly nothing compared to what was going to happen when the ocean of darkness created by the krakens arrived in orbit of Pyke.

Maybe they would be able to stop Victarion Greyjoy, though for the moment the odds were definitely against it. But where the krakens were involved, the Rear-Admiral of the Reach didn’t see a way to win the day.

“My Lord, with due respect, I think it is time to withdraw,” his junior tactical advisor said – the senior had been narrowly stopped to eat his own pistol when he had seen some images of the wights crawling in the half-destroyed Redwyne ships of the line. “We have done everything we can do, but the tactical situation leaves little chance of victory. The next hour will determine how many men our fleet will be able to evacuate from Pyke before the hammer falls. The krakens can’t be stopped...”

There was a terrifying flash of blue, and for a couple of seconds all electronics and signals flickered out.

“What was that?”

“My...the shields! The shields of the enemy ships are down! All shields save the enemy flagship are down!”

Sam watched the tactical display and found no external reason why the battle-spheres and the flag-dreadnaughts had decided to commit this valiant form of suicide. There was no external reason for the enemy leader to sacrifice all its escorts and capital ships...except if its flagship was facing a more pressing threat in its halls.

“The boarding teams have fought their way through the corridors of the enemy flagship! Bombard the non-shielded enemy warships until they are nothing but dust! We must cut down the wights’ problem at its source.”

“This is our last chance to decapitate the armies of the dead,” Gerion Lannister spoke. “I am going to assemble new boarding parties from volunteers. Victarion Greyjoy can’t be allowed to escape again!”

**King Joffrey Targaryen, 24.10.300AAC, Tarbeck Hall System**

As fate would have it, the transport carrying the copy of his grandfather’s will and his flagship met in the Tarbeck Hall System.

Joffrey and most of the men aboard the super-battleship had not missed the irony. Decades ago, Tywin Lannister had made sure he would be remembered for the extinction of the ruling Noble House and the vicious sacking of the inhabited planet there. Or at least he would be remembered for Tarbeck Hall and Castamere; though most highborn and smallfolk tended to remember Castamere above all. In the domains of House Tarbeck, there had been thousands of survivors, despite the utter annihilation visited on the military forces and the nobles. House Reyne had perished with its people at Castamere, and in a far more dramatic and cataclysmic fashion.

Joffrey shook his head. What was done was done. House Reyne and House Tarbeck were extinct, and in great part the absence of dissension after the Lord Paramount’s death came from the fact the legacy the Old Lion had created by massacring to the last two Noble Houses.

What was done was done. Only the present mattered. Only the will of the Warden of the West mattered. Joffrey was King, but he needed a Lord of Casterly Rock, and he needed one as soon as humanly as possible.

Watching the stars, the silver-haired sovereign considered the different possibilities. Considering what he knew about his grandfather, the most prudent option would have been to name Lancel his Heir and inheritor of all his titles. Like him, Lancel was young, that much was impossible to refute, but he served in the Navy and had begun to make his reputation. His lineage was impeccable.

It was not impossible Lord Tywin had considered Lancel too young for the role. In this case, it was most likely the name of Kevan Lannister who would be read on the antique paper he would have to read in a few minutes.

“Never mind that it’s going to be hell to justify according to the rules of succession...” Joffrey whispered.

By all laws and customs, the Heir to Casterly Rock was Tyrion Lannister. Privately, the young King agreed this was a foreseen conclusion. Unfortunately, Tywin Lannister had spent years disparaging his second son, who also happened to be a dwarf to complicate the matter.

So if the name written on the will was Ser Lancel Lannister, Tywin’s least loved son might not contest the will too loudly – as long as Joffrey handed him a Lordship, that is.

But if the Heir was Ser Kevan, Joffrey had no idea what the land commander operating with Ser Marbrand was going to do. Maybe Tyrion Lannister would acclaim Lancel in exchange for titles, wealth and privileges. But it was far more probable the dwarf would advance his own claim, unless the will forsook his rights to the Rock.

And that didn’t even consider what was going to happen if Tygett and Gerion were above Lancel in the order of succession. Granted, it was unlikely, these two brothers had according to all evidence not been particularly fond of their elder brother...but he could not avoid considering this scenario.

At least it was going to be a Lannister, one way or another. The Old Lion had many, many issues, but he would never allow the Rock to fall into non-Lannister hands.

Joffrey adjusted his red and black cloak over his golden parade armour and turned to smile. The doors opened, and two columns of Red Cloaks marched in a long solemn procession. Between them came many notables of Lannisport and Casterly Rock. Behind them came a large golden chest, with seven keyholes.

The list of ceremonial acts took an eternity, or at least it felt that way to him. Each Key was ‘purified’ and ‘sanctified’, many times the death of the Lord Paramount Tywin Lannister was announced – and the trumpets and the musical instruments in hearing range played suitable mourning melodies.

It took over half an hour for each of the seven keys to be used and the contents of the chest to be opened reverently.

At last, the official papers were handed out, and the will began to be read.

“I, Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Lord of the Paramount House of Lannister, Warden of the West, Shield of Lannisport, Hand of the King, being of sound mind and disposing memory, do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my Last Will and Testament...” Joffrey noted with amusement the Old Lion had manifestly updated his will to reflect his return back to the position.

The legal announcements and the references to the laws continued for a while. It seemed there would be no loophole...

“I do hereby declare, before the Seven and the laws of men, my eldest son Ser Jaime Lannister as my Heir...”

The name was like a cold shower and Joffrey failed to not gape.

“Preposterous!” one of the Lords present shouted, abruptly ending the reading of the will.

“This is the will of Lord Tywin Lannister...” one of the elderly notaries said in a haughty manner.

“Then the will is obviously wrong,” Joffrey said in a low tone, but everyone heard him. He had been wrong in the end; he had not predicted the worst-case scenario. Clearing his throat, the son of Cersei Lannister spoke in the best imperious tone he could command. “No one in this room will deny it is right for a father to love his children. But Ser Jaime’s rights in the succession of House Lannister have been voided over eighteen years ago. The oaths of the Kingsguard do not leave loopholes or flaws to be exploited.”

“This is the will of Lord Tywin Lannister...”

Joffrey chuckled at the obtuse voice of the parrot in front of him. Many in the crowd were far more vocal.

“Let’s assume for a moment I was willing to break three centuries of traditions, laws, customs and precedents to reinstate Ser Jaime Lannister in his rights as the Heir to Rock,” the green-eyed sovereign said in a sarcastic tone. Just the mere mention of it gave him bad vibes. The propaganda gains he would give to his enemies would be colossal. Kingsguards served for life. Most of the current generation had not covered themselves in glory, but they served until death or something happened to send them to the Wall or the executioner’s axe. “There’s the minor fact we don’t even know if Ser Jaime is alive right now. Communications with Dorne are a bit haphazard and discontinued at the moment.”

It was an entirely predictable consequence of having a very hostile Reach between Dorne and the West.

“But Lord Tywin has thought about this!” babbled the bureaucrat-notary. “He named Ser Kevan Lannister as Regent...”

Joffrey had a monumental urge to slap the idiot or to kick him in the balls. It would be funny and it would a great stress-reliever. Or maybe he should make the man a buffoon, he certainly had the comedic parts well in order...

“Ser Kevan died in the Battle of Highgarden,” Joffrey reminded his interlocutor. And he had noted the title of ‘Regent’. ‘Regent’ was not ‘Heir’. In other words, Lancel was not placed above other people in the list of succession. In turn, this suggested the children of Tywin Lannister and his grandchildren came first, then Kevan’s children, then Tywin’s surviving brothers. The order of succession thus after Tywin’s sons was thus Joffrey himself, Daeron, Shiera, Lancel, Martyn, Willem, Janei, Tygett, Tyrek, and Gerion. His mother may have been included somewhere, but since she was all likely a prisoner of war, her status was no better than his uncle Jaime.

“The forms must be respected...”

“This document is obviously invalid,” Joffrey froze as he seized the voluminous pile from the reddening notary. The date...this will had been signed in 282AAC. Gods Above, Lord Tywin had not updated his Last Will since his eldest son had joined the white cloaks!

The King had to grit his teeth to repress insults and vociferations before reading the first pages. Yes, it was as he had feared. The will had never been updated and most of the dispositions were no longer valid.

As much as he didn’t like it, the laws of the Western Sector and Westeros were clear in this case.

“All Hail, Tyrion Lannister, Lord Paramount of the Western Sector, Lord of House Lannister, Master of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, and Warden of the West!”

“ALL HAIL!”

**Queen Rhaenyra Blackfyre, 24.10.300AAC, Gulltown System**

The Braavosi cruiser had not died well. Judging by the preliminary reports of Salladhor Saan’s men who had found it, the missile tubes and the plasma batteries had still been cold when it was killed. In practical terms, the regular navy personnel sworn to the Sealord and the Republic of the Braavos had been caught with their pants down by their killers.

It wasn’t good, but this point alone didn’t trouble Rhaenyra. For all their feelings of superiority over the rest of the known galaxy, Braavos spacemen weren’t invincible, four metres-tall giants, omniscient and invulnerable. Yes, they had the best navy from a technological or numerical point of view. Yes, on a ton-for-ton basis, the Braavosi could likely erase Stormlanders or Crownlanders battle-squadrons without for a single second worry about their enemies being able to shoot back effectively.

But they weren’t invincible. In fact, one might say the fear the Republican Navy inspired to its opponents was beginning to have unpleasant effects in its political circles and its mobilisation procedures. Obviously, everyone knew the Braavosi had the most dangerous navy in this part of the galaxy. Add to this reality the formidable financial power of the terrible Iron Bank, the sheer amount of resources tens of thousands merchant ships could deliver day after day to finance a war effort, and even the Targaryens at their height had been wary to fight against Braavos. Dragons were no good when the stock exchanges had to be prevented from a complete collapse.

“Whatever did this, it cut the prow of the cruiser like a starship-sized Valyrian blade,” the Blackfyre Queen said.

“Whatever,” her uncle mused next to her, “you don’t think a human warship caused the damage, then?”

Rhaenyra groaned. Sometimes her little games with her Master of Whisperers were amusing. This wasn’t one of these times, though.

“As I’m sure you’ve already known, by the logs and the schedule of the supply convoys, none of our warships could have been in position to strike,” she replied as the warship, minus the prow and several other parts, was towed to one of the Gulltown salvage yards. “The Arryn forces could have done it of course, Runestone is close. But I don’t see why Lord Royce or one of his captains would do something so stupid. And the Green fleet has not left Dragonstone. The Manderly fleet is operating in the Three Sisters’ region. But none of these fleets have the skills to gut a Braavosi warship like an artist creates a painting.”

This was the more worrying issue. How the hell did you massacre a ship full of professionals without them coming to battle-stations? The cruiser had been attacked close to Gulltown, so they should have been on their guard, the proximity of her space assets and a war zone made everyone prudent. And in deep space, it was hard to sneak on someone. The void was empty; there were no suns, no planets, no asteroid belts or comets to hide behind.

And yet a Braavosi cruiser had died, and if not for a merchant ship having experienced mechanical problems and one of Saan’s captains gallivanting around in search of prey to spend the next hours, they wouldn’t have found the doomed warship.

“I was pleasantly surprised by the fact Braavosi ‘pirates’ had not begun test my contingency plans where our supply lines were concerned. Now with the benefit of hindsight, I wonder if the Sealord’s Admirals have not already tried...and something dealt with them in the darkness.”

“They might have suffered a mechanical incident,” Varys Tivario said with the tone of someone not believing his own words. Rhaenyra looked at him with the glances she usually reserved to particularly slow subordinates.

“If the incident was sufficient to separate the prow, a quarter of a lower deck and ten batteries, uncle, the ship should have been stellar debris by now and the ship which discovered it shouldn’t have been to identify the wreck, much less its nation.”

No, whatever had killed this cruiser had done exactly what it wanted to do, and then left the doomed warship for them to find. It was a message and it wasn’t particularly subtle.

It wasn’t giving her good feelings about the motives of the things which had perpetrated this free slaughter either.

“I will have to call the Braavosi highest representative tomorrow,” since the Sealord was certainly not going to recognised anytime soon a Pentoshi-backed regime, there was no ambassador at Gulltown. “In the mean time, we are going to raise the level of alert. There’s something in the void killing warships, and based on this hulk, I don’t think we can count on it being friendly.”

**Lord Wyman Manderly, 24.10.300AAC, Sweetsister System**

“I must say, you are a brave man, Lord Sunderland! There aren’t many who would dare invite me to dinner!”

Hundreds of Manderly captains, soldiers, men-at-arms, accountants and all sort of witnesses laughed loudly as he stopped the consumption of a divine lobster which literally melted on his tongue to deliver these words.

Their host didn’t seem to appreciate the jest. Not that Wyman had expected him too, honestly. But it was a bit hard to respect a man who had not answered the call for arms of his liege lord during the Great Rebellion and had outright tried to betray Jon Arryn in the current one.

Triston Sunderland tried to pull on the manacles holding his hands together, but the durasteel of the Northern forges was not brittle and of low quality like the miserable Southern stuff they had sold under the Rapist’s reign.

“You laugh, Fat One,” the Lord of House Sunderland hissed, “but one day it will be your turn to be chained to your chair. And I don’t think that day, you will be able to feast as you do today.”

“That is an excellent point,” recognised the Master of White Harbor and the Lord of the Three Sisters’ eyes widened for a second or two in surprise. “But then we Northerners have always held true to the rules of courtesy and honour the Gods ask of us. It is not our fault *some people* have broken with the old chivalrous traditions.”

One did not have been particularly observant to notice the ocean of anger and loathing which surged in his interlocutor’s eyes and face.

“I am loyal to the True King!”

Wyman nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes, yes...an admirable thing...err...Rear-Admiral Woolfield? How many Kings are there in Westeros lately?”

“The current count is at six crowned heads, my Lord,” replied nobly his amicable subordinate. “There is the Red Bastard, Tywin’s puppet grandson, the Dornish Viper, the Black Dragon, the Rapist’s brother and the Mad Kraken.”

“Six,” Wyman repeated thoughtfully before giving a bright smile. “And we have also dozens of warlords running around. No, my Lord, I don’t think we can say it’s a great exploit to be loyal to a King. Especially one you served so badly in the past.”

“You dare...”

“You never marched to war with the Insane Pyromaniac or the Rapist, Lord Sunderland,” Wyman felt his ‘host’ had to be reminded what his past actions had been while finishing the delicious lobster and calling for his cooks to bring the cheese and the salad. Why, he feared the Sistermen was suffering from amnesia! “For all your pretences of loyalty, I don’t remember you participating in the Fall of Pyke or being anywhere near the Iron Sector!”

“My wife was about to give birth to our seventh son!”

“How incredibly convenient,” remarked an anonymous Manderly soldier, generating more chuckles and laughs.

Manderly had to approve. It was totally convenient and worthy of Sistermen.

These smugglers had tried to profit from the eternal wars between the Vale and the North, and one might acknowledge they had been really successful for a time. But three centuries of no hostilities between Houses Arryn and Stark had made them even more unreliable.

“You can mock me as you wish,” Triston bitterly declared. “I am not in position to resist.” On this point he was absolutely correct, since his fleet had been vanquished and all the Sistermen holdfasts were military occupied by Northern soldiers. “But one day, House Sunderland will be reborn from the furnace of wars. And on that day, House Manderly will be punished for its treacherous deeds.”

Wyman Manderly vigorously nodded.

“An admirable opinion,” the Northern Lord burped. “But I think it is going to be somewhat difficult for you, my Lord. Your four surviving sons and yourself will depart immediately for the Wall after this feast, as will your male cousins and your close relatives involved in the seizure of the Manderly merchant ships. Wives, daughters and female cousins will stay under heavy guard at Winterfell. The same fate awaits the highborn of Houses Borrell, Longthorpe and Torrent.”

“The people of the Three Sisters will remember this insult for centuries!”

Wyman Manderly smiled as he began to swallow the magnificent selection of cheese disposed in front of him.

“The people of the Three Sisters should sometimes remember their security is safeguarded by the direwolf and the falcon...”

**Bronn Wood-Brother, 24.10.300AAC, Pyke System**

For a moment, no shot was fired, and the absolute worst type of silence dominated the hall.

And then it was shattered.

“**KILL THEM ALL**!”

“FOR THE LIVING! DEATH TO THE IRONBORN!”

“SEND THEM ALL IN THE SEVEN HELLS!”

The twenty-five something survivors of the long battle charged, Sandor Clegane leading the assault. Bronn admired the spirit of the Hound, but he preferred to take the rear...it was best to crush the wights trying to cut them off.

But a couple of heartbeats, he too was thrown into a desperate for his life. They fought the personal guard of Victarion Greyjoy, and damn, the blue sorcery filling the monsters made them hard to beat and they hit like warhammers.

For the first time since they had arrived in this lair of horrors and death, they had their legendary duels to fight. And they were dying. Bronn saw a Lannister veteran get impaled by a shadowy claw which had come out after cutting the enemy’s arm.

“DIE!”

Sandor Clegane wasn’t even able to strike a true blow against Victarion Greyjoy. There was a sinister word in an unknown tongue shouted, and the walls began to shine blue. The Hound was ejected by the shockwave in a pile of wights like he was nothing.

The dark colossus who had been called Victarion Greyjoy in a previous like advanced and two red armours fell in close succession with a single blow. It wasn’t that the men hadn’t seen him coming; it was just that the strength behind each blow was sufficient to shatter armours and weapons.

Despite himself, despite decades spent fighting thousands of strange and deadly opponents, Bronn felt his hands tremble and an emotion he had thought under his control came back unbridled.

It was fear.

The dark hand pulsed in blue, and Bronn decapitated his opponent in a risky feint, charging to save Sandor Clegane who was trying to crush by hand a score of wights, unable to do anything against the death coming for him. Bronn ran, but another Ironborn giant blocked his way. He engaged, knowing he wasn’t able to win in time...

But his charge had created an opening for Ayric, and suddenly there was a thunderous explosion as Demonslayer and the sorcerous vibro-axe clashed.

The Valyrian weapon resisted where no other blade had, and the weakness in the blue-eyed abomination’s guard was immediately exploited by a strike on the left arm.

“YES!”

“**NO**!” The wound on the arm disappeared like it had never existed and the black-blue armour shrieked like a living thing before erasing the hole created by Demonslayer. “**I AM THE CHAMPION OF THE VOID! I WILL KILL YOU! I WILL KILL ALL THE TRAITORS! NO MAN CAN KILL ME**!”

And the half-giant began to grow and be filled with more eldritch energies. Even looking at him was beginning to be unpleasant. It was like a pyre of blue-cold...things...and pure darkness.

Bronn cut the arms, legs and head of his latest enemy, who seemed to have weakened considerably in the last seconds.

Before he had the time to take a step forwards, it was like they were hit by the fist of a God.

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

Urrigon didn’t like the dead, especially when they were trying to kill him.

The thought brought a sad smile to his lips.

What is dead may never die, but rise again, harder and stronger.

How many times had he shouted these words, unaware of their true meaning, of the awful warning they taught?

A thousand times? Ten thousand? He didn’t know the answer.

At least, he like plenty of Ironborn acknowledged the truth. It may be too late, but the Ironborn knew what sort of monsters were trying to enslave them. A million dead may be outside, trying to break through the defences of the secret bastion of his supporters, but they were too late too. Victarion Greyjoy and whatever demon possessed him had misunderstood his real intentions until he came here.

For in front of his eyes, was the true Seastone Chair. No, it was not the throne of Balon Greyjoy some delusional Void Priest had managed to move away before the sack of the Greyjoy Citadel. This one had been brutally destroyed by the Targaryens and their lackeys.

The true Seastone Chair had been abandoned here over a thousand years ago, as the legacy of the Grey King went increasingly ignored and new generation of reavers believed the dangers of the void were long gone. Men like Balon Greyjoy, short-sighted and stupid, had buried the Seastone Chair in the foundations of the First Fortress. It had taken Urrigon three years to find the secret tunnels leading to it once he began his quest.

The Seastone Chair could not have been more different than Balon’s throne if its builders had tried. It wasn’t kraken-shaped. It was the colour of ancient ivory, a venerable shade of white. It had been carved in a cold, uncomfortable seat. There was no ornament, no decorations and no inscriptions. Its builders had not included gemstones or gold.

But it was infinitely more powerful than the poor thing the Iron Kings had coveted in their tiny shreds of lust, ambition, power and madness.

The Seastone Chair, built according to the legends by the Grey King himself, controlled the beacons of the Iron Sector. If the tales he had managed to decipher were true, a descendant of the hero could forge anew the lights which had repelled the beasts of the Void six or eight millennia ago.

Urrigon would have scoffed at the idea when he was young. But today, this tiny hope had brought him here.

The unpalatable truth was that no matter what humanity did to defend Pyke, their efforts were doomed. The Reachers’ ships of the lines could win battle after battle, and it wouldn’t be enough. The last of the original beacons, the Lonely Light lighthouse, had finally been extinguished in the general indifference. And without beacons, the krakens and the leviathans of the Sunset Void would rise from the deeps once more.

The creatures seen at Great Wyk and Lonely Light were only the vanguard of more terrible legions, shadows of the real darkness. There were enemies awakening that made Victarion’s masters look like the lesser evil.

The force of arms was insufficient for this war. Too much had already been lost in this civil war. Too many ancient alliances had been broken. The leaders humanity needed had their own preoccupations, and those who could have been in position were narrow-minded and arrogant.

His sacrifice was certainly not going to be enough. But if he prevented the collapse of what remained of the Iron Sector today, there would be a tiny hope...

Slowly, Urrigon Greyjoy cut his left hand and let the blood drip on the white stone.

The moment it touched, it began to be absorbed. This was good. After a thousand years of non-activation, the Priest of Ashes had had no certainty the artefact was still completely functional.

“In the name of the Grey King, I call for help,” the former reaver spoke. “I remember the ancient words and I am ready to uphold them again! Ironborn do not sow, we protect! We are the sentinels of the Light! We are the western shield against the Void! On the wings of the Storm, we stand true and we guard the realms of Man! By my blood and by my birth, I implore the Ancient Pact! The time has come to restore the Light!”

The Seastone Chair began to burn in bright light and a magnificent song began to be heard.

Without one more word, Urrigon grabbed the bag containing most of his research where he had kept his studies and handed it to his assistants. They bowed and began to run in the direction of the secret passage, as per their vows.

Someone had to tell his niece, and maybe his nephew, of what had been done today.

The Greyjoys and the last descendants of the Grey King had to be able to continue the vigil if his blood was not enough.

“By the white and black walls of Pyke, by the Void and the Storm, I ask for one more dawn to grace the doomed worlds of the Ironborn. I beg for one more chance to repair what was broken forever. I pray for the salvation of my people...”

Urrigon Greyjoy sat on the Seastone Chair. The contact was agony in the first second and it became worse as the seconds passed.

“And I give my life for them. In Iron was I forged, and in Iron...I die.”

There was an explosion of light and Urrigon Greyjoy ceased to exist.

**Bronn Wood-Brother, 24.10.300AAC, Pyke System**

If Bronn survived this disaster, he was going to do two things. The first was to hire a powerful sorcerer to protect his company from enemy sorcery attacks. The second was to find a way to gain a Valyrian sword for himself.

Oh, who was he kidding? It was too late for that.

Bronn couldn’t do anything as the sorcery of their enemy kept him and all the surviving swordsmen not possessing a Valyrian blade pinned on the glacial ground, waiting for the outcome of the fight to be decided.

And since neither Ayric Sarring nor Asha Tarly were able to do anything more than inconvenience the possessed Victarion Greyjoy, death was the only thing Bronn saw waiting for them.

It wasn’t a question of skill. The Westerner and the Reacher-by-marriage woman fought superbly. But their opponent refused to die and regenerated of his wounds in the blink of an eye. Seven Hells, twice the abomination had suffered wounds which should have decapitated him or at least crushed everything near the head.

Bronn wasn’t a healer or a maester, but these wounds were sufficient to send someone to the Stranger ten times out of ten. On this type of opponent it wasn’t. And so the fight continued, the speed and skill of the living trying to find a counter to the inhuman endurance of the blue-eyed wight-master.

They were losing ground. The parades and the feints were coming slower. It didn’t help that they had fought for hours to reach this hall, across an unending tide of enemy. And the Ironborn-possessed giants had just waited them here, until they were easy prey and their wights’ armies were consumed.

“**NOW YOU DIE**!”

The entire midnight armour shone a bright blue and suddenly the speed of the monster became horrifying fast, the kind of speed that even the Beast had not possessed a decade ago. The daughter of Balon Greyjoy managed to parry the blow but she was thrown over ten metres away like she was a doll. And Ayric Sarring received a punishing blow that saw him fall back by two steps.

The rest was just a one-sided affair. The monster was attacking relentlessly, and not only he was getting faster, his coordination between vibro-axe and shield was getting better too.

In the end, the Colonel of Lannisport received one shield assault too many and collapsed to the ground.

“**I CLAIM VICTORY! I AM THE LORD OF PYKE**!”

A torrent light burst into existence and the end of the proclamation ended with a shriek of agony. The thing that had been the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet opened his hands, and the vibro-axe hit the bones of an unresponsive wight.

Bronn instantly felt better and seized his vibro-sword. And for once in his career, he taunted his enemy.

“HEY, UGLY!” The monster turned his head...and took his vibro-sword right in the right eye. The abomination collapsed...and this time it did not rise again.

Bronn began to dismember the corpse anyway, and he was followed by every surviving veteran.

Just to be sure.

A minute later, four thousand Reachers arrived to contemplate the scene of the massacre, the ‘big-boned’ son of Randyll Tarly among them.

Bronn had a good laugh –like everyone he was sure - when the Lord of Horn Hill and his wife decided to kiss for ten good minutes in front of everyone.

**Author’s note**: The War of the Ten Warlords Arc ends there, after ten chapters. The Battle of Pyke is over, and with it one of the warlords has met his end – if he could still be considered alive, that is.

This is not the end of the Second Long Night, of course. The Others are still there on the other side of the Eye of Woe, and the legions of abominations aren’t vanquished. This is merely the end of the beginning...

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

TV Tropes Page: / pmwiki/ / Fanfic/ LetTheGalaxyBurn

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

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