**War of the Ten Warlords**

**Chapter 4**

**Where Angels Fear to Thread**

*War is by its very nature a complicated affair. In the case of the War of the Ten Warlords and the Second Long Night, it is even more so. For decades, the many organisations praising knowledge as the greatest quality of the human race have debated and fought verbally where one began and the other ended.*

*The question is complex and the horrifying death toll has unfortunately only increased the problems maesters and other institutions face when they try to write books on this age of darkness and tragedy. It doesn’t help at all many planets to this day venerate the heroes of these wars as holy figures and thousands of historic works were banned in one Sector or another when the information they delivered wasn’t the one proclaimed by the religious and secular authorities.*

*In all likelihood, the debates will continue for several centuries and it is not the task of the author to recount all of them. Nor is it to create new controversies. There is enough evidence to affirm the Second Long Night started years before Queen Rhaenys Targaryen, the Second Queen-Who-Never-Was, commenced her offensive against the Marcher System of Nightsong. For Westeros though, the date most often taken as the official beginning of the plunge into the abyss is 17.09.300AAC.*

*The reason for this choice is known to every child and adult from Winterfell to Sunspear. The two great battles fought on this date have entered history. They were fought tens of thousands light-years apart and yet oddly similar.*

*The first battle is of course the Battle of Saltcliffe, which infamy has spread to Volantis and beyond. The names for the battle are also impossible to truly recount in its entirety. In what were then the River and the Vale Sectors, it was known as the Battle of Forlorn Hope. In the domains of House Lannister, the reports and the holo-news soon called it the Death Tide. The Stark commanders promptly referred to it as the Defiance of Saltcliffe. The Heresy of Saltcliffe, the Doom of Blood-Salt, the Holocaust of Darkness, and the Betrayal of Iron were many other descriptions given in the aftermath of the battle.*

*To explain the sides which clashed it is necessary to return to the final days of the Greyjoy Rebellion...*

Extract from the Second Long Night, by Albert Trident, 674AAC.

**Ser Jon Upcliff, 16.09.300AAC, Saltcliffe System**

Jon read the message in his hands for the third time. The words refused to change. Always the same message, the same dread news and the pit of fear in his stomach grew deeper.

“I suppose it has been confirmed.” It was not a question and the two Captains facing him nodded in assent.

“The information has spread from the Banefort to Crakehall and both Harlaw and Pyke have not said a word against it.”

“Damn,” the Vale Rear-Admiral looked at the message before making it a ball of paper and throwing it in the dustbin. “The king is dead, long live the king!”

He was well aware his tone was more appropriate for the mockery of a funeral ceremony than a proper and enthusiastic proclamation of allegiance. At this moment, the knight of House Upcliff couldn’t care less. The King was dead, and by the hints dropped in the message, it was clear the war everybody had feared these last five years was about to begin. Assuming that it already hadn’t, and what were the odds of that?

“Have there been any messages while I was sleeping?”

“Yes Admiral, there were two. One came from the hand of Lord Grafton directly from Gulltown ten days ago with a fast raven-drone...it was a message of warning. The war, according to Lord Gerold, is imminent.”

Jon Upcliff had the urge to make a sarcastic comment before finally renouncing. Maybe if Lord Grafton had been a bit more far-sighted, he would have sent them a proper alert and a recall to the Vale Sector before everything exploded. Obviously, the Master of Grafton assessment of the situation had not been that good.

“The second is an official demand from the Pyke military garrison to transfer the maximum of land and space assets to their system. They fear a general insurrection and raids from House Lannister now that the King is dead.”

“And I suppose they demand this in King Aegon’s name?”

The new nod he received gave him a powerful feeling of annoyance. The Tyrells and all their flowery bannersmen were giving him headaches and the motivation to spit on their feet. The more they were given from the Crown and the other Sectors, the more they wanted. Jon felt certain that give them enough time and ‘favours’, the dragon banners would be discarded and replaced by the roses.

“Well, too bad for them. We haven’t the transports to send more than twenty thousand away from this system, and I’m sure the Commander-General will agree with me we also have to prevent insurrections and rebellions in this part of the Iron Sector.”

The best part was that it was true. The military garrison of Saltcliffe had been increasingly abandoned to its fate since the end of the Greyjoy Rebellion. The majority of his transports had been ordered to return to the Gulltown system in 294AAC, and when he had understood what was happening, it was far too late to do anything. Whatever help he requested was answered by some less-than-reputable sellsword regiments and obsolete hulks. As for the industrial tools he and Ser Lyn had demanded to build their own tech-base at Saltcliffe, he was still waiting for them.

It was not a point which was giving him tender feeling towards Lord Grafton and his associates. Since Lord Jon Arryn had refused to sponsor their little holiday in the Iron Sector, the warships and the troops should have been recalled long ago and control of this system transferred to a Lord having possessions closer to this Sector. The loyalist cause in the Vale certainly could use his squadron, no? Granted his biggest warship was a battlecruiser, but he had four of them and they were accompanied by seven heavy cruisers, five light cruisers, seven scout cruisers, two light carriers, ten escort carriers, and two orbital forts.

On the ground, there were one million veterans soldiers, divided into nine army groups. They were supported by over six hundred thousand militiamen of the ‘Saltcliffe Unity Council’ – the polite way he and his fellow officers had found to call the Ironborn willing to collaborate and stop launching terror bombings.

It was a modest amount of firepower compared to the forces a Lord Paramount could call in times of war, but the reality was that all of it was stranded garrisoning a third-rate system.

“We must readjust our emergency war plans. With the Western Sector next door and plenty of Reach forces at Harlaw and Pyke, I fear this Sector is soon going to be a battleground.”

He didn’t voice his concerns they were the weak link in this battle-zone; his subordinates weren’t stupid and had a sufficient knowledge of the political situation to know how precarious their position was.

The galactic location of Saltcliffe wasn’t in the nature to improve their chance of survival. Any opponent coming from the void had to take one of two systems if he wanted to safeguard his supply lines. The choice was thus between Saltcliffe and Harlaw, and Jon had enough experience to know that even in its ruined state, the former bastion of House Greyjoy was far more valuable than the system he was the second-in-command.

“You will pass orders to the sellsail scout to establish a perimeter ten light-years away from our current position. I want our so-modest mercenaries to double their patrols. Unlike us, they find somewhere the funds to replenish their reactors. I will let them graciously accept the glory of first blood in every engagement.”

“Not I disagree with you, Admiral, but the sellsails have really minable sensors and crappy maintenance. If we push them too far, their sorry excuses of flagships are going to detonate before we see a single enemy ship...”

That was unfortunately a very good point. Alas, the alternative was risking his ships, and he hadn’t that much of them to risk them lightly.

“I know. And we will place two scout cruisers in cover for communication relay and counter-strike operations to limit the risks. But I’m afraid we will be forced to use them like this. There’s no jump point in this system, so our opponents will come from the void and we can’t predict their arrival point.”

It was a sad thing to admit, even in the privacy of his own mind, but Saltcliffe had never been intended to hold against any major offensive. The orbital defences had never been rebuilt to the pre-Rebellion levels. The forts which had been towed there had improved fire-control, several hundred capital missiles and many, many laser and plasma batteries, but they had been young when the Unlikely was on the Iron Throne.

For that matter, why would Saltcliffe needs to hold against a major offensive? By the 299AAC census, the system’s population was approximately two hundred and seventy-four million people. Heavy industry was low. There were little in the way of valuable trade resources. The biggest export was the blue salt-crystal, a variation of the common salt which was said to have powerful healing properties.

Rear-Admiral Jon Upcliff was frankly not convinced. He had tried it, and he had to fight not to retch the moment it touched his tongue. Or perhaps it had been a poisoning attempt. Father Above, who could know with the Ironborn? Their cooking was foul. Their planets were harsh and they venerated something having too many tentacles for anyone’s sanity. They were stubborn, brutish and considered that if you had no martial skill, you were a waste of time and no proper Ironborn. In the last years, Lyn Corbray and he had managed to make some changes to break this absurd mentality but the resistance to their efforts was not decreasing...and it looked like their era of peace was well and truly over.

“You can return to your duties. Please contact the Commander-General for a new coordination meeting. I don’t intend to obey the Tyrells, but we need to see how much of our force we can redeploy once the hostilities will really begin.”

Once again he found himself watching the planet he had been chosen to defend from pirates, corsairs and all other conceivable threats coming from the Sunset Void. What a miserable ball of grey, blue and brown. Saltcliffe had never been pretty at the height of the Hoare dynasty, but now that the reavers were gone, it was presented a fragile appearance, the lone starships travelling across the Iron Sector small and unassuming, many of them presenting the scars of age and delayed overhaul.

“So the dream is gone...Our victories have turned to ashes...”

**Lord Donnor Saltcliffe, 17.09.300AAC, Saltcliffe System**

Sometimes Donnor wondered if it would not have been better to die in the ill-prepared Rebellion Balon had convinced them to fight.

*Not that you needed too much incentive to muster your forces and attack Lannisport*.

The thought had disappeared in the depths of his mind as soon as it had arrived, but Donnor internally frowned at this dark memory.

With a decade of hindsight, it was clear the independence aspirations of his liege lord had been based on a lot of incorrect facts and sheer madness. The Iron Throne, may it rot in the garbage pits of King’s Landing, was weak but even in its direst period of weakness, what the Targaryens could muster had been sufficient to break the Ironborn forever.

The Iron Sector had paid dearly for this lesson. So had House Saltcliffe. Before Balon Greyjoy was crowned at Pyke, Donnor Saltcliffe had over one hundred and fifty million Ironborn as his oath-sworn subjects, and he could easily gather eighty thousand warriors from them when war called. Counting the main and the lesser branches of the family, the number of men and women with the Saltcliffe name had to be slightly under a hundred.

None of this had survived the Greyjoy Rebellion. Weakness, had said King Balon when watching the greenlanders, but there had been nothing weak in the terms the surviving Lords had been forced to accept. In one strike, Donnor and House Saltcliffe had lost much of their fortune. Where before his direct rule had extended to an entire continent and he had the rest of the Saltcliffe Houses as his bannersmen, now his edicts were only applicable to Salt City and the four neighbouring settlements. That was somewhere around three million souls, and the decrease in income had been a monumental blow in the head.

This was not the humiliation he had been forced to endure. None of his three eldest sons had survived the war, and his fourth, Saliver, had been sent as hostage to Griffin’s Roost, for a stay no one had bothered giving him the duration. His wife had died in 294AAC, refusing to see him until her last breath. If he was to be honest, this was the outcome which had depressed and angered him the most. His oldest sons had been grown men and he could not have forced them to stay at home...

The Noble House of Saltcliffe was dying and Donnor hadn’t found a solution to save it. Many of the cadet branches had disappeared after he was forced to accept the royal terms, obviously to pursue the struggle in the shadows. But one after one, they had died, the holo-news reporting their bloody demises year after year. Sometimes, he wanted to join them. The rest of the hours, he reminded himself their actions were nothing more than a disguised suicide.

Lyn Corbray, the new de facto System-Lord of Saltcliffe, had not left anything to chance. From 291AAC and onwards, all stocks of military equipment had been seized and in less than twenty-four months, everything bigger than a laser pistol had been seized by the Vale occupation forces.

The last Void Priests were still waiting in the secret underground tunnels. There was a lot of sabotage, protests and violent actions against the representatives of the Crown. But without any heavy weapons – or light weapons for that matter – Saltcliffe had not a chance in hell to be liberated by its local population. The militia under the greenlanders were collaborators unworthy to call themselves Ironborn, and even them had only light rifles to enforce the rule of their foreign overlords.

His eyes turned to his window and the vague shape of the Shadow Mountains beyond the horizon. His poor eyes could not see it of course, but he felt the looming shadow of the great fortress the degenerate scion of House Corbray had built in that direction.

Fort Forlorn, Lyn Corbray had called it when the monstrosity had been inaugurated, choosing to honour the name of the Valyrian blade he always carried by his side.

In a way, the Valeman had been more than insulting in the contempt he felt for the Ironborn. Fair was fair, Donnor was not considering him exactly a friend and would stab him in the back the moment it was feasible.

But there was no denying Lyn Corbray was a competent strategist and his subordinates knew how to erect citadels.

Fort Forlorn was commanding the two greatest passes of the Shadow Mountains and was right at the centre of the Salt City-Iron Shield-Bear’s Paw triangle, the three great cities of this continent. As long as the citadel held, there was no hope for any rebellion to succeed.

To make things more difficult, the fortress was not impregnable but Lyn Corbray had diverted funds and resources from the planetary treasury to improve the defences. As it stood, Donnor had been forced to acknowledge with several of his co-conspirators that this bastion could hold millions of attackers if they had not orbital support.

Fort Forlorn had walls which were more polished cliffs than any standard construction. There were only three four gates to enter by foot, and those had so many batteries defending them any infantry assault was doomed from the start. There were rumours Corbray had emplaced a sort of proto-energy shield he had bribed a Braavosi official to acquire and thus decrease the risks of orbital bombardment. But if this piece of technology was a rumour, there was nothing fictive about the hundreds of anti-air batteries and the dozens of field artillery guns which had been installed in a decade.

There were no underground tunnels to infiltrate it, it was a new fortress and no Ironborn had been invited anywhere near a kilometre of the engineering staff. Not to mention there was the little problem of what would they do if they managed to bypass the first wall. There were after all two more walls behind and the inner citadel. Moreover, the fortress was just fortified positions after fortified positions, bunkers, kill zones and murder-mines. And it had a permanent garrison of over two hundred thousand men to guard it, with the double of this ready to return from their garrison-patrol duties the moment it was under attack.

Donnor Saltcliffe sighed and marched back to his desk, giving a nasty look to the pile of data-slates and written demands waiting for him. At a guess, a good third of it had to be ‘requests’ of debt repayments...

The rest of the morning was spent answering this...finding excuses for repayments he hadn’t the first dragon in his pockets and trying to find the polite forms to give ‘no, no, and no’ an acceptable form.

The thrill of an incoming holo-communication made him raise his head. At first he was tempted to disregard it, but the combination on his screens gave him pause. What did the young Lord Sunderly want? The boy had returned to the Iron Sector after his father drowned in a terminal manner his sorrows in a barrel of ale, and if anything, the years he had spent at Casterly Rock had given him a deep-rooted hate of anything Lannister and greenlander-related.

“Lord Saltcliffe speaking,” He said as he accepted the communication. The pale visage of the nineteen years-old man was trembling with excitation.

“Lord Donnor Saltcliffe! The Admiral-King has returned!”

“Victarion has returned?” For a couple of seconds he found himself unable to think, much less to react before giving a deep smile.

“Yes! And he has a big fleet with him! His forces are engaging the first warships of Upcliff squadron as we speak! Operation Iron Vengeance can begin!”

“By the Void God...” He had been wrong after all. House Greyjoy had not abandoned them. Vengeance for a decade of humiliation was at hand. He activated a tactical display and sensors he was definitely not supposed to have in his possession anymore, and indeed the familiar identification signals of loyal Ironborn units were converging in space far above his head. “Execute Iron vengeance! Now! Transmit the information to the resistance and torch the homes of the traitors! Kill the greenlanders in their beds and their resting places!”

Several batteries began to fire inside Salt City before he finished giving the orders and more fire spread throughout the heart of his holdings as he cut the communication. Oh yes, no more unjust tasks and seeing cousins sent to break their backs in the salt-crystal mines. Several officers sported blood stains on their dark blue uniforms as he marched in the hall of his ancestors and he saw a tide of kraken dots overwhelm the crow dots.

“The greenlanders are fleeing the major cities, my Lord! Lord Sunderly and the Warrior Houses report one-sided triumphs! Our fleet is winning in orbit! We are going to be free, my Lord!”

“Outstanding!” Truly the Void God had blessed this day. “Continue to press them and turn their own weapons on them while they are disorganised! Break their knees and teach them the meaning of Ironborn vengeance!”

“My Lord, Lyn Corbray is demanding to speak with you...”

A torrent of laughter spread across the command position. Insults and mockeries fused, laughing at the hated Commander-General.

“Accept the communication,” Donnor relished the moment and when the face of Lyn Corbray was shown, he savoured the fury of the Valeman.

“Once an Ironborn, always an Ironborn, it seems,” were the first words of the land commander the tyrant Rhaegar Targaryen had imposed them.

“Oh shut up, Corbray,” this simple sentence brought him untold joy. His sons were going to be avenged and at long last, the Ironborn were going to have their revenge. “If I were you, I would prepare to surrender your sword and learn to beg like the dog you are. Our King is here and I don’t think he is going to be very happy with you. Why, if you’re lucky, you and your officers will be put into thraldom and made to work in the salt mines...”

He had expected wrath from Lyn Corbray. He had expected insults traded for insults. He had not expected a predatory expression he could watch.

“We should have killed your entire civilisation to the last babe after burning Pyke to the ground.” There was no doubt in the voice of the Corbray Knight he would have obeyed without remorse the order.

“Maybe, but you didn’t. Like my grandfather said, don’t give an Ironborn a small injury.” A look at the nearby tactical display informed him the Vale army was abandoning all the agglomerations and retreating towards Fort Forlorn. “We are going to rise, stronger than before. And the Iron Sector will be red of your men and your allies’ blood.”

“No.”

“No? I’m afraid you don’t have any choice in the matter, Commander-general. Saltcliffe will be free from your greenlander occupation.”

“This might be so,” calmly agreed Lyn Corbray in an attitude which made Donnor wonder if the man had not been replaced by a clone or an imposter. “Victarion Greyjoy has arrived in this system with considerable forces, after all, and both our space and ground assets are quite outnumbered by this armada of pirates and scum he has gathered under his banner. I intend to make him pay in blood every inch of ground, but there’s no denying he is certainly going to win today. But unlike you, I have decided to honour the oath I gave to my King ten days ago.”

“And what oath is this, oh great knight? Winning two hundred duels before you are dragged away in chains?”

“There will be no new Greyjoy Rebellion. The realm will never have to endure any other Greyjoy Rebellion.”

The Lord of Saltcliffe chuckled and about two-thirds of the assembly imitated him.

“Like I already said, it is a bit impossible given your limited effectives, Ser Corbray.”

“I’m glad you agree, Saltcliffe. It is why I took the liberty to enter the detonation codes for the atomic warhead hidden under your palace before demanding to speak with you. I think the yield is about sixty megatons.”

He had done what? No, his men would have caught it. Plus there was the resistance cells underground, it was a cheap trick to make him panic. Still, better to give a rapid check or two. Yes, it had...

“I have also taken the liberty to do the same thing for every major city of your planet. Your culture of pirates and traitors has less than thirty seconds to live. Enjoy the Seven Hells, Ironborn.”

The holo-communication ended and Donnor Saltcliffe turned his head to tell his bannersmen this had to be a bluff.

The explosion of light prevented this action to pass and a second later, the four hundred years-old home of House Saltcliffe was no more.

**Iron Castellan Adrach Goodbrother, 17.09.300AAC, Saltcliffe System**

Adrach had never seen a planet die during the Greyjoy Rebellion. Lannisport, for all the screams the Lannister had made, had been a space and orbital battle, with little action on the ground. And due to the damage received by their longships at the Arbor, he had not been able to return to Pyke in time.

He had not been able to return at all. And now to his eternal shame, he was seeing an Ironborn planet die before his very eyes, and he could do nothing to prevent it.

Gods and Demons, he could do nothing to prevent it!

“Fifty major nuclear explosions detected,” told him one of the Volantene he had accepted as his chief of staff three years ago. “All the ground detonations were in the centre of the large cities and except the retreating Vale troops, every inhabitant living in these settlements must be considered dead...minimal estimations from our consoles are giving a death toll of eighty-nine million for the initial impacts...”

Eighty-nine million. May the Void God save them all. The pre-rebellion population of Saltcliffe had been under four hundred million and Adrach rather doubted it had largely increased this decade. And it was just the beginning of the horror below.

Nuclear weapons were rarely used by Generals and Admirals. Orbital strikes were in general the weapon of choice against targets. Cleaner. Greater precision. But more important, they didn’t leave the planet uninhabitable. The moment the nuclear weapons had detonated, Saltcliffe was experiencing a long death, between the radiation, the earthquakes, the shockwaves and the fire storms consuming everything.

No, it was obvious the enemy commanders had known they would not be able to hold the cities against a rebellious Ironborn population...and they had decided to kill them before they rallied to their legitimate King.

“All the enemy forces on the planet are retreating towards the citadel they call Fort Forlorn.”

But Adrach wasn’t hearing the words. He was watching Saltcliffe die. Oceans of flame were making the water boil. He saw several volcanoes awaken as the very earth was shaken to its foundation. Shockwaves were crushing the spires of the skyscrapers. Nuclear mushrooms were engulfing the spaceports and the cities.

This was the picture of apocalypse. This was annihilation. This was death.

There was just one question in his mind.

“How many crippled Vale warships have surrendered?” he asked in a voice so cold he almost didn’t recognise as his own.

“Three, Lord.”

“Prepare them for a collision course on the planet. Maximum speed, target the enemy surviving formations.”

In another time, another era, it would have been unconscionable...but this had been before the greenlanders massacred millions of Ironborn. They wanted to play by these rules? They were going to die by them!

“**No**.”

Adrach Goodbrother fell on his knees like the rest of the bridge’s crew.

Armoured feet were seen at the edge of his vision. And the voice of his liege came, more pressing and more powerful than ever. Blue sparkles shone all over the bridge and cold anger tripled in intensity. Anything which wasn’t revenge and death was banished from his heart.

“**I have another reward in mind for Lyn Corbray and his men. I will teach them true despair**.”

“My King, we can’t send our troops in the middle of this radiation-poisoned war zone...”

“**This will not be necessary. What is dead may never die, but rises again harder and stronger**.”

For half a minute, the world seemed to devolve in scream and strange colours. But when the Iron Castellan raised his head once more, he saw the dead rise by millions on the bridge’s displays.

**Ser Lyn Corbray, 17.09.300AAC, Saltcliffe System**

“And I’m afraid Ser Jon Upcliff has perished with his flagship, General. The losses among his crew in orbit and aboard our starships appear to be effectively total.”

Lyn nodded darkly. Jon Upcliff had never hidden to him how weak an enemy should be for his under-strength squadron to have a meagre chance of contesting this stellar system. Granted, Saltcliffe had never been a judicious prize, but even then, four battlecruisers weren’t exactly the kind of force which made an enemy piss in fear and shake in his armoured boots.

“Rear-Admiral Upcliff is not at fault for this defeat,” and his men looked at him with surprise. They all knew he wasn’t a commander who excused lightly failure and defeat.

In this case, however, Lyn was perfectly sincere.

“Our warships were forced to endure a decade away from home, and Gulltown never authorised the costly maintenance the captains were all signing on. Our starfighters were so obsolete I think we would need a new word to describe them. And our orbital forts were antiquities. But the worst part of the drawbacks the Rear-Admiral had to face was the catastrophic failure of our intelligence services. The last reports transmitted to our stations located Victarion Greyjoy somewhere in the Basilisk Sector with half a dozen rusty wrecks. As you can see, there were a bit in error...”

Lips curled as he uttered one of the century’s understatements. The core of the fleet assaulting the Saltcliffe System was ten times more powerful than in their worst estimations. It was spear-headed by five Tyroshi flag-dreadnaughts – slightly bigger than a ship of the line in tonnage – and fifty Tyroshi battle-spheres – comparable to a Westerosi heavy cruiser – and many, many other longships, corsair warships, transports and auxiliaries. The Ironborn had lost some units in the battle: two battle-spheres destroyed and two damaged, but this had resulted in the annihilation of the Saltcliffe defence squadron. The rapport of strength had been too imbalanced for any other outcome, and to make things worse, the Tyroshi ships had functional energy shields. These were old generation shields, slow to recharge, and the ships manoeuvred like slugs, but for an opponent which was forced to defend a target...

It had been a massacre and Jon Upcliff had met his end in a fiery explosion with the rest of his men. Lyn hoped Lord Gerold Grafton was satisfied with this brilliant strategy at home, because it had cost him the next best thing to thirty thousand experienced spacemen and somewhere near five thousand sellsails.

“Thankfully, two of our scout cruisers managed to run away and translate out of the system. The other systems of the Iron Sector will not be taken unaware like we were.”

In reality, Lyn was far less confident of that than he showed to his Captains. Harlaw and Pyke would be warned, to be sure, but he had no idea if the Reachers would bother sending messengers to the other planets save Orkmont, given all the distrust and the tensions created by the King’s death.

“I need to know your best estimates on how many regiments the Ironborn can land if they want to finish us off.”

Granted, it was unlikely they would need to. The enemy had to realise his food reserves were not going to feed his men more than a couple of months, and though a basic energy shield protected Fort Forlorn, it would not last long against a vigorous orbital bombardment.

“They have over fifteen of these big conveyor-transports and seventeen converted merchantmen, General. Assuming the pirates were able to fill them with the scum of the Free Planets, they should have something like five million troops available. Quality will be on our side, of course. I don’t think they will have much heavy tanks and specialised siege equipment.”

“Thank you, Captain. Now I want a quick assessment of our defences.”

“I understand why you chose to detonate the hidden atomic warheads General, but too many of our troops were killed...they abandoned most of their protective anti-radiation equipment during their retreat. Once the decontamination procedures, I think we will have a bit over four hundred thousand men to defend Fort Forlorn.”

Lyn decided to nod and ignore the not-so-veiled criticism. They were right, in a way. His trump card had massacred the Ironborn rebellion before it had the time to consolidate, but there was no denying his forces had paid a terrible price. And he was honest to admit that if Upcliff had emerged victorious in orbit or if Victarion Greyjoy had offered him reasonable terms for his surrender, he wouldn’t have resorted to this sort of desperate measures.

*But I had not the choice. I was offered the choice between slavery and death by this mad ‘Admiral-King’. And enslavement of my men aside, Saltcliffe had two hundred and seventy-four million Ironborn. Assuming they were willing and able to arm ten percent of the population, this would have given Victarion Greyjoy more than two million and seven hundred thousand troops. Add this Tyroshi fleet to his numbers and whatever he might be able to gain by pouncing on isolated garrisons in the other systems, he might very well be able to take back the Iron Sector*.

No doubt he was going to be seen as a monster and it was likely Lord Grafton would throw him to the wolves the moment he heard of his actions. For that matter, it was likely the opposition was going to be led by his brothers, each shouting louder than the other in the hope of denying he had ever been a loyal member of House Corbray.

“Are the ammunitions levels stocked to your satisfaction, Quartermaster?”

“They are, General. The depots are full with batteries, shells and bombs ready to send the Ironborn straight to the Seven Hells.”

“Good, in this case...”

“DEAD! THE DEAD ARE RISING FROM THEIR GRAVES!”

The next seconds were like watching a horror-show. Alerts began to scream. The little quarter where fallen Valemen were buried with all military honours began to transform itself in a war zone. By the sensors of the flyers and the monitoring regimental devices, he saw his blue-armoured soldiers fight a tide of skeletons and animated corpses.

He saw the panic in his men’s eyes and knew there was only one thing to do. He drew Lady Forlorn and once more time, the note of death resonated as the Valyrian blade was unsheathed.

“I don’t know what kind of sorcery this is, but I’m not letting it stand. Come with me and kill this latest Ironborn trickery!”

Despite the laugh he forced on his lips, he felt less than confident in his head. If the Greyjoy had made an unnatural pact with the monstrous forces of darkness, then killing the population of Saltcliffe had not prevented the Greyjoy ascension.

He may have well given an army to the krakens....

“Fort Forlorn will stand! To your battle-lines, Valemen!”

**Captain Joss James, 17.09.300AAC, Saltcliffe System**

They had hoped the dead of the cemetery had just been an isolated trickery. Now the men of the 1st Saltcliffe Field Army knew they had been dead wrong. On the irradiated plains separating the citadel from Salt City, the enemy was coming.

Joss tried to show a brave face, but he had to admit the helmet of his battle-armour was more useful than all his pitiful affirmations and smiles.

The enemy was coming. Father and Mother Above, he had not signed for that! The plains were darkening with millions of running corpses. Part of his mind screamed there were maybe not that many, but his instinct screamed millions and he was not able to deny it completely.

Flashes of blue light rumbled in the distance and awful sounds came from this mass of the lost and damned. At this distance, they were relying on sensors and displays more than their own eyes, but unfortunately what they could observe was not engaging at all. Many dead were dragging the military equipment they had used in life. There were plenty of battle-armours, the dead who had been unable to get away in time from the nuclear impacts or caught by surprise by these fucking traitors of Ironborn. No, this was repeating the same thing twice. An Ironborn was by definition a traitor.

The corpses were running towards the walls and the mighty cannons of Fort Forlorn began their war litany, sending their deadly ammunition in the undead horde.

By thousands the dead lines were vaporised and all the soldiers of his company began to breathe a bit easier. Their situation was horrible, there was no shame admitting it, but the dead were not rising once more when they had been struck and killed a second time. And whatever weapons they had were not conjured magically. It was the equipment which had been abandoned in the barracks and the cities: the rifles, some battle-armour, a few mortars and vibro-blades or vibro-spears. Some of this might have been useful on open ground...but the 1st Field Army of Saltcliffe was waiting for them on top of the ramparts of Fort Forlorn.

The walls were thirty metres high and had been built to the highest specifications of the Vale engineers. Not even the cumulated shockwaves and firestorms of the atomic detonations had been sufficient to cause a tiny rift in them. The walls were impossibly tall, tough and every section had several artillery batteries to call on to repulse the enemy. The dead would not pass.

“Don’t waste your ammunition. Wait until they’re one hundred metres from the wall and then kill the bastards.” The command came from the radio command frequency.

When this mark was reached it was a one-sided slaughter. Vision was poor as the results of the space and ground massacres had darkened the sky, but there were so many undead it was impossible to miss. If you failed to pulverise a skull, you were slaying the one on the right or the left...and sometimes one or two behind as well.

It was an atrocious spectacle and as the plasma batteries incinerated thousands every second, Joss prayed for whatever dark force had raised the corpses to turn away, to recognise there was no way throwing the bodies of the Ironborn and Valemen fallen would work.

It didn’t happen. The batteries were killing thousands, but like seized by madness and insanity, millions more arrived and tried to climb the walls with their bare hands. Looks at the tactical display were utterly frightening. The entire plain was an ocean of black dots and yet the sensors told quite clearly they were more arriving behind them.

“Blades! Use your blades!” sounded as the first abominations arrived at the top of the rampart. “For the Vale and for the Faith!”

It would have been better if the undead looked frightened by their pious battle-cry. Alas, it wasn’t the case. Joss and his men decapitated thousands and used the two flamethrowers to incinerate the small mountain which was crawling at the base of the walls and for a second, he believed nothing could break through the fire barrier and the rapid fire of the lasers and the massive explosions created by vehicles-sized projectiles.

This battle continued for hours and the skies went darker and darker. Not because it was the night, at least Joss didn’t think so, but there were heretical things floating in the air. The dead were assaulting the three gates and the ramparts simultaneously and even with reserves, they couldn’t get more than ten minutes of rest.

He felt exhausted and he would have killed a man for a good hour of sleep. It was not proposed and he had the ugly feeling it would not be for the rest of this battle. The dead corpses were relentless. Their eyes blazing an unnatural blue shade, they threw themselves, trying to kill the living, and whoever they managed to stab, bite or push from the ramparts was promptly killed and raised to join their ranks.

He had not the time to chat or improve the spirits of his men more than with a few good laughs and insults. To be honest, he wasn’t sure if it would have been useful at all. Under the artificial lights of their targeting systems and holographic projectors, the plains and the wall approaches were crawling with abominations of the non-living sort. Unnatural blue lights were everywhere, and the Eastern Gate, while intact, had already a good pile of corpses blocking the first three metres above the ground, despite a regular effort from the flamethrowers and plasma-equipped men to get rid of them. A sort of resignation was taking hold. They were not losing, but they were not winning either, and the kill-counts – inflated or not – were losing all their importance when millions of new undead were rising to take the burnt twice-dead.

“Courage, warriors of the Vale! Courage! Dawn will come back! The Ironborn have sealed their damnation but this fortress will hold! We are not vanquished! We are the loyal, the sword and the shield! In the name of the Iron Throne, let none of these abominations live!”

Sorcery shrieked the sky, and the enemy unleashed the great forces it had hidden under the cover of darkness. In a million of dead rasping, dead voices, the new assault threw itself against the walls. Each warrior on the ramparts and the large batteries reloaded and began to pour laser into this unending legion of horrors.

“Fire at will, boys! Fire at will!”

For the better part of five minutes there was so much fire and tons of corpses pulverised it was almost impossible to have a good view of the battle...but ultimately, one by one, the batteries were forced to slow down their fire as demands for more ammunition and energy output were on every frequency.

The dead, however, never slowed down. By hundreds of thousands they climbed the walls, their strength and their skills decupled now that they were no longer breathing. And they were too many of them for the devastation of this day. Yes, the General had killed a lot of the traitors, but a lot of cities were on the other continent, in the Sunderly lands and it was impossible they had come from there in mere hours! For that matter, how had so many come assaulting Fort Forlorn in twelve hours? Running at an average speed of fifteen-eighteen hours was not enough when the cities were hundreds of kilometres away...

“Here they come! Give them hell!”

The melee was savage and merciless. All the surviving men were veterans now, wherever they had been recruited in the first place, but all their training had not been enough to prepare them for this. For years they had crushed ambushes and small uprisings, but whatever fanaticism had seized one or two reavers and their mad priests, it was nothing compared to the undead offensive. The monsters didn’t care if they survived or they died. They just didn’t care, and an opponent who doesn’t care is incredibly more dangerous than an enemy who does.

And it was getting worse, heartbeat after heartbeat. The monsters were lacking in artillery shells and high-grade explosives, but they seem to have a lot of poisonous gas. Many battle-armours had their integrity and void-protection ineffective by this point, and when the fumes went into contact with their skin, they screamed in agony and collapsed, attracting more monsters and abominations.

There was no rout, no precipitated withdrawal, no scream of despair. Side by side, the blue armours fought and crushed the skull of the Ironborn and their former comrades they hadn’t the time to incinerate.

But they were pushed back from the ramparts and the outer circle of defences. There were too many enemies, and the damned abominations coordination was improving too! Step after step they were forced to concede their first line to the undead and after that unfortunately the first bastions began to fall. Defiantly of course, as the engineers and the commanders had built them to be massive killing grounds. But none of the builders had ever thought the fortress would ever need to be protected against walking corpses, and what should have made the most insane commander pause wasn’t even a consideration for the thing directing this horde.

“DAWN! DAWN!”

The Vale Captain didn’t know where the battle-cry had come from, but it was soon shouted by thousands of voices.

Of course, dawn didn’t come. The night was blackest than the heart of an Ironborn and whatever effect sorcery had on ashes and nuclear radiation was making the entire atmosphere of Saltcliffe unlikely to let sunlight shine over their heads for several years.

But *Dawn of the Vale*, super-heavy tank of the 4th Mobile Division, entered the fray and behind its venerable hull over a hundred battle-tanks.

“DAWN AND NO QUARTER!”

The lines of the living roared and the counter-attack slammed into the undead. Ferocity and no quarter were the only orders which came from the high commanders. Vibro-blades decapitated and cut heads, arms and legs by the dozens. The lasers were poured in the abominations and for several seconds it seemed nothing would be able to stand against the might of the tanks and the infantry fighting side by side. The flamethrowers mounted on the turrets of the transports were incinerating thousands of corpses and trampling hundreds more as they progressed.

The retaliation was so fast, so crushing, they were back to the Eastern Gate before the abominations had the opportunity to find how the inner mechanisms opened the monumental doors.

“We must take the ramparts! Their flow of reinforcements is decreasing! Courage, private! They are beginning to feel the strain!”

“FORT FORLORN STANDS!”

They could wake up the corpses, but surely they weren’t going to lose hundreds of millions, right? They hadn’t been that many people living on the surface of Saltcliffe in the first place...

“Captain, there is something...”

The shriek and the sonorous bang interrupted the sounds of cheering and the swords brandished in the air. Dark smoke, blackest than night, clouded the air, and a terrible shivering seized the soldiers. Something hammered the gates a second time and every man could see the metal and the impenetrable alloys falter and cede.

Something was coming. Something terrible. Darkness was pouring from the interstices and three eldritch tentacles pushed behind them.

“Sweet Maiden, what in the name of the Seven-Who-Are-One have they raised from the grave?”

“It is a great abomination...”

“It is a dead kraken! Fighting retreat! Fighting retreat now!”

But more blows came and the tentacles increased their pressure. The gates resisted, but the entrance was sufficient to allow the invaders to enter the citadel...and despite the darkness, the thousands of blue lights were all but too visible.

“Retreat! Retreat before we are all submerged!”

*Dawn of the Vale* fired again, followed by fifty tanks, but all their fire seemed to be...absorbed...by the darkness and as the gates ceded, hundreds of undead broke through, with thousands more pressing from behind.

There were new blasts of sorcery and then hundreds of thousands corpses climbed on the ramparts. The batteries fired all they had, but it was a tide you couldn’t see the end of.

“FORT FORLORN AND THE VALE! DEFEND DAWN!”

They threw themselves in the melee, trying to open a path to the secondary walls before everything was lost. Captain Joss James managed to kill thirty-seven wights in the rout.

The thirty-eight made him stumble and over two hundred walking corpses converged on him before he had the time to recover and stand on his own.

And then nothing mattered anymore for him.

**Captain Godric Meric, 22.09.300AAC, Saltcliffe System**

The light cruiser *Joyous Bird* had been removed from the official order of battle published by Vale officials in 286AAC. Too old, had said the Admirals advising Jon Arryn. Too expensive to maintain, had judged the bureaucrats. The armchair-strategists had voiced their concerns about the speed and its inability to fire faster than the best gunners of the Vale fleet.

Therefore the ship had been relegated to the status of an immobile orbital battery around the Gates of the Moon, waiting year after year the moment it would be scrapped. At least it was what the official documentation said.

In reality, should any Crown spy in charge of discovering military secrets had done his job, he or she would have realised neither the *Joyous Bird* nor a certain number of old light units were nowhere to be seen.

Lord Jon Arryn, for all the variant propaganda-owned holo-news liked to call him senile, had known from the moment the Just Rebellion was over that the dragons were going to search for specious motives to resume the conflict. As such, the *Joyous Bird* and several of its consorts had been taken to the Belmore shipyards in secret, and modernised to become furtive platforms. There was nothing much they could do about the obsolescence of said ships – improving their performance in battle would be tantamount to rebuild them durasteel plate by durasteel plate – but this was not to be their role anyway. No, around thirty to forty light cruisers and scout cruisers – who by a strangest coincidence had all been ‘lost’ in the notorious bureaucratic entanglements the Vale had suffered since 284AAC – were waiting near systems their liege had declared important.

That way the moment the Vale went to war, the Lord Paramount would have an excellent idea what he was facing. No one had ever mentioned if North and River Great Houses had established similar operations, but Captain Godric Meric, master of the *Joyous Bird* and very much a Captain of the Vale Navy, had not the clearance to confirm his suspicions.

Ultimately, they had spent two years in rotation with other ships monitoring the communications and the military war-games around Duskendale before their orders changed. Someone near the Eyrie had inquired if the warships-which-didn’t-exist could keep an eye on the Saltcliffe squadron. Not that the possibility of a civil war existed, perish the thought! No, Lord Jon Arryn only wanted to keep an eye on his hot-tempered bannersmen and compile records on their garrison operations.

This was naturally a lie, to stay polite. Everyone who had a working brain could feel war was coming to Westeros. The armament industries in the Crown Sector worked like there was no tomorrow. The political tensions between the Lords and the different navies were at their highest point since the Rebellion. And in the Iron Sector, the war had never been truly over, no matter what the bards loved to sing to the ears of their masters.

War was going to kill millions because the ruling dynasty was full of madmen...and judging by the latest courier he had received at the secret meeting point between the Pyke and the Saltcliffe Systems, it had already begun.

For the *Joyous Bird*, this meant new orders. Another warship was coming furtively from home to take their duties, and they were supposed to keep their monitoring duties until 05.10.300AAC standard time before returning to the Gates of the Moon great shipyard facilities.

Due to unforeseen events, it was likely they were going to be forced to return home before this date. The Saltcliffe-Vale squadron, after all, didn’t exist anymore.

“How bad is it, this time?”

“The third wall fell two hours ago. Only the inner citadel remains now, Captain.”

Godric nodded in grim acceptance before watching the images retransmitted by his drones. Viewed from above, the citadel Lyn Corbray had spent nearly eight years to build was the last beacon of light in an ocean of obscurity and devastation.

He estimated the odds, watched the ruined carcasses of the three outer walls for several seconds crawling with hundreds of thousands undead and arrived to the very unpleasant conclusion the defiance of Saltcliffe was nearly over.

“It won’t be long now. Whoever is left in command must have less than ten thousand survivors and the majority must be heavily wounded, completely exhausted, or both.”

Many of the bridge’s crew nodded unhappily at his words. They had all watched for several days the battles rage in space and on the planet. Many of the Valemen had stopped watching after a while and even those who continued only made regular updates. There were things a man couldn’t observe and keep his sanity, even a good million kilometre away.

Corbray and his forces had been a band of traitors, loyalists by the so-noble qualities of greed, bloodthirst and siding with the Targaryen winners. But they had been Valemen. No, it was more than that.

They had fought – and continued to fight – for humanity.

The *Joyous Bird* had seen it all. How the massive fleet under the self-proclaimed ‘Admiral-King’ Victarion Greyjoy had emerged into the system before ravaging everything and blasting away a decade-long effort of rebuilding. The light cruiser’s had intercepted the transmission where the reaver had demanded the defenders’ surrender...insisting they were going to pay the Iron Price for the Fall of Pyke.

Apparently, the loyalists had believed in contingencies for it had been the signal to kill all the major settlements of the Saltcliffe in a series of monumental nuclear explosions. Godric had to admit it took some guts...if the Ironborn had decided to kill them before, after that the pirates had likely in mind a long torture session for every ‘greenlander’ falling into their hands.

Saltcliffe had perished, and the crew of the *Joyous Bird* had prepared itself to watch the lethal orbital bombardment which would assuredly be fired in revenge.

Instead the entire battle had turned into a contest of heresy and sorcery. By a method Godric had no wish to understand or particularly know, Victarion Greyjoy had raised the dead of Saltcliffe and sent them at the assault of Fort Forlorn.

If it didn’t fall in the category ‘crimes against humanity’ defined by several inter-galactic conventions, the Vale Captain didn’t know what would. Settlements Corbray or his sub-commanders had spared from the nuclear holocaust since they hadn’t rebelled had been killed and added to the legion of nightmares. Sorcery was provoking untold cataclysms, freezing oceans and continents alike.

“If it’s truly Victarion Greyjoy who commands the abominations, in my opinion he’s an idiot,” the voice of a Lieutenant made everyone turn in his direction. “I mean, Captain, he’s launched what over four hundred million undead at this citadel. And he lost what, over half of them in five days?”

“About that,” replied the tactical officer before a look of realisation appeared on his face. “Yes, I see what you mean. He could have raised the corpses, transferred them on several of his hulks and went attacking more planets. It’s not like he needed to destroy Fort Forlorn, the soldiers inside were going to starve anyway before long or succumb to radiation. Seven Hells, he could have bombarded with a few dozen massive barrages the citadel, it wasn’t like the fort was going to move and avoid the impacts.”

“Well, Victarion Greyjoy was never known to be very sane. His whole family is pretty much renowned to be insane, actually,” Godric replied philosophically. “If he is able to command these waves of...wights, I think this is the correct term, for them? Yes, if he is able to control the wights, he probably figures he can replenish his resources on every planet, moon and asteroid habitat he will raid. So in the worst-case scenario for him, which assumes he is going to lose all these nice unpaid bodies, he still has all his ships and the troops aboard his transports to ‘free’ the rest of the Iron Sector.”

“Actually, Captain, I think your worst-case scenario has a good chance to happen.”

Godric blinked in surprise before answering in a calm tone.

“I doubt very much the loyalists have the firepower to incinerate two hundred million corpses anymore, Ronnel.” The Captain of the *Joyous Bird* grimaced. “They launched their entire nuclear arsenal two days ago, when it became clear their second wall was going to fall. Assuming our spies back home and our patrols haven’t missed too much, they spent roughly ninety-seven percent of their planet-buster weapons against the abominations.”

And what an impressive series of fireworks it had been. One moment the darkness was pressing the loyalists, the moment after millions of wights, monsters and sorcery-created horrors had vanished from the display as bombs after bombs sterilised the plains, the mountains and the last cities.

There had never been great hope to rebuild something on Saltcliffe; now it was a clear confirmation the planet was well and truly dead. After this launch-and-forget barrage, the planet was going to be so radioactive there wouldn’t be any colonisation efforts for the next thousand years in this system.

“Yes, Captain, but...I think the nuclear explosions have caused even more damage than we thought. And whatever sorcery the Ironborn are using isn’t helping. The earthquakes have increased in intensity in the last couple of hours and the southern polar cap is in the process of capsizing. There have already been six tsunamis yesterday; I think they were just preliminaries for the big one coming in two hours. There are also two thousand more volcanoes active than three days ago. The planetary crust is showing...worrying figures. With due respect, if the Targaryen loyalists use another large nuclear device, the consequences are going to be...world-shattering.”

“And in this furnace they are still humans fighting and refusing to die...” he murmured. “Chances they have one weapon like this in reserve?”

“Unfortunately or fortunately for them, it’s practically certain they have one,” said the astrogation officer, recognisable by his bright red-dark hairs. The young Lieutenant shrugged. “If I was Lyn Corbray, I wouldn’t want my body to serve Victarion Greyjoy in death...best to deny him everything, including the remains of Fort Forlorn.”

Godric passed a hand in his brown hairs before finally taking his decision.

“Navigation, prepare a six-eight-ten course, we need to move away from this planet. Recall all the drones save two. Minimal emissions, and prepare all the raven-drones for an imminent launch for all the Vale Arryn bases, the update will be in two hours.”

Thankfully, the imbecility of the Ironborn was playing in their favour. Even with absolute superiority, two scout cruisers had escaped and at this hour, the entire Iron Sector had to prepare itself against the winds of apocalypse.

If the Gods were good, it would be enough. It had to be enough...

**Ser Lyn Corbray, 22.09.300AAC, Saltcliffe System**

“The gates are falling! The gates are falling! Breach on Sector 4! Battery Lance is overwhelmed by the undead and dark tentacles! Setting the self-destructing charges...”

Screams and a massive roar resonated and then there was silence on the frequency.

“What’s the situation below?” Lyn asked after ten seconds of silence to acknowledge the memory of these brave men. In a better war, he would have commended them for a Gold Cross...unfortunately, save a genuine miracle, it was really improbable he would ever have the chance to do the recommending.

“The tanks...cough...cough...are gone, General. The main armouries are burning...it looks like one of our demolition teams got close enough to collapse one of the walls before the last wave of abominations stormed it...”

General Lyn Corbray watched the five hundred-plus men waiting for his command. Their battle-armours were scarred and the blue paint was nearly impossible to discern under the taint the battlefield had imposed them. Everywhere, exhaustion and battle-fatigue dominated. They were all what remained of several Vale field armies and sellsword companies, built and supplied for garrison duties and yet they had fought superbly.

“I am proud of you,” his voice cut the whispers and conversations. “I am proud of you, you have fought far beyond what any Lord and King, General and Knight has the right to demand of you. I was honoured to command and fight side-by-side with warriors of your courage and your skill.

The enemy is breaching our last defences as we speak. Of an entire system, we are all that remain. There are no reinforcements, and I think we can all agree that nobody has seen a damn miracle.”

Chuckles followed his last affirmation.

“Nobody will remember us. With war engulfing Westeros and many worlds burning under the traitors’ guns, our fate won’t interest anyone before decades.

But the enemy will remember.”

His squire – the twentieth he had given the title since the beginning of this war – handed him Lady Forlorn, her handle shining with a beacon of light. This was a special buoy handed to every wielder of the Valyrian sword, for the ancestral blade of House Corbray was to be returned to Heart’s Home at all costs. Honour demanded it, if nothing else.

The blade, despite a rapid cleaning, was still red and dark with all the blood it had reaped. A thousand times he had been grateful to have this weapon against the undead. The monsters and the dark things lurking in the darkness feared Lady Forlorn, and rightly so.

“The enemy will remember, and now for every battle he will fight, he will remember we didn’t throw ourselves to his feet. Clearly they hoped to win easily and quickly at Saltcliffe, but we stopped them. Men, we made the bastards bleed!”

Lady Forlorn was raised above his head and the hungry expressions came back on the warriors’ faces.

“In ten minutes, the last fusion bombs we hid in the depths of the salt-crystal mines are going to explode and ensure none of us will ever be raised to use against our families and loyal subjects of the Iron Throne. We will continue the fight beyond that. Whether this fucking planet collapse or not, you will kill the abominations and deliver the Stranger’s judgement upon them!

Men of the East! As your General, I will give you my last order: Fort Forlorn must stand to the end! Don’t let the enemy take our standard! You will give no mercy and give him no reason to rejoice!”

Five hundred fists were raised in answer and a growl of raw defiance echoed in the throats.

“NO SURRENDER, NO REJOICING!”

The army’s colours were placed on the throne-seat of the fortress and as the horrifying shrieks of the undead arrived to their ears, the warriors reformed ranks and locked their helmets on their battle-armours, Lyn imitating his men seconds later.

The enemy arrived like a tide of darkness. They were hundreds of corpses and no more thousands, tens of thousands were following.

“MEN OF THE EAST! WITH ME! FOR DAWN AND FORT FORLORN!”

“DAWN AND FORT FORLORN!”

“FOLLOW ME!”

Lyn charged with a loud battle-cry on his lips, his men on his heels and a heartbeat later, the last-stand of Saltcliffe began.

**Captain Godric Meric, 22.09.300AAC, Saltcliffe System**

If the bridge of the *Joyous Bird* had been subdued before, now there was only a silence of death to watch the apocalyptic spectacle.

On the other side of the bay, a world was dying.

The sole and only inhabitable world was convulsing and dying in continental-sized explosions and more lava than he had ever seen in his life. Even the volcanic pictures of Dragonstone didn’t compare.

Volcanoes inactive for a million years were venting their fury as the world around them died. Entire parts of the crust were projected in the atmosphere or beyond. Oceans had disappeared, evaporated by the hellish temperatures and every second they were more rocks, more debris, and more earth torn from the ground.

The Ironborn ships were fleeing, several of their light hulls severely damaged. For them, this battle had to be a humiliating fiasco: no victory and one of their worlds gone. Godric didn’t know what sort of reception ‘Admiral-King Victarion Greyjoy’ had wanted from Saltcliffe, but he doubted it was this one.

This world was lost. It had endured too much in five years, and now between the man-made explosions, the sorcery and the bombardments, the planet was tearing itself apart.

By comparison, the Fall of Pyke had been a gentle punishment.

“Err...Captain, there was a message transmitted in the clear from the surface before the final detonations.”

Godric took it without a word and took a glance at it.

*Fort Forlorn still stands*.

Godric removed his spaceman’s hat by reflex and stood to attention. Heartbeats later, the entire complement of the *Joyous Bird* stood too.

“Let it be known, that on 22.09.300AAC, the Valemen under Defender-General Ser Lyn Corbray won their place by the Warrior’s Side in the Seven Heavens. The planet broke before the Vale Army did...”

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*The second battle fought the same day as the Battle of Forlorn Hope was not a conflict anywhere near the Iron Sector. Indeed, it took place in the system called by the Night’s Watch and the wildlings ‘Craster’s Fort System’.*

*Unlike the Battle of Saltcliffe, there was no great surprise advantage enjoyed by the attackers. The Exodus Fleet of King-Beyond-the-Wall Mance Rayder had already endured numerous massive raids and offensives, and given the snail pace the greatest Arks and Barges were progressing towards the Wall, there never was any doubt the White Walkers were going to attack the force which for all intent and purpose was the Free Folk civilisation. The question was not if there was going to be a battle before they reached the Eye of Woe; the real dilemma was where the hammer would fall on the millions of refugees.*

*The leaders of the great wildling clans knew guessing the plan of their inhuman enemies was a primordial necessity. From the very beginning of their exodus, they had been forced to flee several times in a rout-like manner when faced with the extremely unpleasant surprises of the Others. The Tyrant-class cruisers had been bad enough. The Carrion-class battleships were immensely worse, and no one had really found a conventional tactic to take them down without enduring unacceptable levels of casualties. Then there was the hull everyone had taken to call the Star Killer. An indestructible super-battleship able to destroy any warship, freeze a planet in a single shot and reduce a human fleet to the state of orbital debris in mere minutes.*

*The odds of forcing a stalemate if this mountain of destruction was not involved were judged small, but not non-existent. If the Star Killer intervened however, the King-Beyond-the-Wall and his lieutenants knew the engagement became a matter of letting the rear-guard die while they fled to protect the rest of their civilisation.*

*The predictions weren’t anything a tactician would have called ‘good’, obviously. While no one had a clear idea how an Other commander thought, few men and women believed the cold abominations would be stupid to let their greatest asset stay idle while the greatest battle of this theatre was fought.*

*Sadly, they were right. But the Battle of the Death Wings, also known as the Final Retreat, the Battle of Despair and Hope, the Ambush and the Slaughter, and the Storm of Dragons, was never going to conform to their best or worst predictions.*

*There were other forces on the move, and the Second Long Night was to at last begin for the Wall guardians.*

Extract from the Second Long Night, by Albert Trident, 674AAC.

**Ser Waymar Royce, 17.09.300AAC, Craster’s Fort System**

“Commodore, I think the second echelon of platforms needs a software reconfiguration...again.”

Waymar raised his eyes from the voluminous manual he had his eyes upon for the last quarter of hour and tried not to groan. It wouldn’t be professional, and if he made sounds of despair each time a bad news arrived to his post of command, he would make them at least ten times per hour and wouldn’t that depress everyone around him?

Closing the instruction manual, he walked to Will’s console and sure enough, two of the oldest missile platforms were malfunctioning again.

“I think the latest solar storm damaged them...Ser.”

Waymar for once ignored how far the ‘Ser’ had been said after the information. He was tired, it had been a long day and he was exhausted. Protocol could go hang itself for a few hours.

“Tell Captain Jorrod on the *Wind of Courage* to send one of his teams as soon as he has the time.” Waymar didn’t like the Ironborn officer, but there was no denying the man knew how to repair broken things...and his ‘rehabilitated reavers’ were working fast in the harshest environments known to man. “Tell him...tell him it’s a second-grade priority, I don’t expect miracles but it would be best to have them repaired in the next eighteen hours.”

“Yes, Commodore. By your command.”

“What’s the status on the hangar bay?”

“Gared says he will have this problem solved in three to four hours. Unless there’s another set of components broken, of course.”

“Of course,” sometimes Waymar wanted to curse the Northerners for giving their old ships to the Night’s Watch. Many of these warships had fought in the Great Rebellion, and by all accounts would have well enjoyed their final retirement.

Unfortunately, the Northerners were about the only people giving the Night’s Watch their warships, obsolete or not, full of flaws or not. Nobody at Castle Black was alive to remember a time when the Lord of Highgarden had gifted a ship to the black brothers, not even the Old Bear. There were River or Vale Lords like his Lord Father who remembered the old vows, but they were far and few between, and with the tensions in the South, all the main fleets were extremely reluctant to send spare parts, hulls and experienced men at the wild frontier of the human realms.

Thus the North, like it had done for decades and decades, was to be the forge, the granary and the main source of recruits for the Night’s Watch. Only the Ironborn had provided an important minority of reinforcements these last years, but this was more due to the fact they had been torn apart by the Greyjoy Rebellion and thousands of the vocal anti-Crown opposition were regularly sent here to serve as examples to the rest of their rebellious brethren.

Since the Ironborn had not been given their own warships when they were forced to choose between the black and the executioner, the Night’s Watch squadrons were all Northern-built and his was no exception to the rule. Eight Fearless-class heavy cruisers, eight Barrowton-class light cruisers and sixteen Corsair-class scout cruisers had been gathered together to form ‘Flotilla 805’.

“Inform me when he has finished dealing with this latest series of broken things.”

The Northern ships had far less technical problems than their Vale or Southern counterparts, but when their compartments experienced problems, it wasn’t a half-problem for sure. They were already ten men in the infirmary and five had to be sent by the courier which came once a week.

Returning to his seat, he watched the tactical display to see if something had changed. It hadn’t. The system of Craster’s Fort – named for the wildling leader who had once upon a time reigned on the ice world years ago – was a miserable place.

The single planet humanity could have considered acceptable to colonise had an extreme climate, even by die-hard survivalist Northern standards. Only one continent was not perpetually frozen, and most colonisation officers would have been aghast at the idea of being proposed this poor source of estate.

In space, it was not better. The planet had not one, but three gas giants, each of them having a formidable asteroid belt near it. Really, the system had too many asteroid belts and rocks which thousands years ago may have been small moons. Add the solar flares of the system’s star, the debris from the uncountable battles fought between the Watch and the wildlings, and you had a location which was extremely dangerous to navigate. Flotilla 805 had to emplace hundreds of drones and stay silent for weeks before they were sure they weren’t going to be ambushed, and for good reason. In the middle of this disorder, even a ship of the line could be rapidly overwhelmed between enemies and natural threats.

Still, the concerns shared by the commanders at Castle Black had been for naught during the last couple of months. Some cannibal-raiders had arrived and been intercepted long before they could make it to the jump points leading to the Wall, and the main source of occupation was to ensure their current ships were kept at their maximal efficiency. Obsolete they might be for a conventional deployment, but Waymar wasn’t deaf: judging by how loud the grey beards were prompt to complain about the previous generation of warships, there was no way he wanted his current command to go to the scrap-yards. And there were persistent whispers within the ranks that the Ironborn reavers had it worse during their ill-considered insurrection against the Iron Throne.

For this year, it seemed they were the only space force to have an interest in the Caster’s Fort System. The wildlings had abandoned it five years ago after the head-chieftain/clan-leader named Craster had done something which had deeply angered another clan, so much that the local forces had been rapidly crushed, their warriors exterminated, and the women taken by their conquerors.

Waymar gave a last disgusted glance before reopening the manual. He had to know where the glitches on half a hundred screens were coming from, and sadly the problems weren’t going to solve themselves, not with half of his officers and he promoted several grades to absorb the considerable expansion of the black brothers’ effectives.

He had only three more pages when the alerts signalling enemy contacts arrived to his ears.

“I know this wasn’t going to be a good day,” the young Vale knight grumbled before shouting on all channels: “CONDITION WAR-TWO! We have multiple enemy contacts coming from the Horned Peaks jump point! All essential personnel go to their battle-stations! Void repair teams on the platform, return immediately to your ships! Stop all the emissions which are not a question of life and death and go silent! NOW! Prepare all the operational platforms for a launch in no less than ten minutes...”

The instructions he had learned for such an occasion like this were recited sentence after sentence, during which more and more wildling warships entered the Craster’s Fort System.

“I have never seen so many ships...” murmured Will, who had joined him as the sound of people running in the corridors was becoming noticeable.

“I have,” he replied. But then it had been at a formal presentation of the fleet at the Gates of the Moon. And as the flow of wildling starships never stopped, Waymar felt a cold shiver as he realised the sea of red dots on his display may very well be larger than the entire Vale fleet. Of course, the wildlings had crap tech, whatever standards you used. It was likely an old ship of the line could devastate two hundred or three hundred of these obsolete flying scrap-engines. But still...

“Prepare two raven-drones for Admiral Karstark.” He commanded to his communications officer. “Quietly. We are hidden by the recent solar flares and the asteroid belt, but I don’t want to lose the advantage of surprise.”

“Yes, Commodore,” the affirmation was subdued as were the rest of the crew of the Black Sword when they discovered the size of the enemy fleet entering the system.

“Commodore, I count already eighty Arks, seventy-four Barges, three heavy cruisers, twenty-four light cruisers, and over six hundred hulls which may be scout cruisers or escort carriers.” The voice of the Ironborn tactical officer was grim. “By the fucking krakens, two hundred and fifty more ships have jumped in-system. No, make that three hundred.”

“Old Gods preserve us...” one of the Northerners had said the words, which one Waymar wasn’t sure, but he certainly could agree with the sentiment.

“This has to be their main fleet,” growled Gared as he arrived. “It has to be...Ser.”

“I’m afraid you’re right.” Just as he said, three move waves of starships arrived. Only one group appeared to be warships; the rest were transports, supply ships and all those things a fleet needs if it want to last more than one battle. For a second or two, he believed this was the end...and then more of the gigantic Arks began to emerge in real space.

Waymar had known intellectually the Eye of Woe was giving humanity the means to access an entirely different galaxy to the starships which managed to not be destroyed by its capricious currents.

Many Northern Admirals and Lord Commanders of the Night’s Watch had taken to call it the ‘Wild Expanse’ or equivalent names, telling the new officers this was an amount of space no explorer had ever managed to properly map out. There were too many systems, too many dangers...and too many wildlings.

That said, the same fleet commanders were quick to agree this was a galaxy which had no Lord, King, Emperor, Magister or whatsoever great title. Sometimes, a King-Beyond-the-Wall united a few clans and waged war against the Wall and the Night’s Watch. But these conflicts were rare and never since the Conqueror had forced the Seven Sectors to submit the wildlings had come out in such enormous numbers.

Never had a Wildling warlord managed to unite such a large number of their tribe-clans. And assuming it was possible, surely he would not have dared bring hundreds of starships devoid of any armament against the defences of the Night’s Watch.

Which meant Lord Stark and Lord Commander Mormont had been right all along. The wildlings had not been mustering their forces for an assault against the Wall...they were fleeing for their lives.

“This is not a war fleet,” he whispered, feeling dread for the first time in months. “This is an exodus. Like the Andals once fled the dragons of the Freehold, the wildlings are taking their ships and abandoning their homes...”

Some men of his crew looked doubtful, especially the Ironborn, but there were sufficiently odds to reassure him his reasoning was not illogical.

“Make sure all our warheads are ready to be in the void the moment I give the order. Tow the damaged platforms to our cruiser’s flanks, we will need them soon, I fear.”

“Ser...we can’t stand at condition war-two for days...”

Waymar winced, and suddenly the weight of exhaustion came back to remind him he had not been well-rested before this latest alert.

“We are all going to sleep a bit for a few hours...but I don’t think we will need to wait days before giving battle.”

He designated the uncountable dots on the tactical display. More were still coming...by now there had to be more than six thousand starships of all tonnage, going from the nimble raider-frigates to the gigantic Arks.

“In this game, the wildlings are the prey. And given how close we are from the Wall, I fear the man-hunters are right behind them...”

**King Mance Rayder, 17.09.300AAC, Craster’s Fort System**

If Mance had been given the choice, he would have never returned to the Craster’s Fort System again as long as he was breathing. Alas, as one of the rare preachers of the Seven-Who-Are-One to visit the Wall had said, life was full of disappointments and what mattered in the end was how you served the Gods, not what you wished. Three or four times after deserting the watch, he had wondered what had happened to this itinerant preacher-septon. Probably nothing good, certainly. The man had passion and a good voice. He had also been dead-set against the corruption plaguing the Faith of Seven, and for several reasons the future King-Beyond-the-Wall had understood this was not a point of view exactly met with tolerance and wide smiles in the Southern Sectors of Westeros.

Despite this religious warning, he maintained it would have been better to never come back in this stellar system, especially under such desperate circumstances. The Craster’s Fort system had not been a pleasant place to live, and this had been before his captains reported him Craster had apparently long ago decided to worship the White Walkers! Of all the damn things the bastard could do, it had to be that. So he had ordered his lieutenants to get rid of this traitor to the human race and ensure nothing was to provide support for the cold monsters. And it had been done. The problem was the fact that, surviving traitors or not, the now-abandoned system was an excellent location for an ambush.

There was a large star emitting regular solar flares and other types of cosmic phenomenon disabling regularly the sensors. They were multiple asteroid belts where entire fleets could hide themselves. There were gas giants with massive dust clouds to play around. It was something of a misnomer to call the paths to travel across the system ‘trails’, but he hadn’t been able to provide a better name. Between the asteroids, the cosmic disturbances, the diverse planetary bodies and of course the dangerous remnants of battles fought between his former brothers and the Free Folk, this system was a trap waiting to be sprung on his people.

Two things had stopped him from not jumping inside its gravity well. First, was of course the problem that the Others were coming right behind them. The clans had paid in blood the price to delay and delay again the abominations bent on exterminating them. For all its flaws, passing by the Craster’s Fort was the fastest method to reach the Wall and preventing them from overtaking the Arks. The systems of Frost Spear and Bitter Battle had important odds of offering them on a silver platter to the Enemy, and the other possible travel destinations were going to take even longer. Second, the Night’s Watch had not maintained a presence in the system, or at least they had not been one four years ago. While he was less than enthusiast about the idea of crossing swords with his former brothers, if he had to do it he would...on his own terms. Granted, it was entirely possible they were scouts right now observing the thousands of starships he had brought here, but scouts weren’t a problem compared to certain forts the ‘crows’ were still keeping Beyond-the-Wall. And third, unfortunately, such systems like the Craster’s Fort were all too common in this region space and if they had to pass through one, better be this one because it had been properly mapped in the last centuries by successive generation of raiders.

Dalla pressed her hand against him, stopping him to contemplate further this morose reasoning.

“You worry too much, Mance.”

It forced a smile on his lips.

“Perhaps,” he agreed, “but for once we were all in agreement: if someone wants to ambush us, it will be in this system.”

And the point he was seeing absolutely nothing on the displays of the Red Cloak, the modified Barge he had used as his flagship since the day he had began his long and arduous task to unite the clans. Not for power, ambition or to prove himself he was a leader worthy to be mentioned in the dusty books of the maesters, but because unity was the only chance his people had against what was coming. Division had proven the fastest way to become a wight and every defeat was reinforcing the White Walkers.

“We don’t see anything.”

“That’s the problem, Dalla. There should be some ships in this system. I know some of the raiders we don’t tolerate in the middle of our fleet have rushed ahead. They weren’t hundreds of them, but we should have seen one or two of them, waiting for us once they were forced to flee the patrols of the Night’s Watch.”

“Maybe they managed to sneak by.” Dalla had always been too intelligent for her own good; it was evident by her own tone she believed nothing of the sort. “You always said the Night’s Watch was falling apart and lacked the funds to do its proper duties.”

Mance chuckled. Yes, he had said that, hadn’t he? And to be honest, it was true. When he had deserted, the black brothers were the shadow of a shadow. Forts were abandoned, spatial shipyards were falling into ruin and the weapons to fight anything more dangerous than a frigate were solely lacking. The Wall remained, though. A monumental circle in the stars of mysterious and frightening weapons, defended by impossible force-shields no one had ever been able to discover the exact functioning. Thus even a large attacking fleet was forced to launch its offensive against one of the stellar systems powering the entire system, and the Night’s Watch, weak or not, would fight to the death to defend these chokepoints.

The problem was that all this information was sadly so obsolete it wasn’t funny, and unless the black brothers and the Northerners were far more stupid than the Thenn and the other raiders believed them to be, they should have reinforced the Wall by now. He certainly hoped so anyway! If the Wall was undefended, it would be easy to storm it but their long escape would continue until the Others abandoned the pursuit or their engines failed. Judging by the thousands of ship parts breaking apart day after day, he was betting on the latter.

“Our vanguard has not seen anything mounting guard on the Milkwater jump point, so I think...”

“ENEMY CONTACT! ENEMY SIGNATURES COMING FROM THE JUMP POINT BEHIND US!”

Mance raced back to his command screen, and the blue dots of the White Walkers warships were indeed coming from the very system they had left six hours ago.

“They must have missed their ambush in the Horned Peaks.”

That or they had expected him to choose another path to return to the Wall. Good news for him...but judging by their acceleration once the translation was over, they had not missed him by a lot of hours and now they were using full power to catch his fleet. And the Arks and the big transports had not enough acceleration in reserve to distance them....

“How long until they are in range of our rear-guard?” He asked, knowing pertinently it was going to be too soon.

“Three hours, maybe less.”

“And the time needed to jump out of the system?”

“Two hours for the units leading the fleet, six hours for the last Arks.”

The King-Beyond-the-Wall felt his heart sink in despair. They had been so close...and yet so far. For all the boasts the champions of his fleet would proclaim around their friends, it would be idiocy itself to pretend they could slow down the masters of cold death for three hours.

They would have to try. The alternative was to let the monsters enslave them in death without a fight. But he wasn’t confident on their chances at all to inflict them sufficient losses in a conventional battle.

A screen lightened on his right and he met the eyes of his wife’s sister.

“The Walkers have brought a massive fleet,” Val told him. Her grim expression had to be similar to his, now that he thought about it. “We are detecting so far one hundred and thirty Tyrant-class cruisers and thirty-six Carrion-class battleships. They have also introduced a new class of warships we haven’t seen before. They are quite unlike the rest of their blade-shaped murder ships and there are twenty of them.”

She was right, he admitted internally as he examined all the data transmitted. All the White Walker ships were long and their shapes were like terrible blades ready to decapitate you, coursing with the blue-ice shade of techno-sorcery the frigid abominations loved. Not these new ships. They were bulky and long, and for a second or two he wondered if these were not the first time Others were using captured human ships...but details on them destroyed this hypothesis. They were definitely not human-built, they were larger and longer than the Watch’s rare capital ships and they coursed with the same unnatural energy the Walkers’ ships took for granted.

“We are going to go with Plan Bear,” he informed Val with more calm he really felt. “Take your command to Point D behind the gas giant and...”

“Oh, by the putrid entrails of the skinchangers’ rituals!”

Eyes turned towards the warrior who had dared swearing on the bridge in the middle of battle preparations.

“Sorry, my King. But...the big one has just jumped in the system.”

Mance Rayder saw the large blue dot on his tactical display and realised instantly the identification of the newcomer. Longer than a Carrion-class battleship, its world-shattering weapon had wiped out all life on several planets in a single shot. It had become the very image of death for the Free Folk, and its appearance was a nightmare for veterans and young recruits alike.

The Star Killer had arrived for the massacre.

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*The story behind the GUS defence missile platforms is a curious one. Originally an idea from an Umber Admiral whose name wasn’t remembered by the maesters, the principle of the innovation was to be able to defend a Northern system against any force – and since the idea was formulated shortly before the Dance of the Dragons, the man of Last Hearth included dragons in the list of threats.*

*It took about fourteen years to the Admiral and several million dragons, but the Giant Umber Spear Mark I was declared operational by 140AAC and immediately classified as a secret project by the current Master of Winterfell, Lord Cregan Stark.*

*While the Northern high-ranking officers refused to confirm or deny it, several clues recovered at the price of their lives by Targaryen spies indicated the likelihood was high the system had been put in mass production and deployed in the Moat Cailin System.*

*Since the dragons were dead and there were subjects far more important than pestering a loyal bannersman about weapons which might not exist, King Aegon III declined to press the issue and his successors forgot the matter. The Dornish War and the Blackfyre Rebellions would be incredibly more important subjects to deal with than whatever the North Admiralty did in its backyard.*

*A pity, for the GUS Mark I, was the first step of the Northern Navy to develop their missile superiority over all its possible opponents. The missiles installed on the defence platforms were terribly lacking in precision, that much was true, but they increased the previous missile’s range by ten percent and each platform carried two hundred of them.*

*Of course, new improvements in fire control, tech-components and orbital gravity engines soon made the invention obsolete. But the new Umber generations never abandoned the project and by 300AAC and the beginning of the War of the Ten Warlords, they had updated the weapon program regularly. As a result, when King Rhaegar died, the current version in service at Moat Cailin and several other highly-valued systems was the GUS Mark XIII, also known as the ‘Titan’, for it was a poorly-kept secret in the ranks several Braavosi ‘advisors’ had worked on it. This weapon couldn’t be launched from a starship’s missile tube...but an ingenious new system embarked on a barge-platform allowed heavy cruisers to control and direct several hundreds of said supports of destruction at once. The GUS Mark XIII had twice the range of the missiles the Lannister fleets of Operation Lightning Lion had faced, and each missile had been made deadlier with four new laser warheads. In addition to this, House Umber had read with great interest the reports in the South concerning a certain ‘Longbow Network’ and studied lengthily the versions bought by other Noble Houses.*

*There were now four hundred missiles per platform, which meant an arsenal of one thousand and six hundred laser warheads per platform. And the warheads had been designed to pierce the armour of the ships of the line.*

*Given the pre-war situation, a large proportion of the Northern production lines went to Moat Cailin, Winterfell, Last Hearth, Castle Black and several other important fortress worlds. But by mid-300AAC, the threat of an open conflict on the northern frontier was becoming more and more likely. The advanced defences charged to protect the Wall were judged ‘extremely unsatisfactory’ by Lord Commander Jeor Mormont himself.*

*Deciding many old missiles were better than no missiles at all, the Northern Navy emptied several old depots which might or might not have been near Moat Cailin and delivered to the Night’s Watch millions of old GUS Mark XII, XI and X platforms loaded with laser warheads, neutron bombs, fission pulsars and colossal nuclear warheads. The fire-control, as Lord Jon Umber himself declared, was going to ‘suck massively’ but given the threat of the Others, it was judged acceptable and may ever lure the Enemy in a feeling of overconfidence.*

*Hundreds of thousands warheads and hundreds of platforms went to the Nightfort and the other citadels which would have the charge to defend the work of Bran the Builder in these dark hours.*

*Two million five hundred thousand eight hundred and fifty-four Mark X warheads mounted on seven thousand and eight hundred platforms were transported in three great mass conveyors to the Craster’s Fort System and delivered to Flotilla 805.*

*And on 17.09.300AAC, the GUS platforms had at last the opportunity to prove their worth to humanity.*

Extract from Old Weapons of the Long Night, by Korys of the Grey, 374AAC.

**Ser Waymar Royce, 17.09.300AAC, Craster’s Fort System**

“May the Old Gods and the New preserve us...”

It took two seconds to Waymar to realise it was him who had let this prayer come to his lips. Not that the rest of the bridge was coping in a better way than him.

“All right,” he said trying to show a brave face against the tide of horrors and abominations which had just entered the system. “It looks like our intelligence was a bit faulty estimating how big the Enemy can build its warships.”

*And how much firepower they can pack in each hull. Watch how the bastards are blasting the asteroids away*.

The Others had evidently missed their chance to spring a perfect ambush, but their back-up plan, as unsubtle as it might be, was going to work. While the wildling exodus fleet was forced to navigate between the different trails and hope they didn’t ram an asteroid or two, the hunters on their track were literally blasting apart everything on their way.

And behind their cruisers and their battle-line came a monumental super-battleship armed with a weapon no sane or insane ruler save maybe a Targaryen would consider building.

“They have brought their fleet far faster here than we really thought them capable,” though it was kind of understandable when all the ‘intelligence’ they had was guess-work, terrified witness reports and rigorous interrogation of wildlings’ cannibals. “Good news, in five minutes they will be completely in our range.”

“We are going to be hammered,” commented Will.

The fearful expression on his subordinate’s face told a more pessimistic message. They were not going to be hammered, and everyone able to see the tactical display knew it. They were going to be pulverised, massacred and reduced into tiny fragments. Flotilla 805’s biggest ship was a cruiser; against them they had thirty-eight ships of the line, all showing a far bigger energy armament to pulverise asteroids than what the newest generation of Vale and Northern warships had in the pipeline.

They were not going to survive. But by the Seven, they were going to hurt the bastards!

“Prepare the platforms. How many are operational right now?” He demanded to his tactical officer.

“Around seven thousand and five hundred of them, Commodore!”

So, counting defects and the ones they had been forced to tear apart in order to restore the less damaged materials, this should give him around one million eight hundred and seventy-five thousand missiles. His warships could not of course direct this huge amount of firepower in a single volley...hmm...

“We are going to go with Plan Hammer. We are going to wait until they are fully in our envelope and then launch at them our maximum volleys of one hundred and seventy thousand missiles. That should give us eleven mass salvoes to bleed them, right?”

“About that, Ser...” the smile coming from the Ironborn lieutenant was extremely bloodthirsty. “If the abomination in command out there is quick, we won’t be able to throw more than seven or eight volleys at them before they have a good targeting solution.”

“I think we will be able to live with it,” in fact they were going to die for it, but why bother voicing this minor point? They had sworn a vow and today their watch was ending. “Update your targeting solutions. Begin with the cruisers, then the ships of the line. The unknown class comes third and if we have time, we will care about the super-monstrosity with the next exchanges.”

“Yes, Ser,” neither Gared nor Will looked really happy, but they didn’t voice objections. They knew as well as he did why he had chosen these priorities. In the grand scheme of things, the super-battleship was undoubtedly the most dangerous opponent around, a Wall-breaking weapon if there ever was one.

But for the fleeing wildlings which right at this moment were trying to cover the escape of their Arks and Barges, the greatest danger didn’t come from this direction. Cruisers were far faster and thus far more skilled at massacring slow and cumbersome rusted civilian transports. If he ignored the cruisers, the monsters were going to tear the wildlings apart and then he would have to explain to his ancestors why he had let a fleet of undead assault the bastions of the Night’s Watch. Of course, it was not like he was aware of the optimal ranges of Others’ warships, but if the cold aliens could kill at this distance, they would have already opened fire.

“Distance of engagement is four hundred thousand kilometres, Commodore.”

Waymar nodded and tried to remember a memorable sentence to broadcast to the flotilla. But his mind came with a big blank. After a second of hesitation he decided simplicity had its own merits.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Open fire...and don’t stop until all of their ships are destroyed!”

The warships of the Night’s Watch went instantly to full power and hundreds of platforms became small suns as tens of thousands of missiles were propelled into the void to kill the enemies they had been promised.

“Let’s see how much you like facing someone who can fight back, freaking monsters...”

**King Mance Rayder, 17.09.300AAC, Craster’s Fort System**

One moment they had been preparing to sell dearly their lives and die for the Free Folk feeling behind them.

The next instant thousands of missiles had begun to fly from nowhere and hope had been lighted in their hearts...like a miracle. Because they were not the targets of this huge missile salvo. The Others were...and suddenly the odds of surviving the next hours were not completely inexistent.

“One hundred and seventy thousand missiles? That’s...madness!”

He wasn’t sure if all his ships fired all their tubes he would have enough to equal that...and that was assuming a lot of the equipment didn’t break while firing.

But this salvo coming from the inner asteroid belt existed...and by the reaction of the Others, it had come as them as a nasty surprise too.

“Mance, the Others’ warships are carriers! Dragon carriers and they are launching!”

“Second wave of missile inbound! Confirm! One hundred and seventy thousand missiles!”

“Identity of the warships hiding in the inner system confirmed! Eight heavy cruisers, eight light cruisers and sixteen scout cruisers are accelerating, all transmitting crow identifiers!”

“Dragons firing! White Walkers warships firing! The Stark Killer is changing course!”

“Third salvo of the crows launched! One hundred and seventy thousand missiles are on their way again! By the tits of the spearwives, where the hell have they found so many missiles?”

Mance believed he was an experimented space commander. He had commanded numerous attacks against the Free Folk while he was a ranger of the Night’s Watch and in his quest to unite the clans once he had turned his cloak, he had fought hundreds more skirmishes and actions.

He could say safely the battle unfolding on his tactical display was completely over his skills.

The Night’s Watch had waited until the last moment to open fire, and now the White Walkers were in killing range...but the reverse was also true.

The Star Killer fired and twenty dragons flapped their lengthy wings before racing to kill these new enemies.

Storm of blue energy and endless tide of missiles crossed the void. Hundreds of asteroids were utterly disintegrated by nuclear explosions but these were just anomalies. The greater part of the holocaust was not stopped, it continued implacably towards its targets.

“Tormund, Val, all senior commanders! Rally your squadrons and disband your defensive formations! We have been offered a chance to flee, get out of here! Ark captains, accelerate as fast as you can and get out of these damned system!”

They were brave these men of the Night’s Watch. They had attacked the monsters of the nightmare, the Lords of the Dark and Cold, and they had not flinched. They had launched their missiles all the while knowing his fleet was full of wildlings who had little reason to love the ‘kneelers’ and the ‘crows’.

“I will not forget this debt.”

The first missile wave battered the Others’ Tyrant-cruisers like a divine blow. They were one hundred and thirty of them, and they fired desperately all they had at their murderers, hundreds of blue rays destroying everything in range...and yet they were overwhelmed.

For the first time, he saw with his own eyes the dreaded dagger-ships of the Walkers exploding by the dozens. In one explosion which disabled sensors and partially blinded them millions of kilometres away, over fifty enemy cruisers disappeared forever from the screen...and mere seconds after the ambushers launched their ninth salvo into the void.

It was impossible to observe everything what was going on. There were too many explosions, too many flashes and the consoles of his flagship were ancient repaired material, not prime technology, and it all happened too fast.

The nuclear weapons and all the explosive devices known to mankind and the abominations began to detonate. The Star Killer fired five times its world-ending weapon and the dragons set the void ablaze.

Millions of explosions devoured the inner asteroid belt and the planet of the Craster’s Fort System. Rocks which had been floating in the void for millennia were dispersed or cut in half. Screams filled all frequencies. Missiles after missiles flew in a desperate attempt to kill more of the enemy before their weapon platform died.

The battle no one in his fleet had thought to see ended eleven minutes and fifteen seconds after its beginning.

“Blood of the damned...”

“They were brave, these crows...”

It took ten more minutes to update the displays in a coherent manner. The distance they were trying to increase between the White Walkers and their fleet was partially to blame, but to be honest the fact was there had been too much energy liberated, too much destruction for the active and passive sensors to acknowledge what was going on.

And when at last the first view of the system returned, there were hisses of shock and he felt Dalla taking his right hand – he hadn’t even the heart to tell her to return to their cabin. Exclamations of stupor and anger were voiced and shouted.

The Night’s Watch ships were gone. There was nothing left of the ambushing force. Their entire location in the asteroid belt had been disintegrated and of the debris which could be distinguished, Mance somehow doubted there was enough to raise fifty corpses from the embrace of death.

Eight heavy cruisers, eight light cruisers, sixteen scout cruisers. Perhaps seven thousand black brothers, all dead in the fulfilment of their sacred vow.

But – and a savage grin came on his face – the Night’s Watch had not died alone in this battle. Whoever had been in command of this squadron had evidently been as surprised as they were by the ice dragons, but they had struck hard and ferociously.

All the dragon-carriers had been destroyed.

Out one hundred and thirty Tyrant-cruisers, there were now barely twenty-one in one piece and all looked damaged.

Twenty Carrion-battleships had exploded or were so devastated and crippled that their inhuman masters would not have any option but to abandon them.

Four dragons were no more.

And the dreaded Star Killer...well, the monstrous world-killer was still moving, but it was clear it had received the first hard beating of its existence. There were three breaches in its hull, and the energy levels were at an all-times low.

None of these warships were pursuing his forces anymore. Their ‘victory’ had been so crippling, so bloody, that they were changing course and their speed was steadily decreasing.

“We have been granted salvation, let’s not waste it! Jump out of the Craster’s Fort System, now!”

**Lord Rickard Karstark, 20.09.300AAC, Nightfort System**

The wildling fleet was an impressive sight. Thousands upon thousands of ships, all gathered in a single location, and some according to the latest reports were millennia old. Granted it was not a purely military force, but to gain parity in numbers with them, the entire Sector would need to bring its military and merchant ships here. When the wildlings had decided to move, they had not done things in half and indecisive measures.

But this fleet was also battered and in dire need of repairs. Several trails of debris followed dozens of ships, clear signs of the pressure which had been too often inflicted on these centuries-old hulls. It was not possible to see without more precise sensors, but Rickard would not be very surprised to learn if each of the Arks and the biggest Barges had not one or more compartments opened to the void. Exhaustion, battle-damage and makeshift repairs seemed to be the life-blood of this fleet.

“Optimistic estimates from the tactical officers are telling us they lost between one hundred and fifty and two hundred ships of all classes in the crossing of the Breach. It may be more. The First Ranger is leading patrols to rescue survivors and tow the hulk to the scrap-yards,” said his eldest son Harrion. “It’s still a remarkable exploit. If I had seen the state of their fleet yesterday, I wouldn’t have believed half of their fleet could survive in the treacherous currents of the Eye!”

“These people are survivors, Harrion.” As easy as it was to insult and hate the wildlings sometimes, it was best not to forget that. “They have survived the raids and the killers the Others sent to exterminate them. By all rights their engines should not have survived ten successive jumps. By all right their weapons should not manage to scratch the paint of one of our heavy cruisers. And yet, here they stand and continue to fight and live after the abominations decided to freeze their planets for a new Long Night. It would not do to underestimate them.”

“I understand, father,” Harrion grimaced. “But by the hourglass of Roboros, they have just given us the mother of all logistical nightmares! Assuming no one is getting through the Breach in the next days, our guests have around eight hundred and sixty Arks, five hundred and sixty Barges, fifteen heavy cruisers, six hundred light cruisers, three thousand scout cruisers, two thousand escort carriers and the Old Gods alone know transports, auxiliaries, mobile repair ships, food-producing and fuel tankers they have in this mess. Ten men of my staff just collapsed seeing the numbers, and I think they were voluntarily downsizing the magnitude of the problem!”

“How bad it is? As I understand it, they probably pushed as many refugees as they could aboard all their transports.”

“From what I understand, it’s likely a safe assumption.” A second grimace came upon his son’s face. “Don’t misunderstand, I’m really happy Ser Waymar chose to save them. If the monsters had managed to use even half of this fleet with the dead they have already raised, I think their first assault would have overwhelmed us no matter what we tried. But as it is, we are left with a major problem...”

Rickard Karstark nodded. The Battle of Craster’s Fort –whose outcome had already spread with the arrival of the light cruiser acting as a rear-guard of Flotilla 805 – was already in its way to become a legend in the ranks of the forces defending this system and no doubt the knowledge of this battle was well on its way to Winterfell by now.

There had been no survivors from the Night’s Watch flotilla. But by fighting the enemy who mattered, Ser Waymar Royce had probably avoided the worst nightmare the Night’s Watch had ever fought in eight thousand years: an entire exodus of the dead slammed against the bastions of the Wall.

For this honourable last-stand and the massive losses they had inflicted to the Others fleet – not to mention the treasure of information they had learnt on the Enemy – the martyrs of Flotilla 805 were already promoted two grades posthumously. Lady Mormont, Lord Flint and Lord Umber had already spoken in public to affirm they would pay the pensions of the black brothers fallen in the Craster’s Fort System – provided they could find their families in time to do any good.

Waymar Royce would probably be promoted posthumously to the grade of Admiral, in the end. Rickard was not going to pretend there weren’t political considerations to take into account: with the Others coming, the alliance with the Valemen was going to be more important than ever. But Lord Commander Mormont had already confirmed the men who had died for the Dawn in the Battle of the Death Wings were all going to receive the Ward of the Wall, the third-highest medal a black brother could receive.

They had deserved it, these men. They had seen the jaws of death open to swallow humanity and they had courageously marched towards it. They had remained true to their oaths, despite too many of them having chosen this service over a rapid execution for a life of crime.

*What does it say about the South I wonder*?

“Winter is coming and now we stand at the gates of Hell...” he murmured before resuming the conversation. “We are going to send the ships in the best condition to Castle Black as fast as we can. Our flotillas are on the retreat everywhere, we can’t leave this exodus fleet here when the Enemy could launch his assault at any moment.”

The mutual slaughter at Craster’s Fort had probably given them a good fortnight of respite, but it was best not to tempt fate.

“And it will make sure Lord Stark decides what to do with the wildlings, not you, father?”

“You understand the advantages of having someone of higher standing than you in the military machine, Harrion,” said with a smirk the Lord of House Karstark. “I may have received the surrender of this King-Beyond-the-Wall, but I am glad to deliver this hellishly hot source of problems to my Lord Paramount...though I haven’t the slightest idea how we are going to absorb the next best thing of three billion wildlings in our realm!”

**First Night’s Sword Al’Sya, 20.09.300AAC, Craster’s Fort System**

Silently the First Night’s Sword contemplated the ravaged planet and the immense debris fields. She did not breathe. She did not express her anger outwardly or used her formidable abilities to distort the walls next to her. Her visage was akin to a statue of ice.

Nevertheless, not a single living creature in this galaxy would have mistaken her expression for a smile.

“**Explain**.”

“**The prey surprised us**.”

A psychic blade taller than an average human materialised in her hands, the edge of the weapon stopping less than a millimetre away from the throat of the disgraced Yth’yr’tel commander.

“**There were other prey-ships in the system. They were waiting for us with more of their powerful missiles than we ever believed possible. The prey was...**”

“**The prey was fighting like cornered prey and you were chosen by my hand. You should have known better**.”

One move and the Yth’yr’tel soul returned to the Creator, his enveloped crumbling in a pile of ice shards.

Al’Sya, First Night’s Sword of the Creator, looked at the life-ice expended for a short instant before returning to the spectacle of destruction which had been created by the recent battle. Many ships of the Yth’yr’tel had been lost in this ambush, more than the battle-plans had allowed for. The weak running-prey had also escaped and would not help her people break the Builder’s work once the real assault began.

If the Holy Relics had been in her possession, the preys would have stood absolutely no chance against her might. But the Holy Gifts of the Creator were dispersed and the sole Relic in their possession was the one which couldn’t be unleashed without a Night’s Queen.

But then with the Holy Relics, the eight other Night’s Swords would have supported her warships and her dragons and joined her to attack the symbol of their exile.

It did not matter. She was the most powerful of the Night’s Swords and the Creator had made clear before the Gates were sealed she was his favourite Chosen. And one of the Holy Relics was now constantly used on the other side of the Breach, increasing her strength and allowing her to draw more and more blades from the blessed void.

The seven remaining Holy Relics would hear the song of ice and death propagated by the Ring. And she was going to track them one by one, prey or no prey.

“**Gather all my warriors and my fleets. Gather my dragons. Gather my planet-breakers. Gather the Breath of the Void. It is time to remind the prey why we are the predators**.”

Behind her, her dragon roared to support her command.