**War of the Ten Warlords Arc**

**Chapter 8**

**Long Night**

From: Green Priest Sylvania, Art-Detachment of Icemark

To: Northern High Command of Castle Black

Date: 12.10.300AAC

*My Lords,*

*The situation has been contained here, but at great cost. The nightmares demoralising our troops were indeed more than they appeared to be. By some odious combination of technology and sorcery we have not yet been able to discover, the Others reactivated several old caches of horrors which must have been remained dormant since the end of the Long Night eight thousands years ago. The Priest of Roboros assigned to my detachment supposes that like the abominations are denying Dispatos and the Underworld His Due by animating the dead, some sort of eldritch power has also been imbued in the monsters to delay the ravages of the God of Time.*

*Losses have been particularly among the Night Watch’s infantry stationed in the citadel. The wights which emerged from these abandoned subterranean conduits were extremely resistant to close-combat weapons and the lack of motivation and fighting spirit in the black brothers has long been noticed by the Northern commanders assigned to Icemark.*

*At the time I’m preparing to send this message by raven-drone, no Other has yet been sighted, but alas given the number of casualties and the ferocity of the assault, the perspective of a monstrous infiltrator can’t be ruled out. As such, the loyal servants of Nantosueltos are burning the corpses as fast we can, despite the interest represented by these ancient wights.*

*That is, I’m afraid, the extent of the good news. While the nightmares have disappeared with this battle, the Breach is expelling more and more magical energy into this sub-region of space.*

*It is beyond my ability to foretell if it is the will of the Others to cause us untold complications or simply a secondary effect of them concentrating their forces on the other side of the Eye of Woe, but the consequences are no doubt going to be dire if it continues until the end of this year. Already the weather of Icemark is perturbed by lightning-red storms and several glaciers are melting one thousand kilometres north of the South Pole.*

*Much as I hate to say it, I think Project [Warning, Authorisation-level Taranos necessary] is our only chance now to preserve the Gift from the influence of the Enemy.*

*I remain the Old Gods’ lowly servant...*

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From: Rear-Admiral Roger Ryswell, Commanding Officer of the Sentinel Stand’s Squadron

To: Northern High Command of Castle Black

Date: 12.10.300AAC

*My Lords,*

*The last scouting effort has been abandoned after the loss of the destroyer* Dream of Revenge *yesterday. I agree that any and all information we can acquire on the enemy is worthwhile, but given the instability of the Eye and the vigilance of the abominations, the casualties we will take to pierce the veil of darkness and blue lightning the monsters love to surround themselves with are not worth the gains.*

*The composition of the fleet in defensive position on the other side of the Wall has not changed according to our instruments and the probes: three hundred-plus captured Free Folk ships in sub-par conditions, seventy-plus Tyrant-class cruisers, ten Dragon Carriers and thirty Carrion-class Battleships.*

*Unless it is decided to launch a limited counter-attack from the Nightfort, it is my opinion we will not be able to discover the order of battle of the Others until they attack the Wall in force. I remain confident that the Enemy will have the same problems where our defences are concerned, alas the sorcery they wield make intelligence certainties a thousand times more difficult than efforts to spy the Targaryen Navy.*

*As the Breach-in-the-Stars’ size increase in the direction of the Nightfort has stopped in the last fifty hours and the crises of wight-rising have been non-existent, my staff and I agree the first prong of the Others’ grand attack is going to begin in less than forty-eight hours.*

*The Night is going to fall, but we are ready to fight it...*

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*I am afraid.*

*My men are afraid.*

*We are all afraid, we Northerners, except perhaps the Lord of Last Hearth. I am not sure there is something in his head allowing him to be afraid.*

*Never in living memory has the Night’s Watch faced such a threat. Our founders did, eight thousand years ago, but the records from them are few and incomplete. And in the unlikely case we would have them, it would be cold comfort.*

*Humanity has grown stronger, but so has the Enemy.*

*And we are divided. Rumours and alarms of massacres are coming to our fortresses and defences. Planets are burning in the fires of a gigantic civil war. The Targaryens have utterly failed to respect their oaths, and now the Seven Sectors are just a name to give children some sense of what was lost in the last century.*

*I am not afraid to end as a wight. I am a Mormont, and the legacy of bears and a thousand generation of warriors is in my veins.*

*I fear failure. I fear that should the Wall fall, should the great fleet and hosts mustered by Lord Stark to protect humanity collapses, there will be no one to protect the billions of civilians behind us.*

*This is because it is a war unlike any others.*

*There will be no prisoners of war, and no negotiated surrender.*

*We will die or we will perish guarding the Breach-in-the Stars.*

*We are guarding the Gates of Hell. We are the Night’s Watch.*

*And we must do what we can in the few days which are left to us.*

*The light of the stars is paling. The Eye has opened.*

*Winter is coming. The monsters are coming. And we will go fight them, afraid but defiant.*

*The Long Night gathers, and now my watch truly begins.*

**Euron Greyjoy, 13.10.300AAC, Nightfort System**

Fighting wights was killing half of the fun.

And no, Euron had not just thought of this to make a good pun.

Contrary to the rumours this great ox of Victarion had spread in the last years across the aether and the pirate bastions of the galaxy, Euron loved the idea of defensive warfare.

Really, what was not to like?

While you, the great tactician stayed safely inside your quarters, the enemy was dying at the gates from starvation and the little surprises you had left behind.

Properly done, a siege could utterly slaughter a force outnumbering you ten to one. When the air became poisonous with chemical shells and the trenches the soldiers were forced to hide into crawled with vermin and the corpses of the previous besiegers, the indomitable spirit of the troops wasn’t going to take long to break.

Unfortunately, as he had previously said, the wights were making plenty of things that he, the great and mighty commander his adoring troops nicknamed the Dark Crow, had wanted to experiment upon.

But what was the point of throwing seas of boiling oil onto the faces of their enemies when the Others’ puppets couldn’t even understand the very notion of pain?

From day to day, Euron admitted under his breath it was brilliant. By sending dead things at the enemy, who cared about bacteriological and chemical warfare? A virus or some kind of devastating plague required living hosts to develop and spread. Barbed wire and land mines could break the legs or blow up the blue-eyed thralls of the Enemy, but the delays they would impose to any opponent were far, far less than the hours a conventional force of human would have taken to secure the area.

But above all, the wights never tired. They never felt any emotion. They never withdrew of their own accord – if retreat there was, it would be at their master-abomination’s command and no one else.

Individually, even the dumbest and more pitiful recruit of the Night’s Watch was able to outsmart the smartest wight. But in endurance, the dead were going to hold their ground until the opponent was exhausted and made a mistake.

Afterwards the monsters feasted.

Euron could almost admire the psychological weapon it represented. Since the wights had no functionary digestive system and no sustenance requirements, biting and eating some parts of the fallen enemies was not done because they needed it. It was a puppet-command like any other imbedded by the Others’ control in the dead brains.

Seconds later, Aeron felt an explosion exploding through the aether. Magically, it was like the hiss of a large snake, but one which tried to shriek and scream at the same time. And the aura was cold, extremely cold.

“Ah,” the commander of the Nightfort ground defences cackled, a sound which sadly was imperfectly redistributed outside his black prison-armour. “It begins.”

Most of his lieutenants had the wisdom and the intelligence to not question his words. Most, alas, was not ‘all’.

“The tactical displays and the stations of the first echelon are not...”

Euron calmly seized one of the darts he had chose to try this morning and threw it right above the left knee of his naysayer.

“Ramsay, my dear Squire...surely you do not doubt my wisdom, do you?”

The bastard of the Dreadfort was, of course. But it amused Euron to the highest degree to see this pathetic worm squirming on the cold ground and holding his leg while not trying to scream his pain.

“No...my Lord...” It was impossible to miss the rage, the hate, the utter loathing...and the lie. For several heartbeat Euron savoured these negative feelings like he appreciated a symphony played on a violin or a seven courses-meal served by a Volantene cook.

“Good, good...I would hate to make you inspect the outer defences...naked.” The optical sensors of his full helmet were not perfect, but he could tell the face of his ‘squire’ was almost greenish.

And as well he should. The fortress of Crow’s Peak was not the largest citadel-complex of the Nightfort, but the smallest and most fortified inner walls were a walk of two kilometres, and the temperatures were never positive in this season.

“The command has been given on the other side of the Breach. In a few minutes, the lovely abominations we call Others or White Walkers are going to come at us with murder and blue sorcery in their eyes. It is going to be a massacre of unimaginable scale and violence.”

At last, at long last, the real war was about to begin.

Euron was glad.

Digging trenches and watching Northerners building their ugly fortifications was dreadfully boring.

“Our orders are strictly defensive.”

There wasn’t any point pretending otherwise, and any who tried had to be shot for the good of mankind and the galaxy as a whole. The world of Nightfort would have been already extremely unsuitable for mass armoured assault given its massive mountains, extreme weather, and endless icy steppes.

Since the Others had obviously the ability to manipulate all that cold to fuel their techno-sorcery and a single one had been able to successfully attack one of the Blackstone Fortresses of Pyke, there was no pint trying to fight them on open ground, except if you wanted your death to be labelled as ‘suicide by stupidity’.

“According to the Green Priests stationed at Defiant Watch and here, we can’t expect the ancient anti-sorcery protections to last long. Our precious tree-lovers have danced around and played with some of their most powerful tricks, but the energy focal points have to feed the Wall. We can’t afford the Others’ to disperse across the Westerosi and Essossi Quadrants.”

This was the official and so-noble Stark opinion, obviously. Euron personally thought that it would give a few Targaryens and sycophants a well-needed kick where it hurt.

“As such, I believe we will have numerous opportunities to test your biggest super-heavy artillery batteries, Tybalto.” The Ironborn turned to his Master of Artillery.

Tybalto Virys was an oddity in the middle of the Northerners and the vermin of the Night’s Watch. His slim stature and his heavily tanned skin were not exactly a common body trait on the Wall. This was normal, for Tybalto Virys had been born on the sea world of Braavos, and been sent to the Nightfort as part of the long and mysterious agreements the Direwolf had signed with the Sealord.

But there were military ‘experts’ and there were military experts. Most of the console programmers, missile developers and industrial envoys of Braavos had come to the North for the love of profit, mutual hatred of the Targaryen and they were volunteers for a life of war and adventure.

Tybalto Virys had been sent here in chains, because the Braavosi had proved squeamish at a few friendly fire incidents and a few heavy bombardments on Norvoshi cities.

Seriously, Euron didn’t see why the Sealord and his advisors had made that much of a fuss. You couldn’t have a dragon if you were not willing to squash a few eggs, and artillery expertise was not won by letting the cannons rusting in their warehouses.

Bah, the hypocrisy and the narrow minds of the Braavosi deciders were his gain. Tybalto was now under his direct command as a brother of the Night’s Watch, and the Braavosi artillerist was eager to teach the abominations his craft the hard way.

“All the batteries which were transported to our citadels are only waiting your order to fire, Lord Euron.” His Master of Artillery confirmed. “The non-humans and the dead are going to scream before the second wave that Artillery is the Queen of the battlefields.”

“I’m sure they will.” And he wouldn’t shed a tear when his enemies were vaporised. Euron had not forgiven the Others for his life-threatening injuries in a decade, and he would not do so until each and every one of these ice-bitch sorceresses were lying decapitated at his feet.

The Night’s Swords would expect resistance. The female monsters would never have conquered another galaxy if they didn’t. But even their worst-case scenarios were unlikely to be sufficient for the absolute nightmare Euron and Tybalto had prepared for them.

Soon the Others were going to recall the good old day when Waymar Royce had punched them in the face. This time the bait wasn’t the wildlings; it was one of the most fortified planets in the known universe, and sufficient warheads were buried under the ice steppes to vaporise billions of soldiers.

“This is useless...my Lord. Who holds the space above our head holds the planet...”

Euron raised a finger.

“My dear squire, you are truly a genius without peers when it comes to tactics and strategy.”

His senior subordinates around him managed some chuckles and smiles, while the pale cheeks of the bastard reddened in embarrassment.

If he had stopped talking at this point, maybe Euron would have decided to spare him. Maybe. After all the vermin of the Dreadfort could be entertaining...and watching him to try to complete the bureaucratic forms in triplicate during his sleep hours was absolutely hilarious.

“Lord Stark sent you to die here, fools! Why are you willing to die like good little sheep?”

The expressions of amusement went extinct faster than it took to say it. There were six Northerners in this council room, and while all of them were killers and criminals, their implacable pack-ferocity was not allowing them to tolerate the treasonous affirmation.

“Lord, can we kill this insubordinate squire now?” growled the commander of the outer walls, an outlaw formerly sworn to House Cerwyn, if he remembered correctly.

“Patience, patience. I want to give him the answers his brain of sparrow isn’t able to process before he gets everything he deserves.”

The Nightfort commander focused his attention on Ramsay Snow, who now had four black-clad warriors in power armour standing vigil behind him.

“The prime reason we are ready to die, you miserable cockroach, is that there is no escape. We have not the shuttles to evacuate more than a thousand men, and that’s if I am generous. The Enemy will never accept a surrender that will not see us turned into wights before ten hours have passed. In these circumstances, the best we can do is to give the Others a grand and fiery apocalypse that they will remember for all eternity.”

Euron threw a second dart in the other leg of his soon-to-be ex-squire, and a satisfying scream of pain arrived to his lips.

“As for the accusation Lord Stark is ‘abandoning’ us, it is a strange accusation,” The Darth Crow had no reason to be complimentary of the Lord of Winterfell, but rumours of his cowardice were just that, unfounded rumours. “His fleet is far less exposed than we are, that much is true, but he is here ready to defend the Wall. That makes him ten times smarter and cunning than every Lord south of Moat Cailin.”

Too bad House Greyjoy had not had a leader like that at its head during the Greyjoy Rebellion...they may have very well managed a stalemate against the mad reptile. Of course, an intelligent warlord would have noticed the probability of winning this war was infinitesimal and delayed his uprising until the South burned like it currently did.

“But enough of this. My dear Ramsay, your utility as a squire is, thanks a thousand Gods and Demons, coming to an end. Your cowardice and your insubordination attempts, while amusing, can’t be tolerated on the eve of my revenge.”

The man who had desired once to become a God nodded at the lone Green Priestess in green-red robes waiting close to the door.

“He’s yours, Priestess of Abnobia. Make sure to use every drop of blood in him for the protection ritual. I don’t think we have more descendants of the Red in this citadel.”

**Melisandre of Asshai, 13.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

Melisandre had one minute of warning.

Had she been healthy and alert, it wouldn’t have been a problem. The blessings of R’hllor were without equal, and one minute was plenty of time to change the course of a battle or to kill a traitor going against the will of the Lord of Light.

But at that moment, she was definitely not in good health.

Her skin had been violently injured by the traps left by the cursed Targaryen sorceress. Her legs would not support her weight, given that one was broken and the other had been severely wounded by shrapnel and two laser rifle shots.

True, her power remained stronger than ever. The Lord of Light was with her, and given several months Melisandre had no doubt she would be returned to her pre-Siege appearance and physical strength.

But it would be too late. The boy she had intended to make the Avatar of R’hllor and therefore establish the Light’s galactic victory had by his arrogance ruined everything.

Had she been a lesser woman, the very stupidity of removing his helmet at the instant of triumph and getting shot by a mere foot soldier would have been enough to make her cry.

But she was not a lesser woman. She was Melisandre of Asshai, High Priestess of R’hllor, and she had not sacrificed thousands of hours, burned blood-strong men and forged pacts of blood and power to fail because the megalomaniac silver-headed King had been unable to survive a battle that by all rights was won by his side.

Yet Aegon’s failure at the moment of victory made her hesitate for the first time. It was true the son of delusional Rhaegar Targaryen was the perfect choice to become Azor Ahai and the Prince-who-was-Promised, the Sword which would cut down the Great Other. Several Red Priestesses who had warmed his bed had prepared his body with the divine embers. In time, these would grow in a magnificent sun and cow all military and political opposition.

But the disaster unfolding at this very moment in the Red Keep was one more sign the Champion chosen to wield Lightbringer was...flawed. None of his enemies would have committed such a mistake. And when it came down to it, Melisandre was ready to admit there was no reason to go behind the first assault waves. The treacherous-unbeliever uncle was not anywhere near King’s Landing, courtesy of her rituals. The Iron Throne may be a bit damaged, but it was not going anywhere. No, there had been no religious or symbolic reason to face the last senior Lord of the Greens by himself.

Aegon had behaved with the fiery arrogance his father and his grandfather had lit in him. And now as the wheels of steel, fire, and death were clashing the Red Dragon was falling, struck down by laser and madness...

There were other Targaryens and Warlords who had the potential to become Azor Ahai. None had been prepared like Aegon was, but as the powers granted to the servants of the Lord of Light were soaring it would not be an unbreakable obstacle.

She couldn’t be the one to convert Aegon’s replacement, yes. But her Flames could stand in her stead and eventually replace her if the cause demanded it. Melisandre was a servant of R’hllor, and she was ready to make great sacrifices for the world of Light to come into being.

But who was the best candidate aside Aegon? Viserys the Green was a lost cause, now that she had used the power of her Lord against him. And his wife and his allies in the powerless false-religion known as the Faith of Seven would turn against him in the unlikely case he did.

The Black Stag...no, not the Black Stag. Stannis Baratheon was unlikely to ever trust a Priestess or a Priest after Fawnton.

The Iron King was completely unsuitable. Victarion Greyjoy had been swallowed by the darkness of the Enemy, and there was no return from this path of damnation.

But there were others...the Dornish Queen may require badly the support of the Lord of Light in a short-term future. Most of the resistance the Black Dragoness had against her order was coming from the spider weaving its web around her and threats like this one had to be eliminated anyway.

There were others who could be promising too.

Unfortunately, Melisandre was forced to acknowledge she had no contact with any of the claimants opposing Aegon Targaryen. A couple of months ago, it was the logical reasoning, for victory had seemed almost certain according to the figures she was allowed to read and this way the worship of R’hllor was irrevocably tied to the Red Dragon. Now this idea could rightly be considered shaking on inexistent foundations, both from the point of view of an insider and an outsider.

Wordlessly, she began giving orders by hand and fire-messages to the Priests who had not been called back to R’hllor. At the same time, she sent a flame healing-stream in the aether to Aegon Targaryen. Not enough to save him in mere seconds or erase the consequences of his arrogance, but the ‘Red King’ would be stabilised for a few days and if his healers and maesters were able to justify his boastings, he may very well be able to survive.

“The Champion will reclaim our support with victories and acts of contrition,” she explained in a voice which sadly couldn’t mask how badly she had been wounded by the dangerous inheritance of the Sorceress-Queen Visenya Targaryen. “Should he fail again, the favour of Azor Ahai will no longer bless him. The Lord of Light wants a peerless Champion, not a failure who suffers defeat after defeat and survives only by the grace of boons he is unworthy to touch his lips with.”

There were no protestations. All her Priests and Priestesses had seen the incompetence of the King firsthand and ten times per day it had been their gifts which had allowed the Red Army to advance and cripple the defences of King’s Landing.

And then the second warning was heard, and this time it was her death she saw.

“Open a gate to Cressey Hall! We are betrayed!”

**Lord Rickard Karstark, 13.10.300AAC, Nightfort System**

Rickard had heard many descriptions about the Breach-in-the-Stars since his fleet had arrived to ‘support’ the Night’s Watch in their noble duty of defending the Wall.

Some of the most poetic recruits from the Night’s Watch had described it as an artistic mosaic of madness and blue-red energy.

The most pessimistic had affirmed the resemblance was eerie with the demon’s eyes of myths and legends.

After the arrival of the Free Folk refugee fleet and the last stand of Ser Waymar Royce, the latter view had gained more and more predominance.

Not only because by now, nobody but a Targaryen apologist could possibly doubt that the monsters of the Long Night were very real and waiting on the other side of the Breach.

No, by now the Eye itself, a phenomenon which had been described in past history as a somewhat peaceful mirror-reflecting lake, was a maelstrom of energy. Every colour in existence and plenty which shouldn’t exist were rippling into existence and providing a system-sized spectacle of extremely bad omen. The soldiers on the closest stations from the spatial anomaly were outright advised to never look at it for long lest they suffer nightmares and diverse mental breakdowns.

Since in the last centuries the Eye had never reacted like this and Rickard and the Northern commanders knew pertinently their limited number of Green Priests had not the strength to create this...it left only one possible culprit, and as much as he wanted to believe the contrary, the Others would not cause this tech-magical super-firework unless it gave them an advantage in the battle to come.

Of course, the reality of the abominations waiting days to muster their forces cut both ways. Yes, when it was going to be launched, the assault was going to be absolutely overwhelming. But each day the Others spent agitating the Eye was also one the Northern Navy and its allies had to fortify the Nightfort System and the lone planet near the Eye of Woe. And with the support of a logistically-talented High Command and the full support of a Lord Paramount, you could do a lot of unpleasant – from the point of view of any attacker – contingency plans.

It was humbling to think that while Aerys the Mad was entertaining his capital with gladiatorial combats to the death and executions by wildfire pyre, the planet he was watching at the moment was for all intent and purposes abandoned. The Karstark patriarch would love to say it was because of the Targaryens, but on this point the dragonlords had just been the last straw in a long period of decadence.

Truthfully, it was complacency which had been the bane of the black brothers and the North. After thousands years spent fighting nothing more dangerous than the ‘wildling peril’, everyone had become overconfident and started to believe there was nothing left to fear about the immense galaxy beyond the Wall.

They had all been wrong. And now the price of the lesson they were about to learn was going to be paid in blood and deflagrations.

“Admiral, the Green Priests are sending us a warning...”

“Nightfort command priority message! The assault is imminent!”

“Sound the alert! All the crews are to go the battle-stations!” The Lord of Karhold ordered, abandoning his contemplation of the system and racing back to his bridge. “Alert all commands of the system, and recommend every Wall bastion surrounding the Breach to be warned!”

Five minutes later, Rickard reached the bridge and saluted his subordinates quickly.

“Have there been any changes on the Eye?”

“No, Admiral the reports are...”

There was a shrouded storm on every sensor and for a couple of seconds the entire system disappeared into a buzz of static and insanity. It was not like a second sun had been created. No, it felt deep in your stomach and your muscles like the complete opposite. It was...darkness, darkness pouring out of the Breach.

“Remember your duties! We are soldiers of the North! Transmit orders for the first echelon to activate their platforms for an imminent launch!”

And then the Enemy came.

Suddenly, the maelstrom calmed and was like a perfect mirror...and the Enemy warships emerged into reality.

“Enemy contacts! Enemy contacts! Energy signatures...four thousand?”

Rickard Karstark, for all his control, froze for a heartbeat.

“Fire at will!” He shouted. Whatever tonnage these warships had, their very number was a threat by itself.

The three forts and the thousands of missile platforms were relayed his command and threw a tide of lethal projectiles and energy into the Others’ battle-line.

“My Lord, according to our first reports, these warships are all built on the same template and are no bigger than scout cruisers. We have...”

The purpose of these units was not long to be discovered. Pushing whatever abominable engines they had to the maximum, the thousands of small starships accelerated in rightly insane manoeuvres towards the core of the first defence echelon. And then they rammed or started to detonate.

Three forts and hundreds of missile platforms had been emplaced to guard the most direct path to the Nightfort, along with hundreds of space mines and many, many dangerous weapons.

Everything perished in a titanic blue explosion of energy. Rickard watched in consternation the display. Everyone had known being assigned to the first echelon was a death sentence, but no one, not even Lord Eddard Stark, had thought they would be wiped out from the surface of the galaxy in less than a minute!

This was over five thousand black brothers and one hundred thousand missiles lost...

“Suicide raiders. There are suicide raiders.” His chief of staff muttered.

“No, they aren’t.” Rickard countered, and laughed without joy as dozens of heads looked like a madman. “Think about it, men. Do you really think the Others are the types to sacrifice their precious icy skin like a demented Ironborn Void Priest? I am ready to bet you a thousand gold dragons that there was no one alive inside these hulls. There were more likely remotely controlled, with wights at the helm and every station that couldn’t be controlled by mere technology.”

“You...you may have a point, Admiral.”

“Which doesn’t change the fact our entire strategy has to change because we never saw this threat coming,” of course few military plans survived contact with the enemy, but for theirs to be broken in mere seconds was not a good sign.

“Kindly inform Lord Bolton he will take charge of what remains of defence-echelon one. Recommend to Lord Stark the dispersion of the command centres. The Others have introduced scout cruisers purpose-built for ramming and missile-sweeping tactics.”

This was...inhuman. One more ‘proof’ Others and humanity could only be enemies. No one, not even the Targaryens at the height of their madness, had ever thought about escort-sized warships to fill the role of missile sponges.

Yes, the scout cruisers and the like could be built in far greater numbers than a ship of the line and faster too, but any jump or void-capable warship was a considerable investment.

“Second wave emerging from the Eye, Admiral,” one of his Captains announced. “These are the same signatures, and it looks like they have four thousand more to send in the melee.”

“Order the second echelon to launch everything they have in five automatic waves!” They were going to lose a lot of the mobile firepower, but the priority was by now to protect the space forts, which couldn’t be replaced as easily as the platforms.

His command had the intended effect...sort of. The distance for the enemy ramming units to cross was greater, and the minefields were denser. That and the massive barrage fire guaranteed there were few of the wights-controlled escorts which completed their suicidal duty...but each one which did it was causing tremendous damage. The explosions were phenomenal...

“Admiral, we have lost two forts and over fifty platforms.” His tactical officer darkly reported. “According to the preliminary reports of the first and second echelons, they must have packed the equivalent of several heavy plasma buster bombs in their hulls to achieve the destruction they caused. That...or whatever sorcery is involved in the conception of these hulls is changing the rules of physics and increasing their kinetic impact...”

“Make sure the data is sent to Lord Stark and the different support-analyst groups in the rear-lines,” it wasn’t going to change the outcome of this battle, it was far too late for that and analysing and formulating doctrinal and operational changes in the middle of a battle was something only seen in unrealistic holo-movies. For better or for worse, the Northern Navy and the Night’s Watch had to fight these death waves with the weapons and the dispositions they had trained with. To do anything else on a whim was likely to create a monumental amount of confusion and lose them the battle faster than anything the Others could do to their battle-line.

“Admiral...the third wave is beginning to transition into real space...three thousand scout ‘ramming’ cruisers...”

“Status change! Status change! There are over twenty Tyrant-class line cruisers coming behind them!”

Despite the grim sight of a third wave of undead-crewed genocide-purposed warships, Rickard felt hope for the first time this battle began. The Enemy had obviously not an infinite amount of these expendable units, else they would have continued for two or three more waves; not even an Other could believe that it had fully suppressed all the defences separated by less than a million kilometres from the Breach. No, the Others had brought certainly a massive armada to kill the North, but it was not infinite. Victory was still possible.

“Activate the third echelon completely, maximum salvoes and twenty percent of the minefields must go active immediately. Then contact Lord Bolton. We must force the abominations battle-line to intervene in this system.”

**Lord Jacaerys Velaryon, 13.10.300AAC, King’s Landing System**

“He lives.”

Once upon a time, it would have brought cheers and celebrations from Theon and Aelyx. Now, the Greyjoy Heir closed his eyes but not fast enough to hide a pit of despair. As for Aelyx, he drew his personal pistol and shot once the traditional painting of King Rhaegar Targaryen which had been delivered the day the super-battleship Balerion was formally admitted into the Crown Navy’s service.

If it wasn’t saying how bad the relationships had gotten between the ex-Crown Prince and his staff, nothing will.

“He has the Stranger’s luck.” Theon found the strength to voice the sentence after five seconds. “I suppose I should not be surprised.”

“Is it luck or is it something else?” Aelyx questioned gloomily.

Much as he hated to admit it, Jacaerys knew the Langward Vice-Admiral had made a very good point.

“I can’t be one hundred percent sure, but I think it is luck and nothing more.” The young man who was only at the moment the de jure Lord of Driftmark answered. “Not because I doubt it would be out of the realm of the possible for the damned Red Priests to heal him at distance. After the bloodbath they caused on the planet below us, I think we can assume a lot of things we thought impossible from them are in fact quite within range. That said, our men were busy purging them and blasting them to oblivion minutes later. And if they truly wanted to heal their ‘Azor Ahai’, I don’t think they would have done ‘just enough to keep him alive’. He was critically injured and the healers have kept him in a coma since he had arrived on the *Balerion*.”

If Aegon VI Targaryen had not been a King and thus entreated to the best medical facilities left at their disposal, it was quite likely he would be already dead, chosen of the Targaryen legacy or not.

As it was, it had already been a very near thing.

“How badly did the soldiers of the Red Keep wound him?” The Heir of House Langward asked, with something akin to black humour filling his mouth.

“The answer, at the risk of being critical of our dear Kingsguards,” because in the end, someone was going to pay for not protecting the life of the King of Westeros, and it was not the naval officers waiting in orbit, “is ‘very badly’. The wound he took in the throat was not fatal on its own, but when they saw him fall, all the Staunton guards and the Gold Fists left alive charged in the melee to make sure he was really, really dead.”

What a pity they hadn’t succeeded. Not that they had lacked motivation, Jacaerys suspected, but with Barristan Selmy and Arthur Dayne protecting him, it had been a slaughter.

“One soldier managed to stab him in his sword arm, and the damage is bad enough the senior maester in charge isn’t sure they will be able to save it. His legs have also taken a lot of damage. And that’s without taking into account the plasma grenade some fanatic threw into the melee.”

Theon groaned so loudly Jacaerys knew it was a mummery.

“In other words, oh Admiral, he’s crippled and disfigured. No fair maiden will want to watch his face – not unless the woman in question is fond of horror holo-series.”

“That’s a bit harsh, even for you Theon.”

“You’re right,” Theon admitted too easily, “Margaery Tyrell wasn’t fond of him in the first place, so we can only hope she is very, very fan of these best-seller horror holographic recordings.”

Aelyx swore half a dozen insults under his breath and Jacaerys heavily grimaced. Yes, given the recent events, they had almost forgotten the repercussions the last events were going to have on the union of House Targaryen and House Tyrell.

The son of Admiral Lucerys Velaryon took over twenty large breaths before opening his mouth again, an astonishing feat of control if he said so himself.

He had to keep his mind clear and not succumb to the rage.

Yes, the whole campaign had been a disaster from start to finish. To begin with, the fact this military offensive had been necessary in the first place was the sign the administration of the two previous Kings had been largely seen in a negative light, both from the average noble and smallfolk’s point of view.

Even then, the First Fleet had not been absent that long, and the support of Viserys Targaryen should have crumbled the very moment they were back in the Crown Sector. The fact that it hadn’t was a catastrophe, and the next best thing to a death warrant the influence and power of the Targaryens had suffered in over three hundred years. It was a defeat no one in Westeros or Essos was going to miss, no matter the information restrictions enforced.

“We have to react to the new situation, and we need to react fast. I’m ordering most of our units to withdraw back to their war camps and transports to be healed and resupplied, but we can’t continue in this climate of uncertainty. I want options from you two, because I have no idea what to do now that this operation has failed catastrophically and the realm we swore to defend is gone.”

Aelyx and Theon looked at each other, and ultimately it was Theon who spoke first.

“The military situation has become rather simple, Jacaerys. While we are far behind in the news chain, we know for sure Mace Tyrell has led the Grand Reach Fleet to his doom and by now the Lannisters must be at the gates of Highgarden. On our side, the fleet we used to assault King’s Landing is crippled and won’t be able to participate in any offensive action for the next couple of years. Our major allies, Lord Connington and Lord Grafton, are dead. The few who survives are cut off from us and we are unable to reinforce them now. And obviously, the Crown Sector has not erupted in violence to throw off the coup leaders supporting Viserys Targaryen.”

The Crown-raised Ironborn rolled his shoulders in defeat.

“So as I see it, we have only two major options available to us. First, we try to hold King’s Landing with the forces we have here. We will endure exactly the time Viserys will take to repair his fleet, and when his men will see the ruins of the capital, I have no doubt surrenders won’t be offered. Our last capital warships will be crushed in a few minutes, and then it will be our turn to fight to the death in the Red Keep.”

The worst part was that Theon was probably optimistic on how much time the warships of the Reach and the First Crown Fleet could stop a determined counter-attack.

“And the second option?”

“We begin immediately our withdrawal. The crippled warships are towed to High Chelsted, the army formations below fifty percent in strength will play garrison. We fortify the last naval base we have in the Crown Sector, as it will be our last stronghold and possible rally point when we launch new northwards or eastwards offensives.”

The word ‘when’ was employed, but the two other young men heard clearly the ‘if’.

“All the divisions and corps reasonably intact and the warships in good condition must turn around and race back to Highgarden. Now that we have reduced King’s Landing to a greyish mountain of rubble, our last chances are tied with the survivals of the Tyrells. If Highgarden falls, this war is over for us. We might continue the fight for a year, but our position will rapidly deteriorate.”

“The strength of House Tyrell was unchallenged when we departed Highgarden,” Aelyx protested in an unconvinced tone. “Surely...”

“Theon has a good point.” The royal chief of staff cut him. “Whatever popularity and control the Tyrells had before this...Harvest Graveyard...it must be a shadow of itself now. And thanks to our actions here, it is going to get worse. This battle killed Mathis Rowan, one of the Lord of Highgarden’s most loyal supporters. I don’t know the effect this is going to have on the Goldengrove nobility’s support for this war, but I don’t imagine it will be *good*.”

“The Lannisters are at the gates. Every ambitious Lord will know to cast his ambition aside for the time being,” the Langward Heir said, but there had been dying officers with more conviction in their hearts.

“Even admitting this is an unshakeable truth,” and the tone of Theon was not hiding how little he believed this, “this state of affairs will last exactly the time it takes for the battle against Tywin Lannister to be decided. If the Lannisters lose, Baelor Hightower and his father are likely going to take control of the Reach, since they will have the upper command of the last operational loyalist fleet. If the Lannisters win, House Hightower, Peake, Florent and more will all throw Tyrell to the lions and defect in a hurry. We promised them a one-sided series of triumphs. The Lords of the Reach have not followed us into battle because they wanted to serve the glorious role of cannon fodder.”

“Either way we must be present at Highgarden when the plasma batteries will be cooling down. We have to save something of these first months.”

Aelyx had the face of someone who looked ready to tear his hair out by his own hand.

“I agree we can’t stay here and it’s best to leave...regiments that have proved uncontrollable in the last battle to be pulverised by the counterattack of the Green traitors. But I don’t see how we can save anything from this fiasco, even assuming we arrive in time for a decisive intervention at Highgarden. Our King is in a coma, and unless Queen Margaery is already pregnant, Aegon won’t give her any children...”

Aelyx Langward stopped his speech there, but it wasn’t required to be a consummate player of the Game of Thrones to read the undertone. If there were no children, the union was more a slave collar than a ribbon of silk.

To worsen the future unpleasantness, the marriage between the only daughter of the Lord Paramount of the Reach and the then-Crown Prince had been engineered during an era where it was clear House Targaryen was very much the senior partner in the union. Of course at the time, it must have been perfectly logical, from a Crown diplomat’s mind. The Targaryens reigned over the Crown Sector, granting them the wealth of the entire’s realm taxes and laws. The Storm Sector was ruthlessly exploited with their benediction and the influence they held over Lord Jon Connington. The Vale Sector had a large faction of loyalists because Grafton was paid and bought with gold dragons of the capital. The River Sector had untouchable loyalists like House Darry and House Whent.

The weight of these alliances and the sheer wealth of King’s Landing had made the Red Dragon the centre of power in anything they wanted to involve themselves into. And with this power, they could curtain the voracious ambition of Tywin Lannister and his hundreds of cousins.

However, the Seven Sectors of today were a very different place than they had been three months ago. And while House Tyrell had been badly weakened and beaten by the equivalent of a mouse, they were in a far better situation militarily. Their home Sector was not lost to them, to begin with. Their home system was not a destroyed megalopolis where ruins smoke and millions died every hour as the infrastructure collapsed around them.

To sum-up the problem, House Tyrell was far more powerful than House Targaryen and given the huge mistakes of Aegon – and between the three of us, ‘mistake’ was too weak a word – Olenna Tyrell was likely to wash her hands and advise her eldest son to request an annulations from the Starry Father. Unlike Mace, Willas was likely to listen to her or arrive to this conclusion on his own.

“Yes, that’s a problem,” Theon agreed, while rising from his seat and seizing a bottle of Hutcheson cognac which had been abandoned on an abandoned butler’s platter. The three glasses which were placed on the table next left no doubt about his intentions. “We need to present a King alive and sane at our arrival at Highgarden.”

Jacaerys didn’t like where the Rear-Admiral was going.

“Tell us your genial plan before we’re so drunk we will agree to everything you say.”

Theon chuckled before taking a deadly serious expression.

“Yes, let’s be honest with each other. We followed Aegon because we believed he was our friend, he was going to win, and our Houses had invested billions and trillions of gold dragons in his ascension and the destruction of our competitors. Each of these assertions is a lie. Aegon has only servants and enemies. Left to his own devices, he will lose every system and military asset before the year is out. Our enemies aren’t weakened by his authority, they are relieved and emboldened. Aside from his looks, Aegon was not and will never be a good King. He is cruel, vicious, arrogant and utterly incompetent. So to save our skins, I propose we replace him immediately and leave his sorry carcass in a coma. That way he is unlikely to cause more disasters.”

Well...it had the merit to be blunt and to the point.

“And who do we replace him with?” Aelyx sarcastically demanded to the Greyjoy. “Thanks to the prophecy obsession of King Rhaegar and the general incompetence in our forces, all the other Targaryens are out of reach and claimants or guests in enemy systems. The few doppelganger who were employed have disappeared the Seven only knows where. And even if we miraculously found one that we could pass as Aegon, this double wouldn’t know the very first thing about the war situation or the politics going with the role. Not to mention the minor problem his mannerisms and his accent would reveal him as an imposter to the first person he gave a command.”

“There’s Jacaerys.”

Thank the Father Above, he had only been pouring the cognac in his glass, not drinking it, otherwise he would have spat it on the conference table in an instant.

“Theon, if it’s a joke, it’s not a very good one. Unless you have emptied a few wine and liquor bottles before meeting us, you must agree that Aegon and I are not exactly presenting a deep familial resemblance.”

Maybe it was different a century and a half ago, but since the reign of Aegon III, no Velaryon had married a Targaryen, and thus aside from the Valyrian traits, Aegon and he absolutely didn’t look like siblings. Even the colour of their silver hairs and the shade of their purple eyes were slightly different.

The first noble of Highgarden or King’s Landing would notice the deception in mere minutes, plastic surgery or no. And that was if they were lucky. If they were not...

“The Lysene genetic companies have retroviruses that can do the job.”

Amusing, wasn’t it, how a simple conversation was going ten millions of kilometres beyond the betrayal point?

“If it goes wrong, we will have lost our senior military commander *and* our King,” Aelyx shook his head in refusal. “And if we are caught using this kind of genetic technology, which I remind you, has been perfected for *genetic slavery*, we will all be hanged before this month ends.”

“That’s a good point.” Theon shrugged. “Unfortunately, I fear we are all going to be hanged anyway if we let the status quo deteriorate further...”