**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 hundred 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 304AAC, 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 301AAC 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.

For Forlorn was commanding the two greatest passed 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 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 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 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. “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. 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 send 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 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 it was 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 world gone. Gerion 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.”

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

*Fort Forlorn still stands*.

Gerion 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 22.09.290AAC, 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...”