**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...”

**Lord Eddard Stark, 13.10.300AAC, Nightfort System**

If anything, the first minutes of the battle had proven that in spite of being utterly evil and inhuman, the Others weren’t stupid and afraid to innovate.

“They must have spent the last decades building these scout cruisers,” Halys Hornwood commented. “And they lost eleven thousand of them against our three first defence lines!”

Quite often, the Lord of House Hornwood had excellent ideas and Eddard was happy to support his assumptions. But today in his opinion his subordinate was in the wrong.

“I disagree, Halys.” The Lord of Winterfell said quietly.

“My Lord, judging by the time and money we take to build a scout cruiser!”

“Ah, but these are not scout cruisers.” This was the problem, in the end, when you didn’t fight a human enemy. “You are assuming that because they have the tonnage and the energy signatures of a scout cruiser, this...this ‘Ramming-class’ revealed by the abominations share a lot of characteristics with our smallest warships. It does not.”

“I am afraid I don’t follow you, my Lord.”

Eddard made a gesture in direction of the tactical display, where black dots were coming like a sea of malice out of the Eye of Woe.

“It is rather simple, when you think about it. We build scout cruisers for a multitude of purposes. Escorting supply convoys, scouting ahead of our main battle-squadrons, increase of the anti-missile envelope...we build scout cruisers in order to have units fulfilling these roles. But you and I know for certain the Others don’t care about these things, except maybe if it can increase the number of corpses they will harvest and return against us. No, what they want from these expendable scout cruisers is to cause the maximum of damage in a battle where we sit on the defensive. Therefore, it is rather prudent to assume they will have accorded the minimum of technology and resources to these units. They will also in all likelihood not embark a single Other aboard, Lord Karstark is right to support this view. Do not think about a conventional scout cruiser. Think about the equivalent of a largely defenceless frigate, with a huge jump engine, crude tech-sorcery to feed their blue lights, and a powerful bomb inside which will have enough power to make impressive holes in our defences. And they crew it with fifteen-twenty wights to make sure we will never be able to board one and capture it.”

“It’s...” Halys Hornwood was livid and Eddard couldn’t blame him. “It’s an alien mentality.”

“Yes,” the supreme commander of the North was forced to acknowledge. “But really, it would be completely idiotic for the Enemy to understand the fantastic potential of throwing corpses against the Nightfort defences and to not build ramming-purposed warships to magnify this exploitation. Every wight they ‘sacrifice’ this way is a member of their malefic race they won’t have to send into the thick of this battle.”

Yes, the Other commander may have tactical flaws, but it was not blind where casualties were concerned. Good news, the Enemy couldn’t have an infinite Legion of Doom with millions of dragons and tens of millions ice warriors like the one which had fought during the Fall of Pyke. Bad news, his forces were going to have to endure the battering of a competent space commander and the unrelenting ground assault of millions of wights to beat this limited number of Others.

“Still, it appears their Ramming-class scout cruisers have been nearly wiped out in the first minutes. Jory, what does Lord Karstark say about the rest of the Other fleet?”

At this moment, the super-battleship Ice serving as his flagship and the core of the Northern fleet were more than six million of kilometres away from the Breach, and naturally it impacted severely their ability to observe with their own sensors the battlefield.

“There are still many squadrons emerging from the Eye, my Lord. So far, it looks like we have two hundred and fifty-plus Tyrant-class Cruisers and three Dragon Carriers. The latter have not launched at the moment we speak. They appear to be accompanied by over four hundred-plus Free Folk starships, including three Arks and 9 Barges.”

The former Free Folk warships – he was going to give the men and women who had lived Beyond-the-Wall the courtesy of qualifying their hulls as such – were largely inferior to his most conservative predictions. Thanks to the regular interrogations of the Free Folk’s quartermasters, the Northern Navy had been able to give him a rough estimate of what they had lost, and this was more in the thousand-plus range. Obviously, the Others, sorcerers or not, had not the capabilities to tow and move all these ships to the Breach – assuming a lot of them had been repairable in the first place.

Eddard was not going to succumb to a naive optimism. The absence of the Dragon Carriers in great numbers and the Carrion-class slaughter ships, not to mention any super-battleship or special unit like the Star Killer, was significant enough. The scouts and the probes had reported at least thirty ships of the line covering the Breach on the other side.

“But none of the Carrions have yet appeared on the battlefield.” He spoke aloud. “Until whatever abomination commanding the enemy fleet sends them into the fray, we will not commit our battle-line. The ships of the line and the armoured cruisers stay in reserve.”

“My Lord,” the cold voice of Lord Bolton coming from the relay three metres away from him told the Stark this strategy was not one which was going to be winning popularity acclaim in the minutes to come. “Unless the cold has addled their brains, the Enemy is going to throw its Tyrant-class cruisers against our own, while the wildling ships filled to the brink with wights will assault the Nightfort. Our casualties are going to rise at a stupendous rate if we can’t count on the support of our heaviest capital ships.”

This was a good point, but not one he had not envisaged. Unfortunately, the only credible alternative was to engage in mass the thirty-two ships of the line and their missile-superiority armoured cruisers in the inferno of battle while the bulk of the enemy remained nowhere to be seen.

Somehow, Eddard suspected the jaws of death would not take long to close if he did this error.

“Our cruisers will have to stop this assault themselves. I will detach a battlecruiser squadron and two divisions of heavy cruisers to Rickard, but I can’t afford to intervene until the full fleet of the Others is committed.”

“Our chances to hold the Nightfort in these conditions are under average, my Lord,” Halys Hornwood had a gift to unveil in pleasant terms the unpalatable dilemma the Northern forces, Eddard reflected. Somehow, the Lord of Winterfell suspected Jon Umber was using a far more vulgar and direct language when he spoke with his staff and crew.

“I know. But between losing the Nightfort and sending our most powerful fleet into a certain death trap, the survival of the Northern fleet win every time.”

It would not be easy to stomach, but Eddard and Maege Mormont had discussed from the very moment he had arrived on the Wall the possibility of losing the planet. This was why, by a curious coincidence, none of the powerful armoured mobile formations and the elite Marines divisions save one had been assigned to it. The core of the five million-strong garrison was Night’s Watch and many...undisciplined companies the trade and military accords with the Essossi had opened up. In the last weeks, several vocal opponents to Mance Rayder among the Free Folk noted for their rabid anti-Westerosi – though they call it ‘death to the oath-breaker kneelers’ in their own tongue – had been added with their warriors. They could be expended and sacrificed against the Others. The fleet he was commanding could not. If he lost these ships of the line and armoured cruisers, the jump points and the secondary systems of the Northern Sector would be wide open to an abomination offensive, and the systems he was supposed to guard and protect would be decimated in short order.

Several capital systems would manage to fight back and resist for months like Winterfell, but their resistance would be in the end be crushed. As long as the Enemy had corpses and hundreds of Ramming-class scouts to expend, the North would be forced to retreat step by step until nothing remained but some citadels surrounded by billions of dead and under orbital fire from horrifying freezing cannons.

“However, since they have been so obliging to send plenty of their standard cruisers so deep in our territory, I think we can take the risk to even the odds a bit. Activate the GUS Mark XI platforms of the Umber echelon. And tell the Greatjon I don’t want a single projectile remaining in his old ammunition depots!”

“At once, my Lord!”

Maybe it would convince the Others they were succumbing to panic. Maybe it would not.

There was only one thing which was sure. The wights and the Others were really, really not going to love what awaited them in the Nightfort citadels.

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

The skies were burning and it was beautiful.

Explosions were happening every second. It was raining starships and shuttles’ debris over hundreds of kilometres.

Human starfighters fought to the death the enemy’s improvised ramming planes at speeds where the single mistake was fatal. Since the average black brother had gone to his metal mount with the certainty he was going to die and the content of a vodka bottle in the stomach, mistakes were rarely long in coming.

“Ah...did you really think it was going to be that easy to crush all resistance, oh Night’s Sword?”

The anti-orbital and anti-flyer guns were promptly decimating this assault like the first two which had been attempted respectively two hours and one hour ago. Thousands of small comets were crashing into the planet, each a sign the heavy batteries the North had loaned for an indeterminate duration to the Night’s Watch were massacring wights without them being able to return the favour.

It was glorious. The hundreds and the thousands of animated corpses under the control of the sorcerers were crawling and running out of the destroyed carcasses that had been their transports, only to run into gigantic trenches that thousands of hours of effort and unsubtle machinery had transformed into killing grounds, as they were directly into the sights of the field artillery and the automatic laser guns.

Every ten minutes, bunker-buster bombs were released and eradicated the greatest concentrations of undead. Plasma landmines were detonated, removing from existence in blue-red lights the defeated and pathetic meat shields which had once lived Beyond-the-Wall.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! That is total war! Intensify the fire of batteries C and I! Tell batteries D to F to slow down! We are going to let the Others believe they are going to be able to gather their death hosts on the plains! But the wights are digging their own graves in the middle of our killing grounds!”

And everything proceeded according to the ground. Pulverised by the implacable and relentless fire of the plasma batteries and fusion warheads, everything from light cruisers to tiny starfighters was landing as fast as possible to disgorge tens of thousands wights.

But once on the ground, the few Others realised quickly they had just changed one bloodbath for another. Their wights were just useless when it came to climb walls which were more than one hundred metres tall and protected not only by artillery but also landmines, napalm and a continuous fire of hundreds of thousands laser rifles.

Mockingly, Euron began to whistle as best as he could with his tortured lungs *Balon goes to war*, a bard’s tune which had been composed to ‘commemorate’ the exploits of his eldest brother.

“Ah, if only I had these guns and fortifications at Pyke, we would have made an ocean of corpses of the Tyrell and Lannister armies...”

Now with hindsight, the imbecility of attacking Lannisport with no military, diplomatic or economic support from any nation or faction outside the Iron Sector was even more foolish than he had believed.

“Ah, Tybalto,” he told his Master of Artillery. “My brother was indeed a complete fool. I don’t think we could have won the Greyjoy Rebellion in 290AAC, but if Balon had been able to obtain some military supplies and resources from Winterfell, this war would not have ended in such a one-sided manner.”

The Braavosi coughed as they watched from the upper command room the destruction of what had been a long-disappeared Night’s Watch cruiser breaking in over a dozen parts and slamming several kilometres south in an ocean of ice, fire and vapour.

“If you say so, Commander. But this would have diverted fortification plans from the Wall, and this right now seems to me...ill-advised?”

Euron chuckled darkly.

“You have a point.” One rather lacking in ambition and greatness, but it was a point nonetheless. “How fare our magical defences and the Green Priests?”

“They are holding. So far, the horrors have been rather...shy about assaulting them directly. I don’t know if it’s your squire hanged by his entrails to the branches of a weirwood which has scared them...”

As ironic as it would be to discover it was the case, Euron had stopped thinking a decade ago he could be so lucky.

“No. While I will not admit it in the after-reports of this battle, our most ruthless and bloody-soaked orders do not come close to a tenth of the horrors the Others are able to unleash. They play with our corpses, use our bones as musical instruments, and there are tortures they inflict to high-ranked prisoners which would render you unable to sleep if I recounted them to you. No, the only reason they do not assault our defences is because they do not have the sorcerers on the ground to do so. They have squeezed millions of wights in these crippled wildling ships, but the numbers of White Walkers’ infantry is abysmally low.”

“They are just probing our defences,” the third member of their little assembly spoke for the first time. Honestly, Euron wished he had remained silent. Ser Mallador Locke had no humour and no passion for the finest things of war, and Euron was half-convinced Lord Jeor Mormont had sent him with secret orders to shoot him in the back at the first sign of disloyalty. Too bad there was no proof, though.

“Yes, yes. The Night’s Sword commanding this is ready to lose millions of wights, but the spanking Waymar Royce gave her less than a month ago made her prudent.” Or maybe it had been the plan of this abomination all around. The ‘Ramming-class’ scout cruisers proved that the monsters had not remained idle during their centuries of exile. “We will give up a few outer defences in a few hours. The cold demons can be baited and I intend to try. What a delightful spectacle they will create when we will introduce them to obsidian-core shells...”

And then a shadow fell upon the fortress, literally and metaphorically. A shriek and a roar shook the earth and the sky. The blazing debris multiplied and multiplied, and Euron gritted his teeth as he realised what had happened.

“One of these damned Arks was repaired to carry an ice dragon.”

And judging by how the plasma beams and the capital missiles failed to even reach the beast, it was not the runt of its generation. Certainly the rider of an important Other sub-commander, though not a Night’s Sword. It had not the presence in the aether to be one.

“Gentlemen, I suggest our plans need...amendments.”

“In what way?” Locke the Dour asked suspiciously.

“Oh, nothing you won’t be comfortable with.” Euron replied conversationally. “I just think it’s time to fill the trenches with acid and detonate a few neutron bombs...”

**Lady Maege Mormont, 13.10.300AAC, Nightfort System**

Taking the command of the citadel of Black Direbear would have felt like a demotion and an unforgivable insult to plenty of Generals, but Maege had long learned Lord Eddard Stark was not doing anything without reason.

The minor fact he had nominated her for this particular fortress when the others were given to the forces of psychopaths, rapists and murderers of the Night’s Watch and the Essossi sellswords was even more a clear indicator that whatever plan Euron Greyjoy and his fellow monsters wanted to follow, it was not the one her liege expected the defenders to realise.

She had been right.

Her command area was isolated and extremely distant – five hundred kilometres westwards of Crow’s Peak in the middle of the Sundeath Mountains – from the eight other citadels but unlike them it had no Old Gods’ Priests to magically attract the attention of the monsters and there was not a single location where one could land-crash shuttles and starships in relative safe conditions in proximity. The Others who had tried to contest this assertion had not lived long enough to report their mistake, and neither were their wights.

The slopes of the high peaks and the lower mountains were at this very moment burning from the pyres of the wights and others types of undead.

“So far, we are producing more ammunition than we expend in our limited counter-attacks,” she told her second.

“I want to say we can hold for a year or two,” replied Helman Tallhart, “but the moment the Enemy will have finished dealing with the Ironborn and all his murder-packs, they will come here. Especially when we will trigger the warheads of Crow’s Peak and Defiant Watch in their faces...”

Maege grunted in approval.

The simple truth, ultimately, was that the North couldn’t afford to send millions of men to die on the icy and desolate mountains, valleys, steppes and empty plains. All the high commanders of the Northern Navy, Fleet and Marines were aware of a certain number of facts. Fact one: even with the ‘Free Folk’ bolstering their numbers, the Northern population remained under thirty-five billion, and with nearly a billion serving in the different frontline branches or supporting them in garrison and supply duties, there weren’t that many reserves to fill catastrophic losses. Fact two: while the Nightfort itself remained in an ideal location to stop cold, pardon the pun, any Other attack, it had been abandoned for too long and reoccupied for less than a decade. To defend against a wildling assault, it would have been overkill. To repulse the horrors coming, it was dreadfully insufficient. Fact three: supplying, arming and reinforcing millions of men at the same time was stretching the Northern quartermasters’ abilities to the breaking point.

Much had been done in the last decade. In fact, compared to the situation a decade ago, the ground-based order of battle Lord Jon Umber and she had managed to keep supplied, equipped and ready to exterminate the wights was downright miraculous.

Unfortunately, many of these men were Night’s Watch, which meant they were more likely to throw their weapons down and stab a dagger in your back the moment the walls were breached than truly fight to the death against the White Walkers’ corpse-servants.

“The question is which fortress is the most likely to fall and how long it will take.”

Helman tapped a red dot on the holo-map in front of them.

“I think it will be the Steel Steps.” The Master of Torrhen Square said.

“Oh?” Maege allowed herself a rare smile. “Are you sure this is not your distaste of the Freys playing a part?”

Her second in command’s laughter echoed across the fortress, attracting curious glances from her Marine staff for a few seconds before they returned to their duties.

“Maybe a little,” Helman conceded. “That said, already three times today the wights have managed to reach the ramparts, and they fight barely a third of the wights assaulting Crow’s Peak or Defiant Watch.”

Maege caressed the handle of her vibro-axe while reviewing the figures and the stream of awful alerts coming from the Steel Steps’ citadel. Helman was right, she was forced to acknowledge after ten minutes. The garrison of Riverlanders ordered to protect this bastion was wasting far too much ammunition on secondary targets. Their killing grounds were inefficient too. And the less said about their communications’ discipline and their hierarchy, the better.

“You will certainly be proved right in forty-eight hours.” That was according to the pessimistic timetable how long these poor soldiers had left to live. “The weasels are the symbols of every problem we discover in the ranks of the Night’s Watch.”

The Northern forces had discovered to their sorrow in 291AAC and 292AAC that contrary to what had been thought previously, a large-scale conflict in Westerosi space was not good for the Night’s Watch.

The recently defeated Ironborn had been the most obvious problem: murderers, rapists, pirates; these three words were perfect to describe the dark crowds which had flocked to the banners of Balon Greyjoy. But there had been another movement underneath, which had proved somehow worse in the long-term: the so-called ‘loyalists’. These troops were essentially formed from the broken divisions and corps the Starks, Arryns and Baratheons had captured and sent to take the black before the Peace of Maidenpool. Many of them to this day believed the Starks had broken their words, that they should have been repatriated back to their home planets.

They were morons.

Yes, there had been an accord like that signed with the Targaryens. But in exchange, the dragon-less snakes had been supposed to give back the Northern, Vale and Storm troops which had surrendered to them since the opening of the hostilities. Since Aerys and his executioners had made sure everyone knew they were torturing and burning their prisoners, the exchanges had been non-existent. The Freys and their accomplices of the Crown Sector had remained where they were.

“At least this war will see the extermination utter and complete of House Frey.” After what Davos Seaworth had done to the Frey Fleet and the Twins, surely the weasels had to be nearly annihilated by now, no?

“Undead or not, the demons of the Long Night can’t tolerate Walder’s progeny. It is known.”

Three seconds later, alarms began to scream, and then the main tactical display suddenly announced a general communication of Lord Stark to all ground commanders.

And it was not good news.

“The Tyrant-class cruisers continue to be used as a covering force, but the Dragon Carriers are moving in your direction. Prepare for dragon-slaying operations.”

Helman swore several impressive curses a few seconds later.

“Let’s see the positive side, the Enemy is coming to us...”

**Euron Greyjoy, 14.10.300AAC, Nightfort System**

As far as he could remember, Euron had always hated ‘fair’ fights.

The very notion of this insipid term had disgusted him the first time it had arrived to his ears. It reeked of the so-called ‘chivalry’ and ‘honour’ the Reachers, the Westerners and all greenlanders pretended to follow, but abandoned when it was suddenly inconvenient for them.

There were fights where both opponents had more or less the same equipment and weapons. Clearly, it was stupid. A duel or a battle where you had only fifty percent of winning was a duel or a battle where your preparations had failed abysmally.

There was no fairness in this galaxy, just the screams of the prey which had failed to evaluate properly the true costs of war.

If an enemy slapped you on the right cheek, you didn’t wait for him to slap you on the left cheek too. You punched him straight in his face, broke his nose, and when he was raising his hands to assess his injury, you drew a blade and cut his throat.

It removed one enemy from the list of persons wanting you dead and warned the rest you were definitely a predator that would not go without a fight.

The problem, as he had noticed in the last hours, was that the Others didn’t believe in fairness either. The evidence of this philosophy was seven hundred metres-long, had claws and fangs taller than him in his dark battle-armour, and was attacking the ramparts with devastating ice-magical hell bombardments.

For the average mortals, it was known as a dragon.

“Where are the hypersonic missiles?” He barked as the beast made a fourth pass above his eastern ramparts. “I ordered them to be fired three minutes ago!”

“Err...we don’t know, Lord.” Tybalto Virys admitted, holding his hands and showing an expression which was as far removed from brash confidence as it was possible to be. “The silos were under heavy guard at the Site...”

“I know very well where they were supposed to be stashed!” The former commanding officer of the *Silence* roared. “The real question is why I was not informed they were under attack if they had a clue the Others had discovered their base!”

“I...I have no excuses.”

“Indeed you have not. And with over a third of our artillery gone and torrents of wights climbing the walls, our defence strategy is compromised. This young dragon has secured air supremacy for the Enemy and the first breaches in the outer walls will appear soon. The same strategy will be used to break through our inner defences. Unless we find a solution in the next hours, Crow’s Peak will hold for seventy or eighty more hours.”

It was, needless to say, absolutely unacceptable. Euron had not gone into this war only to be involved as a mere footnote in the prologue.

Euron had an urge to strangle the Braavosi and call it a day. But apart from a short moment of satisfaction, it was not going to get him a lot of advantages. Just to begin with, he would have to find a new Master of Artillery.

Outside, a dragon roared and the citadel shook, despite the impossibility of it. Damn this sorcery, non-humans shouldn’t be able to wield a power which was denied to him.

“I presume you have a plan, since you have not taken your laser pistol and shot yourself.”

“I have,” the Essossi answered positively, fortunately for him. “As capital warheads have been denied to us and trying to eliminate wights with chemicals is an exercise of futility, I propose we escalate.”

“Continue,” he ordered, interested by the sound reasoning of Tybalto.

“By means that are confidential, I was able to contact some...admirers of my former activities a couple of months ago. And I received certain ‘recipes’. The...substances were originally paid by certain...interests in Essos, should an urgent need for crowd-control become necessary.”

Braavos would never have funded such efforts, and the Sealord would have the head of any officer trying to experiment with programs targeting civilians. It was likely it was for Pentos. The Magisters of this Free Planet had kept their slaves, despite their constant denials on the subject.

“Why do you think it will work on the wights or dragons? The first are dead, no correction, they are undead and un-breathing, and the latter are not normal animals.”

“Because a warlock of Qarth himself was paid to combine the...ingredients of the ‘recipe’, and its incredible potency will give us many hours at the very least. It was called the Bone-Ripper.”

The very fact that Virys had not warned him before today he had that weapon and the schedule of this ‘revelation’ were all Euron needed to be sure this weapon was highly volatile, utterly illegal in every human nation from the North to Asshai, and as likely to kill his forces as those of the Enemy.

But the Long Night was here. And when this conflict would end, there would be the victors and the lost, and the Crow’s Eye would ascend once more.

“Unleash it.”

**King Joffrey Targaryen, 14.10.300AAC, Dustonburry System**

Sometimes Joffrey wondered why they were organising councils of war in the first place. There was zero percent of chance the general strategy and the outcome of the debates hadn’t been decided beforehand. Logically, hours were going to be wasted acknowledging the directives and commands of his grandfather.

The entire affair was a farce, and if anybody found it amusing, it was the Old Lion and no one else.

Imagine the throne room they were all gathered into. And yes, it was a throne room. No conference room had ten ruinously expensive carpets covering the floor.

A rectangular marble table was occupying the central alley, and over twenty-five seats were disposed on each side. Raised by an elevation of three steps, the two golden thrones were dominating the assembly. Everywhere his eyes watched, it was only gold-red banners, gold, silver, platinum, priceless artworks and expensive objects from Essos and beyond. The number of gemstones was truly uncountable. The mass gold and rare ore which could be found there would be largely enough to buy a city or two, or to cancel the debts of a lightly-settled planet.

It was, by all accounts, the symbol of the Lannister power.

It was also an insult to him and several millions men and women.

The thrones were the most visible example. By tradition and royal etiquette, the throne of the King was to be alone in the dominant position. But no, there were two of them, and while Joffrey had not tried to compare them, he could not shake off the feeling the seat of the mighty Lord of Casterly Rock was slightly taller and larger than his.

The banners were another bad sign. The Lannister lions were dominating everything, outnumbering his dragon banner something like five to one. It was unsettling, and not only for his royal pride. There were millions of soldiers and spacemen in the Western fleet which were indirectly sworn to the Lannisters and their banners were nowhere to be seen. Crakehall and Brax had cracked the Oakheart defences of Dustonburry at serious cost in blood, warships and resources. House Jast was not authorised to be part of the Lannister Strategic Council. Nobody below the military rank of Lieutenant-General and Vice-Admiral was authorised to enter. And by a curious coincidence – he had checked before coming – all of the participants belonged to Noble Houses or were higher in the nobility hierarchy.

Specialist of the Western internal politics or not, the list of the men present – there wasn’t a single woman on the super-battleship – was particularly interesting in revealing where the Old Lion believed his power was.

House Lannister had the biggest delegation, of course. Without counting his tyrant of grandfather, twenty out of fifty seats were occupied by Lannister officers. First above all was his grand-uncle Grand Admiral Kevan Lannister, the eldest of Lord Tywin’s brothers and his Chief of Naval Operations. He was accompanied by Admiral Damon and Stafford Lannister as well as several secondary-branch cousins of Casterly Rock and Lannisport. The non-Lannister highborn had Admiral Leo Lefford and Lord Lewys Lydden. It was a lot of Admirals, and Joffrey often wondered if there weren’t some problems with the Western system of promotions.

For the Army, there was Field Marshal Damion Lannister, the Chief of Planetary Operations and top commander of the troops occupying the systems of Old Oak and Dustonburry. He was accompanied by Lieutenant-General Lucion Lannister and other golden-haired officers that were sure to be first or distant cousins of the Lannisters of Casterly Rock. Quartermaster-General Lord Garrison Prester was the senior non-blonde representative in this delegation, by virtue of being the extorter-in-chief of the Western conquering machine.

It was hardly a highly-classified secret to say all these men had tied their fortunes and their future to the victory of House Lannister. Not to his crown, no; after spending the last month close to them, Joffrey knew no one would do more than raise an eyebrow if his grandfather decided to throw him out of an airlock and crown his younger brother Daeron instead.

Tywin Lannister wanted the prestige and the power he had enjoyed decades ago at King’s Landing, and this time he didn’t want to stay the shadowy throne behind the King like he had done for his genitor’s sire.

“Two days ago, Lord Bohemond Dunn realised the error of his ways and bent the knee, recognising our cause and our struggle just and legitimate. The system of Dunn has recognised the incompetence and the false promises of House Tyrell for what they are! One more system is breaking its chains and abandoning Aegon the Monstrous!”

The cheers were perhaps twenty percent genuine, and while the smiles were well-rehearsed, the boredom underneath was evident. By now, the Dunn news had spread throughout the fleet more for more than twenty-four standard hours, and unless you were dead drunk during that time, the whispers must have reached the lowly private 3rd class’ heads.

“Favourable terms have been given to Lord Dunn for remembering where his allegiances truly lay.”

Joffrey didn’t roll his eyes, because as close to Lord Tywin as he was, there was no way his ‘Hand’ wouldn’t notice it.

The terms the Lord of Casterly Rock had asked for to Bohemond Dunn were outright robbery. The food, fuel and depots of Dunn were going to be transferred to the Western Army and Navy in order to decrease the pressure on the convoys and other logistical lines of the forces involved in the invasion of the Reach.

That Lord Dunn had only accepted them after his outer defences were broken and one of his orbital stations with forty thousand people aboard were murdered told everything there was to know about them.

They were better than death...but the moment House Lannister had not an armoured boot on the throat of Lord Dunn, the civilian transports would begin to suffer ‘schedule conflicts’ and ‘supply difficulties’.

“With the reinforcements we have just received, the repaired units of the last battles and the enthusiast recruitment in the liberated planets, our fleet and our army will be stronger than ever. As such, I think it is time to redeploy our forces once more and prepare the great offensive that will force Highgarden to unconditionally surrender.”

Yes, technically the Lannister space forces were back up to the strength they had before the attack of Old Oak. The Warrior only knew how, Ser Kevan and the other Admirals had managed to find more ships to fill the holes created by the enemy Reach Admiral. It had been a shock, admittedly. The entire Western order of battle he had been authorised to see was consisting of seventy-five ships of the line.

It had just been revealed as a lie. The Lannisters had not sixty-two ships of the line – like the Crown Admirals had believed – or seventy-five like they had told to their bannersmen. They had sent sixty again, and five were now mission-killed and three on their way to the dry docks of Casterly Rock were they would need at least a year of reparations. Ser Marbrand had ten of them at Wayfarer’s Rest guarding protecting their frontier against the resurgent Stark-Tully alliance. And according to Lancel, four or five had just materialised from shipyards that had been supposedly closed down a decade ago at the Rock.

This was more on the levels of eighty-plus ships of the line...and his grandfather had not even bothered apologising for lying to him.

“Admiral Lefford! How soon can our first cruisers begin to probe the Highgarden jump point?”

“We only need five days, my Lord!”

Five days? The fleet would never be ready so soon! Most of the replacements for the casualties they had suffered at Dustonburry had arrived today! It was already bad enough for the spacemen and the operators of the scout cruisers to the ships of the line, but there were warships which had never learned to manoeuvre in a squadron to replace the crippled or destroyed hulls.

Being in the reserve and not being to do much else than listen to the complaints and the reports of the senior captains had told him that much...

“Is there not any way to shorten the deployment by a day? The Tyrells are reeling from the Harvest Graveyard, and I do not wish to let them catch their breath...”

What?

“I’m afraid not, my Lord,” Damon Lannister replied with an expression so devoid of surprise the probability of Lord Tywin having told him when and how to intervene was close to one hundred percent.

‘Regrettable,” said coldly the Master of Casterly Rock like he was not aware the recent major battle in this very system had cost him nearly the twice the losses he had been able to inflict to his enemies. “But if it is the best you can do...”

“My liege, five days or six days won’t change the disastrous situation of the Reach,” Lord Lefford announced in one of his famous bombastic speeches. “The Reach as we speak is exploding apart. They are terrified by the casualties they have suffered in forty days, and their economy is coming closer to bankruptcy every day. Yes, they can repair their damaged warships faster than ours, but no shipyard, not even the famed Arsenals of Braavos, can erase catastrophic damage on a capital warship in mere days.”

“We have also the confirmation a violent and destructive offensive against King’s Landing has begun,” Lewys Lydden added on his seat directly to the right of the Lord of the Golden Tooth System. “Dozens of ships of the line are too far away to counter us, and that’s assuming they still exist as we speak.”

“You are confident you will be able to neutralise their battle-line before they try the sort of roll-and-flank manoeuvres they used at Dustonburry, then?” Kevan Lannister’s mild reproach was friendly, but there was a shard of durasteel below.

“My Lord, the enemy Admiral, who my spies believe to be Baelor Hightower, has played all his cards and is now his back against the wall with no tricks left. His starfighters are losing three times out of four in dogfights and flight assaults. His crews are demoralised, the Reach has for all intent and purposes three small fleets trying to coalesce in a big formation, and without Mace Tyrell, the Lords and Knights have no obligation to obey the commands of his eldest son.”

Joffrey wondered how Stafford Lannister was able to recite this analysis. He must have learned it by heart several hours ago.

“And their fixed defences are totally obsolete,” Lieutenant-General Lucion Lannister snickered. “Like at Old Oak and Dustonburry, the moment their fleet is withdrawing or pulverised, we will be able to destroy the forts or force them to surrender on our terms.”

It was all fine and good to mock the Reachers and Aegon, Joffrey wasn’t going to disagree with that. Especially where Aegon was concerned, the insults and the humiliations the ‘Crown Prince’ had been a bitter poison to swallow for years. But before mocking the defences, maybe Lucion should visit a bit the Western Sector. Crakehall was a bit more defended than Old Oak was before the Lannisters unleashed their ships of the line on them, but not by an enormous factor. Yes, the defences of Casterly Rock and Lannisport were modern and extensive, but apart from the Golden Tooth, Deep Den and the Banefort, it would not be that difficult for any Reach fleet to counterattack...

“The real unknown is the number of starfighters they can throw at us,” concluded the Field Marshal of House Lannister after several exchanges on the incompetence and the lack of perspicacity of the Reach Navy.

“I would not worry too much,” Stafford opened wide his arms as if the triumph had already begun. “Hundreds of carriers are no more thanks to the incredible tactics of our best ally the Fat Rose. They will more likely have only their platforms to launch once or twice, and then their pilots will have no choice to eject.”

The gathering ended three hours later, and nothing intelligent or wise had been said. The Lannister fleet would attack the Highgarden System on the 19th, the Reach was one battle away from complete collapse, and soon the might of the West would be able to turn against the River Sector and subjugate all resistance.

Joffrey didn’t open his mouth. What would have been the point? They had decided everything without him and he was only a Lannister-Targaryen serving as a fig leaf for their ambitions.