**Black Crusade 10.2**

**Cadia Stands**

*You aren't my brother.*

*You say you remember the black sands of Isstvan V? So do I.*

*I never forgot the day your treachery was revealed to the entire galaxy and my Legion was destroyed. I never could. Eidetic memory is a cruel curse in that regard.*

*You know what the most terrible thing of the entire affair is? Of all the Legions involved in that great treachery, learning yours was* *among their number is what surprised me the most. The oath-breaking of Curze didn't give me pause. The Night Haunter may pretend he did it because the future was inevitably set to lead us where we stand, but that is a lie. Konrad did it because it was far easier to slaughter innocent and defenceless people when they can't mount a bloody resistance against his Legion of assassins and torturers. And he always loved carnage for carnage's sake.*

*The other Legions are of the same ilk, with almost no exceptions. Perturabo introduced decimation and the most insane methods of attrition warfare to a force which was already nicknamed 'Corpse Grinders', and then had the gall to wonder why people were ill-at-ease around him. Alpharius was so fond of secrets we could never be certain if the individual speaking to us was a Space Marine masquerading as him or the real deal. Mortarion delighted in his hatred of psykers and modelling the interior of his ships into morbid catacombs. Angron...he was broken long before the Imperium found him. I'm sure he still blames our Father with what little intelligence is left in him, but the truth is that the arena where he made his bloody debut was the end of his potential and his capacity to feel an ember of friendship and brotherhood. The Nails made sure of that.*

*Horus was the worst. Guilliman and the Khan often lamented in the ruins of Terra how the corruption of Chaos had ruined everything, but this is a point where I vehemently disagree with them.*

*Horus didn't need Chaos to do horrible things to his brothers and the forces under his command. I saw what he really was concerned about at the Battle of Gate 42. Glory. Power. Fame. Recognition. Maybe our Father judged his oaths and two centuries of loyalty would be enough to compensate for this mountain of arrogance he carried within his heart. If so, he was woefully mistaken.*

*Horus was the worst...before you toppled him from that pedestal. Horus was nothing but a puppet when he fell to Chaos, I see it clearly now. You weren't.*

*I was surprised. And yet as I read the archives of the time between my discovery, my analysis was quick to discard this initial judgement. You were given a superb instrument of war, a Legion whose record had not been marred by five defeats. In all aspects, be they gene-seed compatibility, tactics, resupply, ship boarding operation, the Seventeenth Legion was as adaptable and formidable as the future Ultramarines, if not more so.*

*You could have been the paragon of the Imperial Truth. You could have been Malcador's replacement. You certainly had the administrative capacity and empathy gene-forged into you. You could have been a far better candidate for the title of Warmaster. You certainly weren't keen on butchering the forces of your allies for the greater glory of your Legion.*

*But you only cared about Gods. Gods here, Gods, there, Gods this, Gods that. And when people come to remind you of the consequences of your treacherous deeds, your reaction is always the same.*

*You flee.*

*You say I have failed twice.*

*I think you have somewhat edited your memories of our fights. In each case when you saw your death coming, the truth was revealed.*

*When the time comes to choose between your survival and accomplishing the will of your so-called Gods, the former always takes priority.*

*I will get a third chance to end your life. I do not need precognition powers to know that.*

*I can't kill an entire Legion by myself. But I do not need to. The Imperium still stands, quadrillions* *of men standing guard across the stars, loyal to their oaths, inheritors of the dream you deliberately crushed because atheism wasn't to your liking.*

*The power of Octarite and Chaos Undivided is waning. The pacts and promises you made are worth exactly as much as every pact the immaterial abominations ever swore, which is to say, nothing.*

*You think you have planned for everything. You think your insane gambits can force your problems back into nonexistence if you shout and scream enough.*

*You are wrong.*

*And at the end of the path, this Black Crusade will be remembered as your folly, and no one else's.*

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"*Whoever pretends a game of Regicide or any variation of chess is a good preparation for war will be demoted one rank, at minimum. And if anyone insists, make it two or three. The conduct of military operations isn't a game. The* *forces on both sides of a battlefield are never equal in numbers and capabilities. You rarely have the opportunity to look the enemy's supreme commander in the eye before you kill him. And above all, you certainly don't have to limit yourself to a limited count of actions before letting him play his own strategy. Repeat after me: Regicide isn't war. In a true conflict, a competent leader will always try to keep the enemy off-balance. Whatever the results of the first moves, the opponents, be they xenos, traitors, heretics, or worse, must always react to your plans. Don't cede initiative. Don't let them catch their breath. And never, ever, give them a fair fight*." Basileia Taylor Hebert, 308M35.

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"*When you launch a Black Crusade, be aware the first hundred betrayals aiming to remove you from supreme command are already in motion behind your back*." Warmaster Abaddon the Despoiler, M34.

"*There won't be any betrayal in this Black Crusade. How could there be, when we never trusted our gallant allies for a single second*?" Legion Master Drecarth the Sightless, M35.

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"*Soldiers I speak with almost always hold the view that the Great Heresy was the most devastating conflict ever fought in Imperial history. And to be fair, that isn't completely wrong: the scale and military* *might of the belligerents make mockeries of most military operations fought after the Scouring. But in terms of sorcery, ferocity, massacres, percentage of casualties and plenty of other aspects? The centuries after His entombment have not been free of horrors. Even after the Arch-Traitor was slain, the times of the Great Crusade where a few hundred Space Marines could bring an entire Sector into submission* *were long gone. War has changed over the last millennia. Planets are militarised to an unbelievable degree compared to the standards set in late M30. The Imperium has changed. Nowhere is this more evident than in the battles which were fought at the onset of the 5th Black Crusade, the Volga Encounter, and the Cadian Hell..*." [CLASSIFIED] [CLASSIFIED] [CLASSIFIED]

"*Welcome to Cadia. Welcome to war*." Anonymous Cadian Shock Trooper greeting Armageddon guardsmen, 310M35.

"*If they liked Terra, they are going to love Cadia*." Chapter Master Argentius of the Silver Skulls to his battle-brothers, 310M35.

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**Segmentum** **Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Cadia**

**Kasr Tyrok**

**8.188.310M35**

Thought for the day: Death is the only answer.

**Warmaster Ender Trevayne**

"And the Cadian 788th is now officially reinstated as a Penal Legion."

"Good riddance," the Armageddon-born Warmaster would have not voiced it if Waldersee was present, prickly Cadian honour and all of that, but the Governor Primus wasn't here. "How many of the Merovincha Sentinels did we lose?"

"Seventeen, Warmaster," the saddest thing about the heretics was not their unbelievable ability to look at themselves in the mirror and determine nothing was wrong, in Ender's opinion. It was their belief the galaxy found their brand of irony funny. "It seems the world where they were training some of their officers on has been corrupted without arousing the Holy Inquisition's suspicions."

"If we survive this year, the purges are not going to be minor. Where does this leave the northern approaches of Kasr Tyrok?"

One of the Colonels of his staff coughed in embarrassment.

"Provided we don't deploy some of the Cadian reserves, we are going to have a large gap in the Septentrionalis-Tyrok line..."

One look at a map was enough to know this time, it was the Archenemy who had made a colossal mistake.

"Then leave it be."

"Warmaster? Lesson one of the Tactica Imperialis is not to leave the kind of defensive line we created unmanned..."

"Assuming you live long enough to reach High Command," the victor of the Puerto Crusade retorted while walking around the room and trying to assimilate the maximum amount of data at once, "you will realise that Lesson one of the Imperial Guard is to do whatever it takes to destroy your enemy and accomplish the objectives Holy Terra gives you. Victory excuses many things. Failure does not."

Many men looked unconvinced. That was why Ender Trevayne had not been happy with his assignment: save the thirty-five regiments he had brought with him to Cadia, none of the other forces had fought with him in the last several years.

And so while with most of his subordinates he would have explained his reasoning weeks after the battle, this time he gave away some bits of his tactical thinking.

"Kill-Zone One is behind this gap, and Battle-Maniple Delta of Legio Astraman is ideally placed to flank them if they attempt to throw everything they have into it. One way or another, they will lose."

He had other reserves and assets ready to transform the heretics into mincemeat, but the Cadians unaware of them weren't ready to hear a full list.

"Situation in space?" The Warmaster of the Imperium of Mankind turned to the Navy's representative.

"We lost the five flotillas guarding the approaches of the Warp anomaly, Warmaster. Five Light Cruisers, twelve Frigates, and twenty-two Destroyers. They have broken through the first two minefields and now are pouring everything they have into the breaches. Auspex readings' accuracy is extremely low, but we have full confirmation of eight Apocalypse-sized Space Hulks, two Abyss-class heretic Super-Battleships, ninety-eight Battleships, at least three dozen Grand Cruisers, and over five hundred Cruisers. We have no proper count for the non-capital ships units...they are simply uncountable...and our probes are destroyed by Heldrakes the moment they come too close."

And that was just what the Imperial defenders could see. Ender was ready to bet everything he possessed – and with his successes and his triumphs, he possessed a lot of things – that the heretics had not shown them half of what they had brought to the battlefield.

"Tell Lord Admiral von Bismarck I recommend he launches the fire ships against the enemy Raiders."

"Warmaster? The plan you agreed to was to use them against the largest units of the Traitors! And they have Space Hulks!"

What was it with these Cadians to never shut up and transmit his orders without a protest?

"Plans change," Ender Trevayne replied calmly. "The Space Hulks are on a collision course with Cadia, and given how many close-quarter monsters they have around them, our first waves stand no chance of reaching them. We must slaughter their screen first. The sooner we do that, the more vulnerable their Battleships will be to our feints and other manoeuvres."

"Lord Admiral von Bismarck isn't going to be pleased." The second Navy Commander's expression was best described as mutinous.

"I'm not asking him to be happy. Holy Terra does not request that we be happy. It demands of us to defend Cadia and kill all these heretics. Pass on the orders."

The man didn't nod or show any sign he was going to obey his command. However, his eyes began to bleed and his skin got darker. Add how he was whispering to himself, and you had the perfect pict to warn you what happened when one's faith in the God-Emperor wavered.

"Commissar." The irony was that, one day, it may very well be him who was subjected to this fate. "It seems there are a few men who could benefit from a fresh reminder that failure to obey the orders of a superior officer is grounds for meeting a firing squad."

"Indeed, Warmaster. We are going to take care of the problem."

Two minutes later, close to fifty men were on their way to an ignominious demise, and several corpses were already being dragged out. Ender brought more talented officers from the many regiments present on Cadia to compensate for the losses.

"The fire ships are advancing, Warmaster."

"Good. Prepare a Beta-Gamma-pattern bombardment to follow in their wake. The priority targets are the warships below Light Cruiser-tonnage and all heretical machines with starfighter-equivalent signatures."

"This is going to leave the enemy capital ships more or less completely untouched," with a certain amount of displeasure, Ender saw Governor Primus Andreas Waldersee had arrived. Immediately, the Cadians who had continued to be...mildly uncooperative...were suddenly working with alacrity. What a coincidence.

"I know. But one does not hunt the apex predators when there are clouds of carnivorous flies to swat away first."

The Armageddon officer tried to extrapolate what he wasn't seeing, the potential plans of the Archenemy, and how many warships had already arrived in the Cadian System...and while he had far from a perfect picture, Ender knew the enemy was already too committed to evade what the Mechanicus and the Navy Starforts had prepared for their damned souls.

"Send them straight back to hell."

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**64th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**DRECARTH**

'**THE SIGHTLESS'**

'**LEGION MASTER'**

**TRAITOR SPACE MARINE**

**COMMANDER OF THE LARGEST SONS OF HORUS WARBAND IN THE SEGMENTUM:** **'THE SONS OF THE EYE'**

**TRAITOR FLEET COMMANDER**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**REWARD: 250 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 4 PLANETS, 2 LUXURY SPACE STATIONS, MEDALS OF COMMEMORATION FOR KILLING A SPAWN OF THE ARCH-TRAITOR, TITLE OF SHIELD OF NECROMUNDA AWARDED, ETC...**

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**Outer** **Cadian System**

**Carrion-class Heavy Battleship *Vox Dominus***

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

Unlike the majority of his Legion, Paristur had been present at the Siege of Terra.

He had seen the unprecedented firepower Horus' armada and Battlefleet Solar had unleashed against each other.

The bombardment of today fired by the slaves of the False Emperor reminded him uncomfortably of the Siege, not that he was going to admit it aloud.

"Forty thousand torpedoes! Forty thousand torpedoes inbound!"

"Nova Cannon signatures! Fourth Illuminated Squadron! Evade! Evade!"

It was like the outer defences of Cadia were a crown of lasers and explosions. Despite the relatively large distances of this engagement, despite the problems suffered by any mortal technology, the mortal defenders had not deluded themselves to believe they could get away with half-measures.

Paristur would approve, if it didn't mean more complications for the Grand Plan.

"Fire ships incoming, Lord Apostle. Lord Kor Phaeron insists our Cruisers must protect the Space Hulks before-"

The first hull packed to the brink with promethium, high-grade explosives, and Pantheon only knew how many tons of plasma warheads chose this moment to detonate...right in the middle of a pack of Idolator Raiders.

When the daemonic device replacing the auspexes finally returned to near-functionality after purging a Mechanicus scrambler-attack, it would have taken a lot of imagination to tell there were fifteen Idolator Raiders in that area of space a minute ago.

"They aren't going after our Space Hulks," Paristur snarled angrily. "They are going after our Escorts!"

"Isn't that good news, Lord?" His Coryphaus asked. "I mean, the orders of Blessed Lorgar urged us to preserve our Battleships for the battles after breaking through the Cadian Gate."

"The incoming torpedoes and their long-range guns won't seriously hinder a Battleship, be it of the Infernus or the Carrion class," Paristur growled, "at worst, our shields will be knocked out for a few minutes, and since the Gods shroud us from their pathetic augurs, whatever risk we take is low-key. But our Escorts are far more fragile, and we can't afford to lose all of them at the very beginning."

Yet that was exactly what was happening...somewhat of an exaggeration, but not a complete lie. Iconoclast and Idolator Raiders were blasted apart in considerable numbers, flotilla by flotilla. As the Grand Armada progressed into the Cadian System, the carcasses and devastated hulks of hundreds of lighter starships stayed behind forever, when there was that much left of them.

"The dogs of the False Emperor still continue to hide behind the fixed defences of each planet," a Khorne worshipper scowled, his fangs obviously red and black. "Cowards."

Both Dark Apostle and Coryphaus shook their heads in a silent pitying expression. Whatever their faults, the mortals garrisoning Cadia were hardly fleeing from the battle.

No, it wasn't cowardice. It was...discipline. Discipline and a great deal of adaptation. Erebus had supposedly been able to steal the plans and preparation maps of Cadian High Command, but as always, either the Vile One had lied, or someone had modified them before their assault began.

"We have lost one hundred percent of our fire ships' first wave."

"The second?" The Word Bearer's Dark Apostle didn't stop staring at the Fortress World on his blessed daemonic device.

"Seventy-seven percent spent. We will be clear of the minefields in five minutes." The horned green-skinned mutant clearly hated announcing bad news, but went ahead after a moment. "The Battlefleets of the False Emperor are still in orbit above the Fortress Worlds."

"Total losses for our Great Host?"

"Sixty Iconoclasts, twenty Idolators, and nine Cobra Destroyers. We have also lost four Transports, eight lesser auxiliaries, and-"

"Second launch! Second launch, new torpedo signatures coming from Mechanicus Barques! Twenty thousand torpedoes!"

"Shit," his Coryphaus muttered, "How by Nurgle's holy bowels did they manage to transfer so much ammunition to Cadia without us being aware of it?"

"We were too confident our spies in the Cadian High Command knew everything," Paristur admitted reluctantly. "Send the new decoy-hulls of Sota-Nul ahead, they will be our torpedo-sponges...it's what they were built for, after all."

The environment created by a Warp Storm was downright fascinating in countless aspects. Yet, for all its advantages, it had many drawbacks as well. One of the biggest obstacles which were known to everyone was that many metals' and alloys' properties from the Empyrean were not stable outside of a Warp Storm. That was why the pyramid of Magnus was so extraordinary: it had not imploded, liquefied, or outright mutated into something unable to cross the stars the moment they had arrived at Cadia, while so many other hulls did.

Still, it had been decided these short-lived assets could be of use. It was they who were going to be expended in great numbers at Cadia. It wasn't a question of size: the Space Hulks fell into the same category, as their Warp Jumps and speed were properly-

"Lord Apostle, the Space Hulks are changing course again...against the Dark Council's orders. They are once again on a collision course with Cadia!"

"The Sons of the Eye warships are separating from the Grand Armada! Two Cruisers of the 1st Great Host have been boarded by the Sons of Horus!"

"Night Lord raiders are breaking formation! I repeat, dozens of Night Lord assault ships are breaking formation!"

Paristur emotionlessly watched the carnage continue for several minutes, as eight of the heaviest military assets in the history of military warfare were now escaping from the authority of the Seventeenth Legion.

"So Drecarth the Sightless has decided to betray us."

"His disinterest when we spoke of how all the Noctilith of the Cadian Pylons could be transformed into Octarite was a bit suspect," his Dark Acolyte grinned.

"Now, now," Paristur smiled. "It is not like we spoke of it in front of him about it about...how often was it?"

"Eighteen times?"

"Yes," the veteran of the Siege shook his head. "It should be around that number. And it's not like we sent him some of the most treacherous cannibal warbands of the Eye, or the most bloodthirsty and rebellious Eighth Legion warbands we could find."

"You forget the special ammunition and the support of the Legio Krytos he wouldn't have been able to secure by himself."

"I haven't forgotten," Paristur chuckled as the eight Space Hulks and a small but still relatively impressive 'desertion fleet' continued to accelerate towards the lynchpin of the System's defences, utterly ignoring the orders of their betters to turn around.

"Curse you, Drecarth," Paristur said aloud as laughter echoed across the bridge of the *Vox Dominus*. "Curse you for your timely and anticipated betrayal."

**High** **Orbit over Cadia**

**Apocalypse-class Battleship *Sun of Splendour***

**Lord Admiral John von Bismarck**

"The Space Marine psykers report these Space Hulks are packed with uncountable hordes of mutants and fell beasts, Lord Admiral."

"In this case, a boarding assault of the Angels of Death to detonate melta warheads deep inside is clearly unwise," John von Bismarck murmured to himself.

It was obviously not what he could call welcome news. One of the best weapons the plans had been relying upon to bleed the heretics before they reached Cadia was blunted before it was even unsheathed.

On the other hand, one didn't rise to reach the title of Lord Admiral in the Cadian Sector without cheating a lot. Those who didn't...let's just say they rarely survived to celebrate their twentieth anniversary.

"We will need to strike the Space Hulks one by one with the fleet while the orbital grid diverts their attention," the Master – after the God-Emperor – of Battlefleet Cadia Primus proclaimed in a thunderous voice for the sake of everyone on the bridge. "Is the rest of their massive fleet still on a course for Saint Josmane's Hope?"

"Yes, Lord Admiral," his senior auspex officer replied. "As far as we can monitor them...our scout ships are taking enormous losses. The heretics have brought a lot of their eternally-cursed Daemon Engines...especially the Heldrakes."

John internally grimaced. Connections forged in a century of service had allowed him to learn a counter for these infernal contraptions was entering mass-production on Mars and several famous Forge Worlds, but so far and unlike a lot of other deliveries, the Imperial Navy had so far not received any.

"We will have to use our starfighters and Destroyers in close-interception operations, then."

"This is going to cost us a lot of our ability to surprise the enemy, Lord Admiral."

Yes, it would. Unfortunately there wasn't-

"Admiral, priority message of Archmagos Al Jaza-Omega!"

John von Bismarck grunted in annoyance. This had better not to be another of these 'requests' which were impossible to approve, politically or bureaucratically...

"Lord Admiral!" The good thing about having so many mechadendrites and a ugly box of metal instead of a face was that no one would be able to pass himself – or herself – as the Archmagos and steal his – or her – identity. "The planetary shield is ready for activation. Praise the Omnissiah and the Sacred Laws of the Machine-God!"

The Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Cadia didn't hesitate a single second.

"You can power up the shield immediately," the grey-haired man permitted. And if they didn't, nothing would be able to save their skins from his wrath.

"Acknowledged. Diverting power...beginning of activation in twenty seconds."

The bridges of the largest naval loyalist fleet in the Cadian System were silent as the countdown was made. Excitement mixed with anxiety.

But as the countdown reached zero, a massive shimmering field of blue energy began to cover Cadia below the warships' keels, protecting it from the first long-range probes the Traitors were hurling at them.

The shouts of approval were particularly loud and satisfying. John had to congratulate the Tech-Priest – though he was more than four years behind schedule – but the morale improvement was worth it. And the tactical advantage it gave him was nothing to sneeze at either.

"All right. Gaston, please contact the Black Consuls and the other Space Marine Chapters. With the planetary shield and orbital grid to guard our rear, we have an opportunity to take the fight to the enemy."

"If we cross the T like you no doubt plan, Lord Admiral," his chief of staff pointed out quietly, "some of the heretics are going to get through."

"Some will get through no matter what we do," the veteran officer of the Imperial Navy whispered back. "But we have to destroy these Space Hulks before they're trapped in Cadia's gravity well. And as long as the shield is active, we don't have to stay in high orbit like sitting ducks to provide counter-missile fire."

It was too much reacting to the heretics' plan for his taste, but unfortunately it didn't change the reality. These Space Hulks had to be stopped. John didn't know if whatever monster in charge wanted to ram them against the planet or to simply throw the hordes into a crash-landing assault, but they mustn't succeed.

"Astartes Command approves your suggestions. They are with us."

"Then let's go kill the heretics."

Despite all these years where he had watched parades and fleet manoeuvres, John von Bismarck couldn't help but feel amazed at the sight of the massive fleet which moved in a single purpose right now. Battlefleet Cadia Primus had been heavily reinforced, reaching twelve Battleships, protected by thirty-six first-class Cruisers, and more than three hundred Frigates and Destroyers. They had twenty-four Mechanicus Cruisers and five Bombardment Arks that the Tech-Priests had committed. And then there were the Space Marines. The Starfort of the Black Consuls stayed above Cadia to coordinate the defences, but twelve Battle-Barges, thirty-four Strike Cruisers, and hundreds of Escort ships added their firepower to the Navy.

"We are going to see what the heretics have in the guts. Target the Space Hulks *Calamity's Tear* and *Decay's Heart*. Order is given to every capital ship to divert an additional twenty percent of all energy output to the weapons."

"By your order, Lord Admiral!"

The minutes passed. Millions of men ran on thousands of Imperial warships to load and prepare the batteries to fire. The Space Hulks never stopped accelerating.

"Give them a Cadian welcome."

"OPEN FIRE!"

And the largest salvo of firepower ever launched by a Cadian fleet was fired into the void.

**The** **Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**Necron Battleship *Barge of the Stormhawk***

**8.190.310M35**

**Overlord Simut**

At last the stars had judged his moment to rise above all was here. Simut was savouring the end of his long period of tedious boredom when his Royal Warden Archimedion Phetos intruded into his throne room.

"My Mighty Overlord, we have-"

"I am in a pleasant mood today, Warden. I want my titles, all my titles, to be proclaimed before the glory of the battle is seized by my hands."

Archimedion recognised his mistake, prostrated himself for a long time, before being allowed to rise.

"Oh, Mighty Stormhawk Commander of the Winter Stars, Ruler of Anthothekis and Akapris, Blade of Szarekh, Sunlord of the Dynasty, Rising Light of the Stars of Heloki, Lord of the Eight Seals, Lord of the Stars, Eagle of Victory, Grand Overlord-General of the Rear-Guard Fleet, Phalanx-Master, Blood of the Silent King, One Hundred and Tenth of the Supreme Tomb, Suzerain of Eternity. Fleet matters require your presence."

Simut was satisfied, and thus deigned to teleport onto the bridge of the *Barge of the Stormhawk*, and thus illuminate the bland place with his immense presence.

"What has troubled you, Warden?"

"The fleet-"

"**My** fleet." Simut corrected. You couldn't let servants and inferior creatures think they were in charge. It wouldn't do at all to let them entertain delusions of grandeur.

"Your fleet," Archimedion bowed in submission, "has discovered a field of exotic particles on the course decided by your orders. It is possible-"

"You decided to interrupt my cosmic meditation because you have noticed a few particles?" Simut wasn't annoyed anymore, he was furious. "What do you think the particles are going to do, corrode the hulls of our capital ships?"

"Mighty Overlord-"

"My titles!" Simut ordered.

"Blade of Szarekh, Stormhawk of the Winter Stars, Rising Light of the Stars of Heloki...it is possible that through a neo-fusion of several quantum principles, the enemy intends to detonate these particles with a yet-unknown ammunition. I humbly suggest we change course-"

"Ridiculous! You think the vermin is capable of reaching, of understanding, a sliver of the highest mysteries of the universe? Absolutely unconceivable!"

"But Lord of the Stars..."

"I am not going to delay my triumph because you are frightened by mere *particles*!" His apparatus uttered the last word with all the contempt he was capable of. "Can you count, Warden? Can you see the fleet surrounding us? Now that I can exert the authority my rank and my birth predestined me for, I have forty-five Battleships, supported by ninety Harvests and other escorts. I have over three thousand Doom Scythes waiting to be unleashed upon my command. We outnumber the enemy, and each of our ships is better than ten of theirs, and that's a very generous estimation on my part!"

"I...Rising Light, Blade of Szarekh...we have entered the particle field, I implore you...the enemy is firing, the enemy is firing!"

Simut watched the Warden in consternation. Truly Archimedion had completely lost his head. At this distance, the enemy would not even been able to touch them, and it wasn't like their pitiful warheads could-

But there was no trace of torpedoes or any long-range fire. The explosions were already happening, surrounding and missing his fleet by a vast margin.

"There is nothing to fear-"

And then, in a single blinding moment, the explosions resonated with the particles, and the entire field became a terrible void inferno.

The first escort ships and the larger capital assets were disintegrated in an instant.

"Teleport out! Teleport me out of-"

Simut never finished his sentence. The *Barge of the Stormhawk* blew up with all hands, and with it, the rearguard of the Throne of Oblivion perished.

**Battleship** ***Enterprise***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

Over the last ten years, several large libraries' worth of plans had been compiled by the officers of Operation Stalingrad to determine what the best method to destroy the reserve Necron fleet guarding the Ymga Monolith was.

Many of them undoubtedly were rather surprised right now, as their first arrow had effortlessly reduced this threat to cinders. By the stars of the Nyx Sector, Taylor certainly shared the sentiment.

Contingency after contingency had been prepared, elegant combinations of diversions and new weapons had been memorized and trained for by the billions of souls mustered for Stalingrad.

And in the end, the Necron commander had thrown his command straight into the zone where the saturation of the Kane particles was heaviest, meaning his Cairn Tomb Ships were at Ground Zero of what was a very fiery apocalypse.

"Fleet destroyed, my Lady," Gamaliel announced, and this was all the bridge and millions of beings needed to erupt in joy.

In less than ten seconds, the mood went from 'professional' to the kind of festive which was always a given fact when they celebrated the Sanguinala.

"Err..." even Kratos was lost for words, clearly. "Were the Necron auspexes malfunctioning? I mean they clearly decelerated at first..."

"I think there is a simpler explanation." Gavreel commented sardonically.

"And this explanation is?" her Flesh Tearer Champion inquired.

"The Necron commander was an idiot." The Sergeant smiled. "We all wondered why this fleet was never committed for all these years. Given how tough the shields of the Monolith are, there's no way it was merely the insurance a human commander would have desired. That leaves the stupidity of a Necron noble too connected to be fired."

"Unfortunately, we will probably never know for certain," the Forgefather of the Salamanders concluded as people cheered and began to sing various victory songs introduced after Commorragh. "I doubt there's anything left of the Necron databases. We went a bit overkill, with the benefit of hindsight."

"Hindsight is always good after the battle..." the Lady General commented, but she couldn't help but giggle after opening her mouth.

Two million kilometres away, there were the broken remnants of a Necron fleet. The largest Necron fleet ever recorded and fought by the Imperium, and they had annihilated it.

The plan had been methodically set, because while they had never dared hope of trapping the entire Necron fleet in it, the officers and Magi assigned to this part of the assault were professionals. Moreover, given how tough the Necron Battleships were, 'overkill' had been perfectly reasonable.

That's why there had been not one or two world-flame torpedoes already awaiting the Necrons in abandoned cargo hulls, but ten, and the density of the Kane particles had been twelve times the one they had prepared at Pavia.

And now like tens of millions of other eyes, Taylor saw the result.

The Necron fleet was a massive shambles of broken hulls, incinerated debris, and tarnished living metal. Maybe one or two hulls were intact enough to let the stars remember these had been true warships, but it was obvious there were no functional Necrons anymore.

"That's going to leave a massive hole in their order of battle, Chosen of the Omnissiah," Archmagos Sagami noted. "Losing forty-five of their Cairn-class Battleships has to hurt, no matter how fast their shipyards are at building their replacements."

"Yes," the loss of ninety-plus escorts, all Cruisers and Light Cruisers, wasn't going to be painless either. "Do we have an estimate on the number of Doom Scythes we incinerated?"

"No," the senior Tech-Priest aboard the *Enterprise* admitted. "There were a few hundred as close-range escorts, but the simulations predict with a high likelihood that the majority of their starfighters were still in their hangar bays when we caught them by surprise."

"Too bad, but I prefer knowing they are gone, rather than test their performance against our own starfighters," the human pilots were trained and experienced, but it was better to not suffer any losses when the opportunity presented itself. "Everyone! It's time to get back to work. The enemy has suffered a significant blow, but this system is hardly cleansed of enemies! We will be able to celebrate later...if you continue to fulfil your duties superbly."

Proof that motivation and the spirit of victory were better for the morale of the force than ten thousand lashes of whip, the men returned to giving their undivided attention to the bridge's stations, and the same scenes were repeated throughout the fleet.

"We got a free victory, my Lady," Diamantis began. "But in a way, I think it's going to have problematic effects. These Necrons aren't us, but I think a lot of their institutional arrogance is going to be broken sooner than we wanted."

"We must accelerate the pace of operations." Gamaliel half-translated, half-supported the Imperial Fist's declaration. "And it's best to ensure that after the losses they received, they never get the opportunity to replace them."

Some part of her disagreed with the statement. They were still very far from the Monolith, and they had plenty of 'special weapons' to incinerate a couple of Necron fleets with.

But the Monolith was still intact, its planet-shattering firepower untouched. At this point, it wasn't a question of actually causing it serious damage; Battlefleet Volga simply couldn't hurt it at this range.

They had to keep the Necrons reeling, mentally, if not physically. Like a long-dead American Admiral had once said, strike fast, strike hard, and strike often.

"My compliments to Lord Admiral Müller, and politely request that unless the Necrons reveal they have additional fleets nearby in the next five minutes, it will be time to launch Golden Fleece."

Kratos chuckled.

"I wonder how the Necron commander in charge of this disaster is going to react to Isley and his strike force..."

**The** **Throne of Oblivion**

**Overlord Sobekhotep**

"SIMUT! SIMUT! GIVE ME BACK MY FLEET!"

"My Glorious and Majestic Overlord, Simut is-"

"SIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIMMMMMMMUUUUUTTTTTT! GIVE ME BACK MY FLEET!"

What had possessed him to give that megalomaniac cretin a fleet command?

How could he be wrong to such degree?

How would he face the ancient memories of his ancestors when he played their engrams inside him?

Where would he find the strength to face the Silent King, He Who Reigned Forever, and announce this cataclysmic humiliation to him?

"Simut!" His wrath faltered and for the first time Sobekhotep thought he could once again feel the emotion of sorrow. "Where is my fleet? Give me back my fleet!"

"My Lord," Sihathor intervened, "Simut is dead. His fleet...I doubt anything short of a C'Tan's full power can make it combat-capable again."

Sobekhotep tried to calm himself. To think rationally and emotionlessly. To not think about that idiot, that moron, that useless pile of-

No, no he wouldn't think about that imbecile again.

"Royal Warden, heed my words."

"I hear and stand ready to obey, my Mighty Overlord."

"From this moment on, I cast out the so-called Stormhawk out of the Szarekh Dynasty. Let his name be forever forgotten. Let the rolls of the Eternal Vaults ritually destroy his name, his deeds, his lineage, and his prerogatives. I will name new Overlords for the worlds of Anthothekis and Akapris. All titles which were given to the irredeemable cretin must be withdrawn and assigned to other Overlords and Nemesors...if they choose to accept them. I won't blame them if they don't accept them."

"Yes, my Mighty Overlord."

"Now speak of the current military operations."

"The green vermin are attacking Overlord Thakmatar in a suicidal onslaught. His Assault Fleet is winning slowly but surely, despite some impossible teleportation breakthroughs from the brutish lifeforms. Unfortunately, this means he will be unable to immediately support the Throne of Oblivion unless you are ready to order a fighting retreat."

"I am not." They had finally cornered the vermin-beasts, it was out of the question to let them go on a rampage again and resume a years-long war. They no longer had the time to accept these unsatisfactory choices. "Tell Thakmatar that the moment he has exterminated this vermin fleet, he is to turn around and strike the rear of these new enemies which have cost us our rearguard fleet."

"Yes, my Mighty Overlord."

"Recall the Escort Fleet and the Replicator Forges to support the Throne. I know the level of strategic metals and resources is far from I wanted, but we are going to need a new fleet."

Again, he didn't add, as he wouldn't rage aloud for now. He was the Dust-Maker, and his vengeance would bring new levels of terror to the hearts of the vermin races.

"Prepare our phalanxes for a major offensive. Prepare all teleportation engines for a first-rank assault on the new fleet of the vermin who so insolently challenges us. I want all Reaper and Lightning Arc batteries ready to fire once I give the order. They have destroyed one of our fleets? I will make them rue this day for the rest of eternity."

New determination filled his metallic body. Yes, the battle was far from lost. For all the humiliation they'd suffered, the Throne was undamaged. The shields were intact. No enemy had touched the sacred living metal the Silent King had ordered him to protect with his life.

"Where is Zahndrekh?" The Szarekhan Overlord asked once he was sure his wrath was under control. "He is-"

Sihathor brutally turned his head in reflex as enemy signatures flashed in the northern sector of operations.

"Enemy attack! Enemy attack against the Replicator Forges!"

"By the darkness of the Nightbringer!" Sobekhotep shouted, feeling his anger soar at the slow reactions of his servants. "What are you doing? Counterattack! Counterattack immediately!"

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Cthonia-class Battleship *Triumph of Isstvan***

**8.192.310M35**

**Legion Master Drecarth the Sightless**

The space around Cadia was a hurricane of slaughter and explosions.

Somehow, it failed to raise Drecarth's spirits. A large part of it was without question because most of the ships doing the dying were ones which had chosen to place themselves under his command.

"Useless spies," the infamous Legion Master spat, "how did the bastards sent by the pious Seventeenth manage to miss the construction of a *fucking planetary shield*?"

The Tech-Priests of the Mechanicum had the good sense to move away and work upon the daemonic devices they had installed aboard the *Triumph of Isstvan*.

"This is a big problem," acknowledged Second Captain Remian Sakart, continuously trying to scratch the part of his power armour where tongues and spikes were growing.

As if to echo his words, the massive Defiler Cannon mounted on the Space Hulk *Warp Spear* hammered the shimmering blue field of energy...without causing any damage. The retaliation of Battlefield Cadia, however, vaporised a non-negligible percentage of the hull's mass.

"The Space Hulks aren't going to play their roles."

"No, Legion Master," First Captain Lan Makeddon had not removed his helmet in decades – he may not be able to, Drecarth suspected – but no visual confirmation was needed to guess his vicious smile. "But then the Mechanicum always demands a lot and gives little in return."

"Maybe," Sakart grunted, "anyway, we have to neutralise this planetary shield. As long as it is there, our Space Hulks are forced to enter the range of the Starfort owned by the bastard sons of Guilliman...and while we do that, the dogs of the False Emperor are biting into our flanks!"

His Second Captain was right. Of course, there was no need to be a great space commander to correctly describe the situation.

"For how long can the Space Hulks hold formation?"

"A few days?" Makeddon moved his massive armoured shoulders in a sign of ignorance. "We have already lost the two smallest, and two others are taking heavy damage. But their Battlefleet is still intact. We will have to commit our warships against them, and they have a lot of Astartes waiting for us, according to our sorcerers."

"This," Sakart bit back, "looks like a very bad idea. We have exactly five Battleships to go against their twelve, and our meek cousins have so far stayed out of the melee with all their Battle-Barges. If they commence a two-pronged attack-"

"We are going to suffer," Drecarth recognised. "But we have no choice but to accept a full-scale fleet battle now."

"We do not have the Astartes to go fighting on the planet and launch boarding operations against the Consuls and the collared beasts of Leman Russ simultaneously. We have only eight thousand Space Marines, not eighty thousand."

"We are going to descend on Cadia," Drecarth commanded. "Our Chaos Auxilia and sorcerers will have to delay our feckless cousins while we win this war. We are also going to use a Space Hulk as a formation-breaker against them, this will force them to reorganise and dither while their mortals cower in fear."

"By your orders, Legion Master. How do we proceed?"

On the hololith, a small flotilla 'allied' to the Night Lords – a polite term to explain they shared the same outlook on life as the damned sons of Curze – was pulverised by an apocalyptic Lance barrage. No one from the Sons of the Eye's leadership cared.

"We have three main targets, and so we will launch three Speartips to tear the mortals and whatever dogs they have managed to gather around them apart. First, we need to decapitate their forces, since the Seventeenth was unable to do a proper job once again. Makeddon, this will be your duty. Kill the False Warmaster they have. Bathe in the blood of the Cadian Generals. I want Kasr Tyrok in ruins before the next sunset."

"It will burn, Legion Master. Our slaves will build a mountain of skulls of the mortals who dare to march against us."

Drecarth pointed at a second location on the representation of the world their enemies had taken to calling Cadia.

"Psychic scrying or not, everyone agrees the generators which allow the planetary shield to exist are here. Our first information told us it was also a command headquarters for several of their missile silos. It needs to be destroyed, if we are to gain uncontested orbital supremacy. It will be your job, Second Captain, to raze their walls and protect the Mechanicum Priests until they can properly convert the technology to serve our purposes."

"None will survive," Remian Sakart promised. "They will cry for their False Emperor while we slaughter their regiments and fortresses."

"As for myself," the leader of the Sons of the Eye announced, "I will take command of the spearhead of the spear cast against the Pylons of the Elysian Fields, and once the defences are broken, transform all the Noctilith we can seize into Octarite. With this, the will of the True Warmaster will be honoured. The galaxy will know the Sons of Horus live...and we will retake our rightful place at the forefront of the war to topple the False Emperor. Let the Galaxy Burn!"

"FOR THE WARMASTER! FOR HORUS! LET THE GALAXY BURN!"

**Cadia**

**Kasr Tyrok**

**Governor Primus Andreas von Waldersee**

"So they are launching a multi-pronged Dreadclaw Assault."

"Yes," Andreas replied. It would take a blind man to miss it, after all. "Judging by the first projections, they are going to land on the Tyrok Fields and several of the holes you left open. They're also trying a landing south of Kasr Kraf and east of Kasr Cazador. Likely to threaten the shields' energy sources and the major batteries of the 6th Army Group."

"I agree with the former, I disagree completely with the latter," Warmaster Ender Trevayne announced after staring at the animations materialising on his command hololith. "Their main force is going after the Elysian Pylons, exactly as the Silver Skulls warned you."

The Governor of Primus didn't have to ask for a representation of the defences said Space Marines had spent the last years building to know a headlong assault upon their defences was a very, very bad idea.

Then again, so was a direct assault on Kasr Tyrok. The Warmaster had refused to garrison Space Marines near it, but the forces present had immense fortifications and siege weapons with which to protect themselves.

"Why would they do something so...reckless?" And it was insane, even by the standards of Traitor Space Marines.

"Because they are the sons of Horus, of course," Andreas grimaced hearing the cursed name.

"You shouldn't speak that name."

"Why? The Arch-Heretic was slain by the God-Emperor, and unlike many monsters we face today, he won't come back. Anyway, using my clearance, I learned many interesting things about his Sons. Aside from their arrogance, the most pertinent information I was able to discover was their fixation on decisive surgical strikes targeting the enemy leadership."

"That is...interesting," Andreas conceded. "But I doubt the Holy Inquisition was happy with your inquiries."

"They weren't," the younger officer in the standard uniform of the Armageddon Steel Legion confirmed with a rather startling lack of concern. "But it's not my fault if they are unable to give us the proper information we need on the frontlines."

"Any information about the Traitor Legions is dangerous."

"The same can be said about *denying* the existence of the Traitor Legions," the rebuttal was clear, "did you know that once, when I was a mere Lieutenant, an imbecilic Acolyte wished to kill us all because we'd seen a Traitor Marine from afar?"

"And what happened to the Acolyte in question?"

"I don't know," the Warmaster smiled with a pious expression. "A few Sergeants told me they were going on a walk with him, and I never saw that Acolyte again."

Andreas swallowed heavily. What a lovely way to learn the Warmaster was likely under a death sentence of the Commissariat and the Inquisition at this very moment...and both organisations tended to shoot a lot of people once the purges were officially enacted.

"But back to the subject of our uninvited guests," the senior member of the Imperial Guard in theatre continued politely. "While they appear to be very tactically flexible, these heretics have been physically and mentally trained to locate the heart of the enemy command structure and tear it open as quickly as possible before going after another critical target the moment they're done with the first."

"It's not a strategy uncommon for the loyal Marines of the Adeptus Astartes." Andreas pointed out.

"Yes, but the Angels of Death loyal to the Golden Throne have limited numbers and therefore must adapt their strategy. The Traitor Astartes we see here have convinced themselves the decapitation strike is the only philosophy worth learning. Which is a mistake, especially on a world like Cadia."

"Why do you think so?" Andreas tried to not show his unease as massive conveyors landed on the Tyrok Fields. They were too small to contain Titans, but too large to be super-heavy tanks. Logically, these were Traitor Knights. The 1st Army Group was going to be on the receiving end of a fight, unless the Warmaster had dispersed a lot of secret assets Andreas didn't know of.

"Ideally, their 'Speartip' tactic must be directed at targets unprotected by void shields." The Armageddon-born officer explained. "When surprise is a critical factor, the assault must be won in a few minutes, otherwise the airborne assault is at risk of being cut off from reinforcements and supplies as soon as the transhuman shock fades. And they can't do that here, since their cultists failed to sabotage our generators. So they must land outside the Cadian Kasrs, secure their landing zones, break the walls, and go after us. That's not a single strike, that's an abomination of a plan."

"They still have a lot of Traitor Marines...and for this part of the assault, Traitor Knights."

"Eight thousand, if we count all three prongs of their assault," the Warmaster nodded. "They should have sent more, especially where siege-specialists are concerned."

Ender Trevayne stayed silent for a good ten seconds, before nodding to himself.

"They have advanced far enough. Now let's give them a proper welcome. And the anti-air guns can stop staying idle and pretending to be neutralised."

**Tyrok** **Fields**

**First Captain Lan Makeddon**

The first clue Lan Makeddon had that this new war was not going to be a one-sided affair were the two mid-sized holes which were punched into his personal Kharybdis Assault Claw mere seconds before ground impact.

The second clue appeared before he had made three steps outside of his transport: one of the Lucaris murder-machines lost its ion shielding before eating two or three rockets to its metallic 'head'. The Chaos-blessed Knight was not out of the battle yet – these walker suits were tough beasts – but all sanity was lost and it began to rampage against everything nearby – which included the Sons of Horus and a certain Kharybdis Assault Claw.

The third clue was the devastating artillery bombardment which caught them before they could take cover.

"I WANT THESE ARTILLERY OPERATORS BUTCHERED!" The First Captain screamed into his vox. "SONS OF HORUS! FOR THE WARMASTER!"

"DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR!"

"FOR THE WARMASTER!"

The warriors of the Sixteenth Legion charged the trenches where the pathetic mortals hid, and began covering their chainswords in gore as dozens and dozens of wretches fell beneath their blades.

After a few seconds though, Lan began to feel something was really wrong. Most of these mortals didn't even manage to shoot in his direction, even within the confines of a trench. And while he had no respect for the guardsmen of this planet, it was extremely unusual to see so many collars around their necks.

"Captain, forgive me for the question, but do the dogs of the False Emperor usually recruit mutants for their armies?"

"I don't think so, why are you-"

An enormous roar shook the battlefield, and at first the Son of Horus officer believed the Heldrakes had arrived in support...just before the trench began to burn in blue flames.

"OUT OF THE TRENCH! OUT OF THE TRENCH! CONTINUE THE ATTACK!"

But a new bombardment of artillery shook the earth, saturating the air and the battlefield, decreasing their field of vision to nothing.

And across the smoke, the enemy counterattacked.

Lan Makeddon at first laughed. Counterattacking? Against Space Marines? These guardsmen were going to regret it for the last seconds of their lives!

It took only three seconds to realise the problem.

"These aren't guardsmen!" He growled. "These are Skitarii!"

"And they have more artillery with them!" Most of it was too light to be a problem for Astartes, and the Plasma Guns were firing too far behind him...

"To cover!"

This warning was all they needed to reach the second trench, as draconic shapes came back and set the space between the two trenches ablaze, before releasing more rockets and other long-range projectiles against House Lucaris' forces.

"Since when do the Corpse Worshippers have Heldrakes?" barked one of his Lieutenants angrily.

"Apparently since today," First Captain Lan Makeddon replied hotly. "Damn it, that's why they didn't bother putting Space Marines next to this fortress, they had-"

The enemy artillery stopped firing. The Sons of Horus profited from the respite to slaughter a company of Skitarii and push the broken remnants into the burning trenches.

Five seconds later, the ground shook.

Then it shook more powerfully.

"Either this planet has a lot of earthquakes..."

"Or they have Titans the Seventeenth's cultists missed."

The strong eastern wind temporarily chased away a lot of the smoke and ashes of the battlefield.

And the Legionnaire who had once fought to breach the walls of the Imperial Palace gritted his teeth as a mountain-sized machine of war lowered its weapons in their direction.

It was more than thirty metres tall. Its arms carried weapons of war which could have hurt their warships in high orbit. It possessed anti-infantry weapons most super-heavy tanks couldn't be equipped with.

It was a Warlord Titan, and judging by the green paint, it was built by the Forge World of Graia. Meaning they had just landed in a kill-zone where Legio Astraman, the Morning Stars, and most of their Skitarii and supporting forces awaited.

"Tell Legio Lucaris to stop massacring our own Auxilia and worthless mortals," the First Captain of the Sons of the Eye commanded, "I have a bigger challenge in mind for them-"

Of course the 'not-Heldrakes' chose this moment to fire new missiles and explosive ammunition. The artillery resumed firing, plunging them into smoke and craters once again.

The Warlord Titan fired.

A hill covered in razorwire on their left disappeared in a phenomenal explosion, along with the fifty Legionnaires who had just taken it.

Then another shot impacted nearby, the shockwave smashing into him and tossing his armoured body into the air for several metres and onto his back.

It took him several seconds to rise to his feet, and more to feel confident he wasn't going to collapse. As he looked over the bloodied battlefield, a ruined signpole attracted his attention. It had been heavily mangled, but the Low Gothic inscription could still be read.

*Welcome to Cadia*

"I hate this damn planet."

**The** **Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**Replicator Forge Alpha**

**8.193.310M35**

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

The Necron elites were a challenge, even for an Astartes equipped with the Mark IX power armour.

Although challenge may be the wrong word. It had taken three shots of his Plasma Gun, five strikes of his Power Sword, and finally tearing apart the 'spine' of the xenos before trampling his head with his armoured boots before the broken pieces teleported away.

"Replicator Forge Enginarium secured. Jammers?" The Chapter Master asked, hoping the news was good on that front. He really didn't want to see what the Necrons could do with a few thousand reinforcements.

"All the jammers save one are active. Last activation to be confirmed in ten seconds...confirmation of activation. No teleportation of enemy units recorded. The Replicator Forge is ours, Chapter Master."

"Good. What's the status of-"

"Alert! The Necron Escort Fleet is changing course! They're coming right for our throats!"

"Strike Team Beta has been forced to abort their attack! They are abandoning Replicator Forge Beta!"

"The xenos fleet is launching Doom Scythes! Estimation: over four thousand." The Heracles Warden Scout's expression wasn't visible since it was audio-only, but one didn't need a hololith to know it had to be grim. "We were wrong. These capital ships aren't of the Cairn-class. They appear to be purpose-built carriers."

"Wonderful," Jeremiah ran to the command room they had improvised on the upper levels. "The tugs?"

"The adamantium claws will be ready in one minutes and five seconds. We will be able to make our own escape then."

"And the distance which will separate us from the Necron starfighters by then?"

"Hmm..." it couldn't be pretty if a Space Marine forgot his training and hesitated. "Roughly one million kilometres. Chapter Master, we don't know how far their Scythes' range is..."

"I can bet without taking great risks for my pay it is far better than any starfighter in the Imperium's arsenal. Not that we have them here to protect us." Sneaking through the Necron sentinels had required disguising the tugs as Ork wrecks and placing every Space Marine into stasis for a few hours. The metallic xenos weren't as incompetent as the Drukhari of Commorragh, unfortunately. "Can we recover the Emperor's Warbringers and our own battle-brothers?"

"Yes, Chapter Master. We should be able to join up with them in less than three minutes. The question is how we are going to escape with them. Our escape path is no longer viable."

That was the understatement of the battle. The miniaturised tactical map Isley projected in his helmet showed that Replicator Forge Alpha had somehow become utterly encircled in less than fifteen minutes by Necron Cruisers...Cruisers which weren't there before, of that he was pretty much certain.

"How did they manage it?" the Captain of the Iron Drakes sent to serve as his second rushed up as they walked between shattered Necron architecture and flamboyant towering structures blooming with green energy.

"They must have someone competent in command on their side."

"After one sent a massive fleet in the middle of a war zone where nothing could survive?"

"Well, if the law of averages remains true for Necrons, they must have someone very competent to compensate for the abysmal failures of the other," Jeremiah Isley joked before returning to deadly seriousness. "We can't stay here. And with the failure of the mission on Replicator Forge Beta, I fear the Necrons aren't going to hesitate for twenty minutes before transforming our ride into space debris."

"Lady Weaver insisted this 'Replicator Forge' was as priceless for them as it is for us."

"Yes, she did. But since we have placed jammers, our enemies won't be able to use their teleportation to retake it. For them, it means using transports and other assault troops. I have seen none of that in the Escort Fleet which is deploying against us. And Battle Group Volga is closing in on their flanks, destroying the last survivors of their outer defences. They can't afford to lose hours here, and they know it. The competent Necrons will know it is better for them to destroy this Replicator Forge than allowing it to fall into our hands. Not even an idiot could miss the fact Necron information made Golden Fleece possible."

"You're right," conceded the other Space Marine. "In this case, the only question which matters is how we are going to escape from this trap."

"Unfortunately, I don't think we have a lot of options," Jeremiah Isley unhappily admitted. "Maybe this Forge is able to teleport, but we don't know exactly how or if it's a process Space Marines can survive. Given how radioactive the Enginarium and everything are, I'm inclined to assume the answer is no. And even if it were possible, we would have to switch off our jammers, resulting in the Necrons pouring in thousands of their assault forces during the few seconds of the window of opportunity we would be granting them. No, there is only one path available to us. We order the tugs towing this Forge to charge straight into the Ork Graveyard."

"You realise this is properly insane, right? This Graveyard makes most asteroid fields look like a dream for any starship! And what the tugs are towing is hardly the swiftest or most manoeuvrable captured hull in creation."

"I know." Isley confessed. "But at least this way we have a chance. The Doom Scythes won't be risked by the thousands with the dangers of this new battlefield, and the longer we survive, the higher the likelihood the Necron commander will be recalled to support the Monolith against the Imperial Fleet."

"It is still insane."

"Our approach to the Replicator Forges was based on an old tactic of the Traitor Sixteenth."

"Is that supposed to reassure me?"

"Now that I think about it," the former officer of the Alpha Legion shook his head, "not at all."

**The Throne of Oblivion**

**Overlord Sobekhotep**

"Gather fifteen phalanxes and retake that Replicator Forge!"

"The secessionists are depriving us of the required time," the older Sautekh Overlord refused. "And you know the old proverb, Szarekhan Overlord, you can rebuild armies and fleets, erase the damage of ten thousand invasions, but you can't conquer time itself."

"We are immortals and have mastered the art of chronomancy!"

"Perhaps," the green lights serving as eyes of the Necron vacillated, either in confusion or disagreement, "but we still have lost time. And like the secessionists, our fleet can't be in two places at the same time. Many Doom Scythes have been lost in the pursuit, and I will need to commit others now that the Replicator Forge is hiding behind secessionist warships. The Escort Fleet must go on the offensive again if we are to destroy or recapture the lost Forge. And strategically, it won't change anything. The damage the Replicator Forge suffered in this desperate escape is considerable. The secessionists won't be able to use it this year to increase their numbers; one way or another the battle will be over before they have the opportunity to create a single starship."

"But after we win, we may spend decades locating the Replicator Forge they have just stolen!"

"First we must win against the secessionists," Zahndrekh remarked. "And that is hardly a preordained fate right now. The foe has certainly proved cunning against Simut."

"Never speak that name in my presence again!" The Dust-Maker barked. "And there is nothing to learn from this debacle, save that certain nobles are unworthy of claiming blood-ties with the Eternal Silent King."

"I do not share this opinion," the old Overlord immediately countered. "The...defeated Overlord was less than tactically wise in his decisions, but assuming he had done the intelligent thing and moved around the trapped space zone, he would have quickly noticed there were minefields flanking him before the secessionist fleet trapped him between the scythe of a long-rang bombardment and a shield of explosive traps."

"That is your opinion, I don't-"

"Hem, hem, hem." By the insect waves of Iash'uddra, how he hated that Cryptek.

"What is it, Sneferka?"

"I was just going to report that the minefields Overlord Zahndrekh supposed the existence of have been located. And there are a lot of objects spread across the area of space he indicated to us. It seems the enemy wasn't relying only on...the defeated Overlord's flawed skills to win this fleet battle."

Sobekhotep fought the urge to not disintegrate the 'Master of Despair' and every other Cryptek nearby. It took him a long time and more self-control than he wished to expend in this critical moment.

"Fine," the Overlord controlling the Throne of Oblivion grunted. "You were right. The trap was...more extensive than we initially thought. Now recall your fleet in support of the Throne. While you do this, you are ordered to shift the last Replicator Forge at our disposal into its maximal replication mode. Begin with our largest capital ships-"

"That is an extremely bad idea, Dust-Maker," Zahndrekh immediately disagreed before he had the time to finish his sentence.

"You lack the numbers the Rearguard Fleet had. Your enemy is going to have a significant superiority in capital ships."

"You Szarekhans always make the typical mistake of novice tacticians," the Sautekh commander insulted him. "It's always 'muster the biggest fleet', 'gather the greatest army', 'call the largest hosts'...no wonder you lost half of the battles in the first offensives against the secessionists."

"Excuse me?" Sobekhotep roared.

"The first lesson any General of note learns," the senile General continued, "is that each time you double the size of your forces, your tactical flexibility will be divided by a factor between five and ten. The only counter to this problem is to name skilled and extremely adaptable sub-commanders in charge of each squadron and phalanx...sub-commanders you don't have, I'm sorry to say."

The old Overlord's voice, unsurprisingly, was not apologetic in the slightest.

"What are your suggestions?" They had better be good, for he was tempted to kill both Cryptek *and* Sautekh Overlord now.

"Thakmatar feigns a fighting retreat to the Throne. At a carefully chosen moment, his fleet will adopt a Dakhapi-reverse formation, diverting the flow of green secessionists against the bird-themed secessionists. The two factions' extreme divergence of methods suggest a violent order-chaotic antipathy our forces will be able to take advantage, inflicting heavy losses on the green faction and creating weaknesses in the orderly order of battle of the other."

"Out of the question! I am not going to let these brutes get anywhere near the Throne when we have at last cornered them!"

"Don't let pride overtake your judgement like the Mephrit Nemesor of-"

"This isn't pride. This is basic security of our most vital asset! Now return your fleet in formation and activate the translation-beacons, your fleet needs to take over the rearguard duties."

"You are going to fall into another trap. Don't say I didn't warn you, Dust-Maker."

Sobekhotep cut the communication before he did something eminently regrettable...or not, it all depended on one Dynasty's point of view.

"Hem, hem, hem."

"Begone from my sight. Now!"

**Falchion-class** **Battleship *Hornet***

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

This was Dragon's first true military campaign in the company of Taylor since the Death Star – yes the stupid name was forever enshrined in collective memory – and all things considered, the golden-armoured parahuman was rather grumpy.

"It isn't the end of the world, Taylor," the Tinker consoled her 'boss' who was given a very good human-sized hololithic representation on her bridge. "We knew the Necrons considered the Replicator Forges the crown jewels of their Dynasty. It was to be expected they would present a more formidable defence than their conventional fleet did."

"It is not a 'more formidable defence', Dragon. It is like comparing night and day. The first Necron fleet commander ran into our first trap eyes open and got his entire fleet destroyed, something which cost him *forty-five* fifteen kilometres-long Battleships, I will remind you. The other commander sprang a trap on Isley, forcing him to choose a...radical course of action which seriously damaged the prize they seized. Staying impartial or not, these two opponents aren't playing in the same league."

"I am not disagreeing." The Lady Magos answered. "But we have to stay prudent and rational. And besides, it might do some good. The Heracles Wardens and other Space Marines were frankly somewhat overconfident after Commorragh and trashing several Necron Tomb Worlds. A tolerable failure may do them some good and force them to reform their doctrine and goals."

The same could hold true for the people who had ordered it, and this included the Lady General. By the way the insect-mistress narrowed her eyes, this wasn't missed.

"All right." The supreme commander of Operation Stalingrad conceded the point after several seconds of maintaining a stone-cold expression. "I can only hope your assessment that this is a 'tolerable' defeat won't bite us where it hurts before the end of the campaign. The Necrons still have a Replicator Forge, and that is going to complicate things. And the less said about our Astartes losses, the better."

"I prefer to look at it positively, personally. Since Isley and his force have taken Replicator Forge Alpha, even badly damaged, we have cut down their replication output by half. And assuming we can activate Case Typhon, we may soon be able to shut it down entirely."

The ruler of Nyx smirked.

"*If* we can activate Typhon...still, I see your point." The Lady General grimaced. "I would have preferred the first failure of the Heracles Wardens to be under other circumstances, however."

"They did their best," Dragon had seen the plan, and it wasn't exactly foolish. It had been optimistic in the opposition they would face, though. "I don't criticise their training or their approach, they really struck the Forges as they intended. And it's likely the presence of the Deathwatch wouldn't have changed anything."

"Maybe, but we can't afford a second try."

Dragon nodded. The assault had cost them twenty-five Space Marines out of two hundred involved in the entire affair. That was a twelve point five percent loss, and all had been permanent, as could be expected when you faced Necron molecular-disintegrating guns. Worse, half of the bodies were entirely lost, since the Astartes had been forced to evacuate Replicator Forge Beta in a hurry.

Five Iron Drakes, eight Heracles Wardens, and twelve Emperor's Warbringers had perished. Given that each and every one of these transhumans had been elite specialists, this wasn't a small loss in experience and skill.

"The most important thing now is ensuring the lesson have been learned and to correct our assumptions about the Necrons' leadership. They are far from defeated, and we need to play our best game, otherwise we are going to end up exactly in the same position as the Second Legion."

"We didn't exactly play with kid gloves the first time around," the still glowing parahuman – and how that was possible in a null-zone Dragon didn't know – commented politely.

"With all due respect, you did," Dragon said bluntly. "We should have placed all the specialists against Alpha, and sent the Flesh Tearers against Beta. It was a mistake to run after the two Forges at the same time."

"So bloodthirsty," the black-haired General joked before her face returned to her deadly seriousness. "You're right. I shouldn't have played around. You want to activate Mars?"

"Mars, Thunderbolt, Avalanche, and Typhon," the senior representative of the Nyx Mechanicus in Battle Group Volga corrected. "We have almost finished destroying all their translation-beacons, the Escort Fleet will have to move its warships the old-fashioned way, be they replicated units or not."

"We might as well add Saturn and Prometheus as well."

Dragon blinked.

"That is going to cause considerable damage to the Monolith itself."

"They don't exactly look like they are willing to lay down their arms and negotiate...five seconds ago, we received their 'Surrender and Die' message once again...and like you said, this isn't the time to go into battle wearing kid gloves. This is a fight where there will be only one surviving force at the end. I don't want it to be the Necrons."

There was no argument which could counter these words, or at least none she could find processing the battle-data.

"Acknowledged. Let's begin the annihilation of what their Monolith has left in terms of outer defences."

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Cadia**

**Kasr Kraf**

**8.195.310M35**

**Captain Eugen von Stahl**

Last month, Eugen had believed Cadia was too exciting and was on its way to getting him killed. There had been the hunt for that Warp-horror under Inquisitorial supervision the first Monday – the Acolytes had named it a 'shoggoth' when it had finally been put down. Four days after that, Major Stein had eaten his own pistol. On the second Friday, they had been called to participate in the storming of a district which had become the headquarters of a Tzeentchian cult. The Tuesday after it, there had been a small war against Nurglite mutants who had somehow managed to sneak onto Cadia despite the Battlefleet, the orbital grid, and the Mechanicus overseers. Before the end of the week, the Holy Inquisition had come back, declared the Colonel was a secret psyker in league with the Ruinous Powers, and promptly taken him away. Obviously, no one had seen the heretic since, and, if the God-Emperor was with them, no one ever would. There were things you didn't ask, Astra Militarum or not.

This had earned him a promotion...right in time to become the officer in charge of two cultist purges, beginning several skirmishes with the gangs of Kasr Kraf, and killing three of his men who were on their way to mutate into abominations uglier than the ugliest sins.

Eugen was maybe only twenty, but he had seen where the wind was blowing. And since his father was in the High Command and had some important friends in the Departmento Munitorum, the young Cadian unofficial noble had pleaded between two protestations of loyalty to be chosen for a transfer to one of the rare regiments which were transferred out for off-system duty.

It wasn't a guarantee of tranquillity – the life of a Cadian guardsman was anything but calm – but at least he would be able to sleep a few hours without a worshipper of Chaos trying to curse his quarters, poison the water of his bath, or trying to mix something disgusting into the daily rations.

Unfortunately, the wheels of the bureaucracy turned slowly on Cadia like anywhere else, and the Departmento Munitorum bureaucrats were not the most efficient lot.

His request was likely buried several days after his father made it...which was when the heretics and monsters decided to invade Cadia.

Now life was getting a bit too interesting.

"WHERE IS OUR FUCKING ARTILLERY?" The recently promoted Captain of the 8th Company shouted into the vox-caster. "WE HAVE A TRAITOR TITAN HERE HAMMERING US!"

The staff officer at the other end gave a few dubious promises before cutting off the communication.

"The Artillery must be a bit busy elsewhere," he told his sole surviving Lieutenant as the ground of their bunker shook extremely violently and dust fell from the fissures of the ceiling. "We are going to need to forget the Basilisks if we want to deal with the abominable engines."

"This is Cadia," the older man replied grimly, a mantra he repeated a hundred times per day. "We're going to have a problem, though. The 180th reports there's a horde of beastmen streaming out from that large hulk which fell ten kilometres south of us. They're going to be here soon and I think they won't come without friends."

"This is Cadia," Eugen answered back. "Ammunition levels?"

On any other Fortress World, the officers would have started inquiring about food and water. Not on his homeworld. It wasn't like provisions were unimportant, but if you had no way to defend yourself, you were going to be dead within the hour.

"We have twenty hours of las-cells."

"So little? What are the quartermasters doing?" The Captain complained as they left the bunker to immediately enter the trenches...that all regiments had taken to name 'hell' in the last days.

By reflex, Eugen had placed his rebreather mask upon his face while leaving the bunker of the company. Along with the Cadian Mark V helmet, the Mark VI gas mask was one of those things you donned if you wanted to live one day longer. The air in the trenches was filled with things he wasn't able to name, courtesy of the third attack when plague cultists had tried to overrun their position. They had burned the corpses of the bastards, but their heretical 'gifts' lived longer than the madmen.

There were fires everywhere. Near the trenches. Behind the trenches, in Kasr Kraf itself. Before them, in the lands which had once been Cadian plains, but were now killing grounds full of craters, corpses, and a lot of worse things.

"The Traitor Titan is coming back this way."

The ground shook again, more violently this time.

"That's why the God-Emperor gave us lasguns and bayonets," Cadian humour, but it was all he had, "news from the other companies of the 2nd?"

"No," a Sergeant shook his head, sipping something that was likely against the regulations...Eugen decided to turn a blind eye, there were far worse problems coming this way.

"**SLAVES OF THE FALSE EMPEROR! JOIN THE CAUSE OF CHAOS! WORSHIP THE EVERLASTING MIGHT OF KHORNE, TZEEENTCH, AND NURGLE! OR DIE FOR A FALSE GOD**!"

Four Shock Troopers of the 2nd Regiment of Cadia instantly screamed and began to mutate. Spikes grew and tore apart their armours. Flames began to dance in their eyes. Unnatural appendages burst into existence. And that what just what they could see.

"Poor bastards," like everyone else, Eugen was already firing at them. "I hate when the heretics do that."

It hadn't taken long for every regular of the Cadian 2nd Shock Troopers – and the irregulars and the camp followers as well – to be administered a fresh remainder that Chaos, for all their damnable delusions of 'strength' and 'truth', were just concerned about killing you and turning you into abominations so hideous that your own parents wouldn't recognise you.

"Yes, Sir. The Titan?"

"The Traitor Titan, yes," if he died fighting like that, Eugen swore to himself he would try to inform the God-Emperor Himself that his bureaucracy massively, utterly sucked. "I want volunteers to come with me."

"They have brought those daemon-scorpions, Captain. A platoon isn't going to be enough."

As if to support these words, the sky grew dark and the putrid odour of more sorcery struck. A small tornado materialised, decimating the lines on the left. When it was finally safe to look, it left only devastation...more devastation.

"I knew I should have asked that girl for her hand in marriage last year," one of the longest-serving guardsmen serving in the 8th Company boasted.

"Maverick, I don't think the Archenemy cares about your marital ambitions very much..." Eugen cleared his throat. "Come on Cadians, Hell awaits us. We swore the Gate must stay closed. Damn the Titans. Damn the beasts. Damn the traitors. Damn the heretics! CADIA STANDS!"

"CADIA STANDS FOREVER!"

They climbed up the trench and immediately had to fire a volley to kill a mass of mutants which had hoped to crawl up close in order to surprise them.

Then the 8th Company of the Cadian 2nd Shock Troopers, Kasr Kraf Military Command, went on the attack.

It was only a small Traitor Titan after all...

**Kasr Tyrok**

**Warmaster Ender Trevayne**

Ender couldn't profess knowing Lord Admiral John von Bismarck particularly well, but the man seemed to have aged ten years since the invasion began. The bandage on his cheek and the low resolution of the lithocast communicator didn't help persuading him otherwise, of course.

"There's only one Space Hulk left now," the Cadian Admiral finished grimly. "It's the biggest, and the Traitor Astartes ships are using it as a shield while they engage us in an artillery duel at two hundred and fifty thousand kilometres. Several Space Marines, most notably the Space Wolves, think it's a bluff. That the majority of their forces have already bypassed us and landed."

"They may be right," the Warmaster replied. "We have already confirmed the presence of several thousand Traitor Astartes, supported by over sixteen thousand Daemon Engines, both infantry- and tank-sized, with a few greater abominations to serve as leaders. Lances of Legio Lucaris and Warhounds of Legio Krytos have also tried to overwhelm several important landing zones."

"Right," the Lord Admiral grimaced again. "But even if they're bluffing, their ships remain extremely dangerous. They have millions of cultists, and each time a boarding operation was launched, they slit their own throats to summon more daemons. And though the Space Marines generally end up winning, they have taken heavy losses."

"Can your fleet win if things continue as they are? As problematic as the debris of the Space Hulks are," and they were, as through their fault they had small armies of mutants and heretics running amok everywhere, "maintaining orbital superiority is key in this battle. The majority of the Titan Transports are still remaining out of the grid's range, and we have slaughtered the Traitor Knights on the Tyrok Fields. Several districts are under heavy assault, but no Kasr has fallen."

"We can," John von Bismarck declared after giving him an expression which was neither joyous nor enthusiastic, "as long as the gigantic fleet of the heretics continues towards Saint Josmane's Hope, we can deal with the spawn of the Arch-Heretic. But Battlefleet Cadia is going to need a lot of repairs. I've lost only two Cruisers and thirteen Frigates for now, but not a single one of my Battleships is undamaged, and at least a third are going to need more than a month in the yards when this is over."

"Then fight this battle, Lord Admiral. I leave the fight above our heads to you."

The lithocast was switched off, and the different faces of the Imperial Navy's Admirals disappeared from his sight.

"At least we really have the confirmation they aren't after Cadia now." The Armageddon officer whispered so that only the thirty-plus officers near him heard his words.

"It could be a trap to lure us into another of their 'daemonic plans', Warmaster." Andreas von Waldersee protested, as if the honour of his planet demanded it. "And for heretics who aren't after this planet, they certainly seem to throw a lot of resources, both in Traitor Astartes and mutants, at us."

"I chose my words poorly," the Warmaster apologised, "I should have said the destruction of Cadia isn't their primary objective. The heretics certainly intend to do their best to ravage this system, given how many flotillas and raiding forces are spreading across it. I think we can all agree they wouldn't exactly shed tears if the current assault managed to kill us all. But they haven't launched this Black Crusade to destroy Cadia. If they did, they are frankly the worst tacticians to have ever lived. Common sense would dictate they use their largest capital ships to sweep aside Battlefleet Cadia Primus and then landed the billions of troops they keep inside their Battleships and transports."

"Err...yes. But the same could be said about your theories they intend to escape through Obscurus. With the extreme acceleration the Traitors pushed their drives through at the beginning, they could already be past Kasr Berg. Their tactics so far have been completely unreasonable. I don't know how many ships they have already lost, but it's at least several times the tonnage of Battlefleet Cadia Primus."

"And yet they paid it," Ender Trevayne pointed out whimsically. "Without hesitation. And they continue paying it, I should add, since their force trying to bleed Kasr Kraf and Kasr Cazador on their way to the Elysian Fields has not desisted."

Madness was by definition the act of someone doing something, failing, and hoping that the act of repeating it over and over without changing anything would produce different results.

Well, the Sons of Horus commander who was trying the decapitation attacks was certainly proving he wasn't sane.

"Though I am hardly a specialist in these matters, the military situation doesn't make sense. Therefore this leads to two possible conclusions. Either the heretic leaders have lost their minds and their strategy isn't supposed to make sense, or everything is going according to their plan, and we have failed to see the full picture of their overall strategy. We're missing something...or many aspects of the plan."

"A new decisive strike against Kasr Tyrok, maybe?"

This time Ender allowed himself a chuckle.

"No. They could I suppose, but a Speartip against this Kasr already cost them over a thousand Traitor Astartes and twenty-eight Traitor Knights. I don't see why they would believe it would work a second time after such a bloody defeat, especially as Legio Astraman revealed part of its strength and didn't take any losses in the process."

Flanked, outnumbered, the heretical landing had been assaulted like the lessons of the *Tactica Imperialis* books recommended. The Bar-El Penal Legions who had played the role of bait were wiped out, but Skitarii losses were rather low, and the Armageddon and Cadian forces could pursue the disorganised rabble until extinction.

"Prepare the activation of a new Reserve Army," he ordered to the Governor Primus. "There's definitely something we're missing here, and I don't like it. If they don't reveal anything new in the next twelve hours, the fresh regiments will be deployed at Kasr Kraf."

"They certainly could use the artillery formations," Waldersee approved. "I have reports of company commanders taking matters in their own hands to deal with super-heavy daemonic engines and Traitor Titans..."

**Space** **Hulk *Faithful Sublimation of Chaos***

**Dark Apostle Quor Karmain**

According to an old Colchisian proverb, looking at a problem from above illuminated you and brought great clarity.

Quor Karmain could verify it now, having exactly nine hundred and nineteen sorcery-imbued mirrors to see what was happening on the world his command Space Hulk was near.

Unfortunately, the conclusion he was arriving at was not exactly in accord with the orders of his former Master, Dark Apostle Belagosa, Lord of the 4th Great Host.

The Word Bearer's spiritual leader uttered eight words and slit the throat of one of his slaves, before throwing his still twitching corpse into the nearest mirror.

The surface stopped showing a maze of razorwire, exploded ordnance, and brutal trench warfare, and was replaced by different visions of the Pantheon before at last allowing him to speak with Dark Apostle Eliphas.

"Yes?" The younger Dark Apostle began with a pleasant smile which was as disdainful as it was arrogant. The commander of the *Faithful Sublimation of Chaos* wanted to break his legs and offer his organs to the Gods.

"The Sons of the Eye and their assets are suffering massive losses."

"Apostle Karmain," Eliphas replied with a larger smile, "it seems to me that was *exactly* the point of authorising their betrayal."

Quor seethed internally. One day, he would set the entrails of this whippersnapper afire.

"Perhaps I was not clear enough," the senior Dark Apostle continued coldly. "They are suffering incredibly heavy losses while not inflicting enough casualties in return. As I speak to you, no Kasr has fallen. Their attack against Kasr Tyrok has been a monumental disaster. And they haven't even been able to transfer their heaviest assets onto their landing zones, the Cadian defence is still too strong!"

"As expected from the Sons of Horus," Eliphas nodded with a smirk, "since Terra, any operation which isn't commanded by Abaddon always ends in disaster."

"It isn't a failure on the part of the Sixteenth Legion," Quor Karmain hotly retorted. "This planet is a damned death trap. It's kill zone after kill zone all the way to the Kasrs of the Shock Troopers, and when the elite companies of Drecarth commit themselves, the enemy commits its Titans and Astartes. This is slow, methodical, painful attrition warfare. The meat-fodder and slaves you gave me aren't sufficient! I need Iron Warriors or Death Guard Legionnaires to send in support."

"Out of the question," Eliphas waved his demand away, "Drecarth clearly betrayed us. He caught himself in the middle of this mess, he will survive...or die...by his own merits. If you so desire to help him, summon a Plague Legion." And the other upstart Apostle broke the communication ritual.

Quor Karmain spent the next minute cursing Eliphas' soul, ancestors, and allies to an eternal torment involving acid-spitting Neverborn and altar sacrifices.

"All right...you want to play that game..."

Returning to his observation of the different Cadian battlefields, Quor almost winced. For all that war was the natural environment of the Astartes, he really couldn't find anything worth rejoicing about with what was happening to the 'betrayers'.

Much like the punishment the Sons' fleet endured against the battleline of Cadia, the land battles were a long grinding nightmare that the unbelieving slaves of the False Emperor were slowly winning. Not without casualties, but for each regiment which was overwhelmed and destroyed, the mutants and mortals who had embraced the Primordial Truth were leaving mountains of corpses in every trench and before each defensive position.

A proper count of the casualties suffered by Drecarth's host was outright impossible. Quor Karmain was not going to bet it was less than thirty million, not counting over two thousand Legionnaires and fifty Knights of House Lucaris, or the thousands of Mechanicum Engines unleashed against the Cadians.

What was not in question was that simply to keep up the pressure on the Cadians, he was forced to throw hundreds of thousands more bodies into the inferno every hour, just to ensure the Great Plan wasn't derailed.

"Why is it taking them so much time to reach Saint Josmane's Hope?"

"That's what I am trying to find out, I assure you."

His mirrors were not powered to communicate with anyone. Eight wards protected his sanctum.

There shouldn't be anyone to give him a response.

Quor turned slowly his head...and suddenly his two hearts beat much, much faster.

Not that he supposed the Dark Council or Blessed Lorgar would blame him for shivering and his shaking limbs.

Not when a massive cloud of darkness before him coalesced into an equally massive body which was harbouring the dread symbol of the white raven on his black armour.

"Corax..." Quor Karmain seethed before discouragement grabbed his bones. Still, the son of Lorgar had his pride. He was a Dark Apostle and a Lord of the Word Bearers. He commanded millions of true servants of the Gods.

Eight words were uttered. Eight words of true power. Each word could cast a Neverborn back into the Sea of Souls, set cities aflame with madness and chaos, wipe out regiments, and reveal the Faithful from the Unbelievers.

The attack was severed by the massive Lightning Claws known as the Raven's Talons like it was nothing.

"What now?" Quor hated how his voice sounded.

"Now? I have a present to give you."

The large cargo container had certainly not been there a second ago, but it appeared on the Primarch's right...somehow. His ritual chambers were shrouded in shadows now, and these weren't those of the Pantheon.

"Quor Karmain. If you want to live, cut the red wire."

And the Lord of the Raven Guard again transformed into a cloud of shadows and ravens.

The Dark Apostle didn't waste any time and rushed to open the black cube.

But as his hands removed the metallic plating, the transhuman warrior froze.

Quor Karmain was hardly a specialist in bombs, but he had heard of the rats' traps in Sicarus' catacombs, and the sickly green-glowing stone pulsing and emitting green sparkles was definitely an explosive device if there ever was one.

And it was connected to over a thousand wires.

All of them were red.

"MOTHERLESS BASTARD!" The Dark Apostle erupted.

Damn it! Damn it! He couldn't let this blow up here. The damage of these unstable stones was bad enough by itself, but if such an explosion went off anywhere near his mirrors and his arcane rituals, it would be a catastrophe, both for the *Faithful Sublimation of Chaos* and the plans of Blessed Lorgar.

This...red wire...red wire...maybe this one?

An enormous pulse of energy not belonging to the Three slammed into him and Quor didn't need anyone's comment to know he had failed.

"I HATE YOU CORAX!"

Green energy engulfed his whole universe. What came after that was unarguably worse, as his soul was thrown deep into the Sea of Souls, where the servants of the Gods awaited.

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**Necron Battleship *Oppressor of the Stars***

**8.196.310M35**

**Super-Mekboy Brukk X-Brukk**

"Rammin' is da best taktik!" Brukk laughed as he got out of his super-ramming torpedo. "Kill da Tingitz! WAAGH!"

"WAAAAAAGGHHH!"

"WE ARE NECRONS. SURRENDER AND DIE!"

The Super-Mekboy blasted two of the big enemies before scratching his helmeted head.

"What's dat word?"

"Mek-boss?"

"Da metal boyz love ta banter with 'surrenda or die'," Brukk shot wildly into the ranks of the Tin'eads. "Die I get. But 'surrenda'? Is dat a Dakka-Dakka thingie?"

"Nah, Mek-boss." The smaller Nob shook his head wisely. "Dakka iz dakka, even 'umies know dat. Dakka iz life. Dakka iz da best thing ta make big WAAGH! Dakka can't be 'nother thingie. 'Surrenda' must be a capit...cuvul...ah, one of dose cultural thingies of da Tin'eads."

"Makez sense," Brukk agreed. "Dakka forever! Oi! Wherez da rest of da boyz?"

"Levelz lowa, Boss!" another Mekboy shouted. "Deir ram-ships weren't red and shiny like yourz!"

"Urk, urk," the survivor of the big battles chuckled. "In dat case, we're gonna throw a big party 'ere and fight our way to da bridge! When we'ze take da bridge for ourz, everyone will know we're da best! WAA-"

"Boss! Boss! Warboss Arrgard sending shouters Boss!"

"Whats he sayin'?"

"Reinforcementz Boss! Plenty of shiniest new ram-ships and Kroozers!"

For a beat of his heart, Brukk X-Brukk received a vision of Gork and Mork. He saw a massive tide of boyz gathering around a planet. He saw brutal, limitless, glorious...WAAGH.

"RAGNARORK IZ COMING!" The Super-Mekboy – self-proclaimed – roared. "ALL WITH ME! WE'ZE GOING TA TAKE DIS BATTLEKROOZER, AND DEN WE'ZE ARE GOING TA TAKE DA TIN'EAD FLEET! WAAAAAGH!"

"WAAAAAAAAGGGHHH!"

**Battleship** ***Enterprise***

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

"Wolfgang?"

"Yes, my Lady?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Taylor mused thoughtfully, "but isn't it impossible for anyone to send Astropathic messages in a null-zone?"

"Yes, yes it is," confirmed the blonde-haired Rogue Trader.

"And do we not have several fleets whose sole purpose is to warn us when a xenos fleet tries to enter the Quarantine Zone?"

"We do."

The Lady General closed her eyes, before reopening them and looking at the hololith depicting the strategic situation again.

"In that case, where the hell are these Ork reinforcements coming from?"

It had taken several minutes for the auspex-readers to be sure, but there was indeed an Ork attack force emerging from behind the blue star of Volga. At the insane speed the fastest scrap-ships were accelerating, they would be able to slam into the first group of Necron blockading forces in approximately fifty minutes. Which would be very bad for the Necrons. The majority of their 'Assault Fleet' was still busy defending against ramming attacks of the greenskins, and the Sautekh commander would have no reserves to throw at them to prevent the two Orks uniting in a bigger armada.

"I have no idea," Wolfgang admitted. "It is...err...completely unprecedented."

"As always with the Orks..." an anonymous voice grumbled.

Taylor examined the problem from all angles of attack. It couldn't be psychic signals; the null-zone was as powerful as ever, the physical and mental problems it caused to thousands of Imperial Navy personnel made that quite clear. It couldn't be a miraculous technologic weapon. The Orks were often capable of great feats when scavenging their enemies' technology, but a transmitter able to communicate beyond the limits of the Volga System wouldn't have been missed by anyone. They had no organisation similar to the Sisters of Silence, and their not-Tech-Priests worked with psychic fields to construct their ugly creations.

And once you have eliminated the impossible, as the old quote went, whatever remained, however improbable, had to be the truth.

"Faith."

"My Lady?"

"It's faith which has led the greenskins here. If I had to guess, their faith that their fellow monsters would hear the ruckus of their battles against the Necrons was all the communication these newcomer Orks needed."

Trust one of the stupidest species in the galaxy to find a way to complicate every other race's life even when the laws of reality were against them.

"How...how would that even work?" Archmagos Thayer Sagami asked in disbelief. Taylor raised an eyebrow and furled and unfurled her wings a couple of times.

"I can't really explain the intricacies of it," the insect-mistress sighed, "but that has to be it."

"It is ridiculous," Kratos commented.

"Perhaps, but the Orks' presence is impossible to deny," Gamaliel shrugged. "And to be honest, the Orks have pulled off far more ridiculous things in the last few millennia. The War of the Beast comes to mind."

"At least the Orks are, if anything, simplifying our strategic situation," Nikolai Rokossovsky declared, stroking his large beard. "Our concerns that the Necrons were likely going to crush them too easily appear to have been unwarranted. No matter how talented the Necron commander is, it is going to take him several days to deal with these reinforcements."

"Except," Wolfgang Bach added grimly, "that I think we have to seriously consider the outcome of the Necrons *not* winning this round, my Lady. We have deprived them of one Replicator Forge, and most of the replicated starships they will create will be deployed against us. That means the Necrons facing the Orks are going to fight this battle without a single reinforcement...and if your theory of...Orkish faith...is correct, then this fleet is not the only one on its way to Volga."

The Rogue Trader had the expression of a man about to deliver bad news, but he didn't flinch as she observed him.

"I strongly advise to call for reinforcements. Another Battle Group shutting the door behind these forces would enormously facilitate this battle and allow us to focus on the Monolith."

It was tempting. Very tempting. Too tempting.

"No," the golden-winged parahuman decided at last. "While I know we have made contingencies for it, involving a second Battle Group right now will guarantee the Ymga Monolith will try to leave the Quarantine Zone if it has the technological capability to do so."

"We have a nice trap prepared for them."

"Assuming everything goes according to plan, and given what happened since this battle began, I'm far less inclined to feel confident about that." Taylor Hebert shook her head. "No, Battle Group Volga is intact, and for the time being I don't think it is wise to bring a second hammer. Let the Necrons and the Orks kill each other if it makes the latter happy."

This battle was very surprising in a lot of ways she could have done without.

"It's time to begin the real fight against the Monolith."

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**High Orbit over Saint Josmane's Hope**

**Battlecruiser *Mercury Wall***

**8.198.310M35**

**Vice-Admiral Quintus Wolf**

"Have we thrown all the traitors out through the airlocks?"

"Yes, Admiral. And the Commissars are organising firing squads for those who have been taken alive in the prison complexes."

"For all the good it is going to do," Quintus whispered between clenched teeth. The Penal Legions of Saint Josmane's Hope had already been an instrument which inspired little confidence in him – to not say none – but now that its officers were proven compromised their reliability was somewhere between 'you can't trust them' and 'shoot the traitors before they turn on you'.

"Where does that leave us in terms of army and space assets?" The Vice-Admiral who had been chosen by Lord Admiral von Bismarck to defend the Penal World asked his chief of staff.

"The two Cadian regiments are near full strength, but the Orar and Mordian have been forced to merge their surviving companies to get close to one full regiment each. The Penal Legions...I think that after they detonated the collars of every traitor officer, there may be half a Legion left. In space, we have lost one Cruiser, five Frigates, and three Destroyers. The Space Marines, as far as we know, have taken only minor losses, either on the planet and on their ships...I would pay a lot to discover how they achieved that."

"I wouldn't," Quintus replied. Illegitimate child of a Lord of Cypra Mundi, the now elderly Vice-Admiral had seen enough of this galaxy that when something seemed too good to be true, it generally was. This 'miraculous' lack of casualties was not natural...and if he was tempted for a single second to believe the contrary, the massive number of Inquisitors surrounding the Angels of Death would have strongly encouraged him not to. "Deploy Battle Group Nemesis in formation Eta-Three, Avenger variant."

"Admiral? You intend to leave high orbit?"

"These treasons and waves of corruption," the black-eyed commander commented darkly, "are useless if the heretics don't have a large fleet ready to jump on us. And with the Warp Miasma cutting off all our communications with the other planets, I'm ready to bet a century of pay that the Archenemy will try to destroy us while we're still reeling-"

"Enemy contact! Enemy contact! Ten, no, twelve! Sixteen Traitor Battleships! Identification confirmed! Sixteen Infernus-class Traitor Battleships! They are backed by thirty-eight Hades Heavy Cruisers!"

For a moment, incredulity disputed it to incomprehension. After ten seconds, Quintus decided that it was best to chuckle at the ridiculousness of the situation.

"Admiral?"

"Don't worry, Hans, I have not lost my mind."

"With due respect, Admiral, that's exactly what a few Captains said before eating their laspistols."

"You have a point. But this time, I was merely laughing at the sheer absurdity of the situation. I don't know what kind of strategy they have in mind, but there's no way sending sixteen Battleships against us is a sound move. What do they fear, that we have hidden twenty Battleships behind the planet?"

It was hardly a secret the Penal World of Saint Josmane's Hope was the least valuable of the Cadian System's planets. The continent-sized complex where the criminals of Cadia were sent after their arrest and judgement was the planet's only 'resource', and its output was minor quantities of promethium, low-grade plasteel, and of course the Penal Legions.

Task Force Nemesis reflected that lack of importance. Aside from his own *Mercury Wall* and the three Space Marine Battle-Barges, few notable capital ships had been assigned to it. Assuming the Heavy Cruisers had Traitor Astartes aboard – which was a safe bet, Quintus felt – so many Hades-class warships alone would be able to overwhelm his command. This class was infamous for its pair of long-ranged Lance batteries and Macro-Cannons. Three of them would be enough to deal with his Battlecruiser. Two Battleships, especially these eight kilometres-long monsters, would easily be able to contest three planetary assault-purposed Battle-Barges.

Sixteen Battleships? It was way above any grouping his Task Force and Space Marine allies could oppose with any chances of success.

"Send a priority message to the Lord Inquisitor, Hans. Tell him that unless I receive a countermanding order, we're going to manoeuvre in a fighting retreat towards Vigilantum."

If the Holy Ordo gave the order, Vice-Admiral Quintus Wolf would attack, of course. But if this order didn't come, the grey-haired officer wasn't going to sacrifice his Battlecruiser and the rest of his command for Saint Josmane's Hope. His warships were worth far more than this Penal World, and the enemy was far too powerful to inflict even moderate casualties.

Save a miracle of the God-Emperor, there was no force in the universe which would allow him to reach optimal range against sixteen Infernus-class Battleships. Not when his auspex capacities were so degraded by the Warp Miasma. Not when they were still trying to assess their replacement needs and what needed to be repaired after they had rid themselves of traitors.

"I recommend, acting under my own authority, the implementation of Case Omega-Alpha."

"Admiral, we do not have the transports to evacuate a single regiment since-"

"I know. But it's not like it's important. We don't have the time to evacuate them anyway." The massive heretical fleet surging to attack him was pushing their engines hard. He had maybe one hour to leave. It was enough to save his Task Force, especially since he had been on high alert when treason had struck. It wasn't enough to make even a single ground-to-orbit rotation.

"Send the message to the Space Marines. They must get out of here, before the noose is tightened."

"I don't think they are going to like the idea of-"

"No, they won't. I myself don't like the idea of abandoning a world where the rule of the God-Emperor is law, even if it is Saint Josmane's Hope."

The Warp Miasma changed as they spoke, from swirling storms to a multi-coloured sea of horrors...and in its midst, came a tide of creatures which caused malfunctions to many of the devices built within the *Mercury Wall*.

"Admiral..."

"I see them, Hans. Send a general message to the Task Force. Daemon onslaught imminent."

**Saint Josmane's Hope**

**Alpha Penal Facility**

**Colonel Eric Fane**

"DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR!"

A volley of lasers silenced the first line of prisoners, but in the corridors of the penal facility, the most aggressive heretics were providing protection for those who followed behind.

And there were a lot of those. If there was something a Penal World experiencing a violent insurrection wasn't short of, it was bloodthirsty ex-prisoners.

Eric looked around, but there wasn't anyone to make the decision for him. The last Inquisitor he'd seen had been incinerated by a rogue psyker, and the regimental Commissar was somewhere three hundred metres east of his current position...in at least five or six separate pieces.

"Close the gates."

"But Colonel, we still have men-"

"CLOSE THE GATES!" He shouted, and fortunately the Tech-Priest and the ten men on top of the platform which controlled the opening and closing of said massive armoured doors obeyed.

The screams went higher. Twenty Cadian Shock Troopers out of the entire Company he'd sent managed to jump, run, or crawl fast enough to be stuck on the good side.

"We still had half a Company in Beta, Colonel!"

"And if we had delayed any longer, we would have shared their fate," Eric Fane, now acting-commander of the Cadian 3005th, retorted. "These men were lost, they wouldn't have reached us before the prisoners and heretics pushing them back caught up."

Not that they needed much encouragement from the Archenemy, the Cadian suspected. You didn't get sent to be brutalised by Saint Josmane's gaolers because you were a bit too slow during a lasgun inspection.

"Where are the Space Marines, anyway?" the middle-aged Colonel asked to his second. "The Inquisitorial orders told us to regroup here and support them."

"I don't know Colonel, but I don't see any Inquisitor or Angel of Death."

His subordinate wasn't wrong. Alpha Muster Hall was built according to proper standards, which meant that the facilities had been conceived to stop any attacker dead in his tracks. It was large and packed with plenty of positions from which a capable company could decimate insurgents and other enemies from.

But he couldn't see anyone save his Cadians and a few prisoners.

"They should be here. We lost Beta, Gamma, and Delta. There aren't any more facilities we are in control of-"

"OMEGA PROTOCOL ACTIVATED." A loud metallic announcement blared from every communicator and vox-device. "OMEGA PROTOCOL ACTIVATED. COUNTDOWN: FIVE MINUTES. ALL LOYALIST UNITS ARE TO SELL THEIR LIVES DEARLY FOR THE GLORY OF THE GOD-EMPEROR."

"What?"

"Blood of Cadia, what is happening?"

It was the moment the heretics chose to remind them of their presence, as something hammered the ceramite-reinforced gates. It hammered them sufficiently hard to create a noticeable dent on its surface, in fact.

"That's impossible, this door has more than five metres of plasteel...even the toughest Ogryns would be unable to scratch..."

"The Space Marines have abandoned us..."

"What is the Omega Protocol?"

"**CHANGE! CHANGE IS COMING**!"

"**BLOOD! BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!"

Fissures began to spread across the massive gate, and somehow, the temperature rose accordingly with every blow heard.

"What sort of monsters have they sworn their souls to?"

"They must have Traitor Marines with them, they wouldn't have been to defeat the 3006th otherwise..."

"Who had the brilliant idea to gather the worst prisoners of Cadia in a single prison complex?"

This, admittedly, was not a very insightful question, because it betrayed a total incomprehension of Cadian society.

The Imperium loved the dedication of the Cadian Shock Troopers, but rarely did anyone, even the High Lords Eric suspected, really stop their train of thoughts to consider what exactly keeping two-thirds of your population in active military service did to society as a whole.

The polite answer was: it wasn't good. Eric Fane had fought for seven years across different wars before being recalled to Cadia, and the worlds he had seen were in general less violent than his homeworld, despite being active war zones. The gangs of Cadia would have ruled supreme on the average Industrial World, if not for the regular military. Violence was endemic, in- and outside the Regiments. Save the usual Munitorum propaganda and black market vids, there was nothing but weapon maintenance, stimms' trade, and preparing for the next campaign.

Predictably, this resulted in a rate of crimes which would likely frighten anyone sane. No officer liked to speak about it a lot, but everyone knew it happened. It was the darkness behind the glory and the medals. The part no true Cadian enjoyed being the jailor and the protector of.

The doors and the metal literally melting impossibly forced him to abandon these thoughts and return to the conduct of the war. Not that it was going to be a very long war for his men and himself.

"Defence-High, place the last Melta Weapons at fifty metres, Delta-Two." He ordered. "Cadia stands. It doesn't matter if the Space Marines have run with their tails between their legs, or the Inquisitors have abandoned us. We have sworn that the Archenemy is going to be held at bay, and that's enough for us."

"Cadia stands." The survivors of his regiment whispered back.

The gates exploded, and hell came. A horde of baying madmen, surrounded by daemons and other monsters no loyal soul knew the names of.

Lasguns and Melta Weapons shot their last rounds of ammunition, and for an instant, the enemy assault died. But not for long. Three seconds later, their ranks appeared to have tripled, and an avian shadow surrounded by flames threw a foul lightning into the lines of the 4th Company, reducing them to ashes before anything could be done.

The foundations of the Penal Facilities shook before crashing. Entire sections of the hall began to break, dropping entire platoons into the abyss below.

"CADIA STANDS!"

"**CADIA DIES TODAY! CADIA DELENDA EST**!"

And then his entire world exploded. Eric's career ended in war and apocalypse.

**Carrion-class Heavy Battleship *Vox Dominus***

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

Knowing there were several hundred Space Marines whose presence he couldn't feel had understandably made Paristur extremely nervous.

Millions of kilometres away, the Dark Apostle could feel the bothersome presence of the long-orphaned sons of Sanguinius, the blind fools of Guilliman's gene-line, and the stupid and obstinate Corpse-worshippers of Dorn. But he couldn't feel the presence of this new Chapter, these 'Exorcists'. And despite the countless rituals the sorcerers under his command had hurled across the void, their warships and forces had survived nearly untouched. It was like the attacks of the Seventeenth Legion were fizzling out before touching them!

This unanticipated problem had resulted in Blessed Lorgar giving him a detachment which was likely a gross waste of resources, but neither Paristur nor the other Dark Apostles had invested so many pacts and resources in the Black Crusade to take any chances.

And when the mortals' ships had abandoned high orbit and fled the Penal World they were supposed to defend, the commander of the 3rd Great Host had stayed on guard. That the fools worshipping the False Emperor were retreating did not mean it was going to stay that way forever. Therefore he had urged caution to his captains and lesser host commanders.

Many had not listened.

They must regret it bitterly now that he saw the tectonic plates of Saint Josmane's Hope become visible from orbit as after thousands of years, the deep fires of the world were suddenly roused by explosions which had to be Exterminatus-grade Magma Bombs.

"My Lord! What are your orders?"

"Silence."

"My Lord!"

The insolent mortal – a traitor from the Hive World of Volscani – lost his head in the next second. When Paristur wanted silence, he didn't want to repeat himself.

"Coryphaus, how far away are we from Saint Josmane's Hope?"

"Two hundred and seventy thousand kilometres, Lord Apostle."

"Then all is well. We won't be caught up as collateral damage."

"As collateral damage?"

The fallen world blew up as the three words were uttered.

"Yes, collateral damage," Paristur grimaced as the dots representing many of the Hades-class Heavy Cruisers began to report massive damage, when they didn't disappear from the daemonic devices' field of vision in nova-bright fireworks. "If I'm not mistaken, the unbelievers prepared several Cyclonic Torpedoes in addition to the Magma ammunition we already saw."

"But my Lord, if you already knew-"

"I didn't know," Paristur corrected. "I suspected. Which is why when I give orders, I expect them to be obeyed."

And this was why he was growing angrier by the second, though he decided not to show it externally. Twenty Hades Heavy Cruisers had decided to disregard his commands and descend into low orbit to support the slaughter of the Cadians and the gaolers as best they could.

Instead, they had been rewarded with a quick and fiery demise.

"We aren't going to be able to recruit any illuminated forces from the prisons...nor use the complex to fuel the large-scale ritual you had in mind."

"The prisoners, I never cared much about," Paristur revealed to the Coryphaus. "The sole spaceport of the planet was thoroughly sabotaged before the rebellion we prepared was able to gain momentum. It would have taken months to transport a significant force into orbit without a large blessing of the Pantheon. The ritual grounds, however..."

Kor Phaeron and Belagosa had been utterly wrong about using this Penal World for their purposes. The target had been too obvious for their enemies to miss, as mortal and blind as they were. And as long as they lacked the time to consecrate the prison complex, what the defenders had just done was not something which truly bolstered the Black Crusade.

It would expand the power of the Empyrean in this System and blind their failing technology, but that wasn't what the Words Bearers were after.

"Reorganise the fleet into a proper formation. Summon the escort reserves. The enemy's fleet is running to Vigilantum, it is vital to ensure our enemies despair."

"And the damaged ships, Lord Apostle?" a Word Bearer Captain asked. "There are half a dozen ships which have crippled engines or other problems as they were too close to the planet's death."

"If they aren't able to stay in our formation, then they are of no use to the Black Crusade anymore. Summon the Astartes Legionnaires and the gifted sorcerers by teleportation or by any artifice at our disposal if they are of our Legion."

Paristur smiled.

"If they are Night Lords, as I suspect many of them are, leave them where they are. I am sure the servants of the False Emperor are going to have a few words for them when they eventually return."

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

**8.199.310M35**

**Overlord Sobekhotep**

"Repeat my orders."

"Yes, my Glorious Overlord." Sihathor the Impaler replied with the deference his rank deserved. "Per your will, the Reaper batteries in range of the vermin fleet will annihilate their vanguard. Particular attention will be given to the two largest ships, since they appear to be variants of the previous vermin-intruders. While the apex of the Szarekhan firepower teaches them their insignificance, thirty Phalanxes will teleport across two hundred ships of the central formation and remove the odious taint of life from their hulls, from the vermin shipmasters to their lowest forms of servants and pets. While this occurs, the Doom Scythes and our last available Battleships and Cruisers will use hyper-transfer acceleration to assault their rearguard. All Nemesors have been commanded to fire at their engines and Empyrean-drive systems, since those are the most vulnerable sections of the vermin technology."

"Yes," Sobekhotep the Dust-Maker approved. "The arrogant vermin don't know it, but they are already living their last moments of life. With their vanguard being no more, the core of their fleet ravaged and as cold as the Throne, and our Scythes and warships cutting off their escape, they won't be able to flee, and they don't have anything capable of countering our mastery of the physical universe."

The Szarekhan Overlord raised his staff higher before majestically slamming it against the green-and-gold floor.

"They got lucky with the Incompetent One, but that was merely one of our fleets. Now they face the might of the Throne of Oblivion Itself, and against its firepower, their odds of survival are a clear and uncompromising zero. They have lasted a bit longer than the Aeldari and other belligerent lifeforms, but in the end, vermin is vermin. Begin the extermination of the pests, Royal Warden."

"Yes, my Mighty Overlord! Reaper Batteries, open fire! Teleportation beams in preparation. Scythes and Support Fleet stand ready for assault!"

The enormous batteries of the Throne of Oblivion, cannons so gigantic most inferior creatures mistook them for mountains when they looked at them, emerged into the light as the immense plates which separated them from the void opened.

And then they fired. For several seconds, the space around the Monolith was bathed in the green illumination of the Reaper batteries.

Only something was wrong. No target had been reported destroyed...and then the familiar and dreaded sounds of an alert, indicating something had gone wrong...again...blared up.

"Mighty Overlord! Their vanguard is protected by a field of psychic energy which causes resonance damage to the Reaper batteries! We have to stop the bombardment now!"

"Heavy jamming! Heavy jamming of our teleportation beams! We have lost contact with all Phalanxes sent through the teleporters!"

"Where did they find so many starfighters to assault our Scythes with? And are those electromagnetic-lightning weapons?! Withdraw! Withdraw and change the formation!"

Sobekhotep couldn't believe it. It was impossible! Impossible! This was a perfect annihilating blow, one the Szarekhan Dynasty had perfected to an art form. No enemy had ever survived it. They had ground countless legions of the Old Ones' servants during the final stages of the War in Heaven to dust with the Reaper batteries alone.

"A sort of...sphere of golden psychic energy surrounds the enemy vanguard," Sihathor stated in a voice as disbelieving as Sobekhotep himself felt. "Analysing...Analysing...Analysis reports it is a sort of combined field spread out by twelve warships in a vaguely ovoid-type formation."

"DESTROY THEM!" Sobekhotep screamed. "I WANT THEM DEAD!"

"The...the 'shield-ships' are inside the golden psychic shield, my Overlord. We can't hurt them..."

"And what of our teleportation capabilities? Surely vermin of such lowly technological skill haven’t been able to challenge Necron mastery!"

"Hem, hem, hem. That isn't correct. There are indeed systems which seem to be capable of preventing Necron Phalanxes from wiping out our enemies from the inside of their hulls."

"Sneferka. Why. Haven't. You. Warned. Me. Of. This?"

"You wanted someone to repeat your orders, oh Mighty Overlord. You didn't ask for someone to tell you that your commands were going to result in defeat...hem, hem, hem...another defeat."

This time it was too much. Sobekhotep seized the closest Gauss Weapon, and directed its fire against the insolent Cryptek. Of course the destruction wasn't permanent, but for the next few hours Sneferka wouldn't be in his vicinity...and it felt very, very good to unleash his fury.

"We are going to need a new strategy, Royal Warden." The Dust-Maker said, as the last Scythes were pulverised by what was – if he wanted to be honest – a very worrying storm of lasers and physical ordnance. "Contact Zahndrekh. We are going to need a new plan."

"Yes, my Glorious Overlord. Still, we have some time. The vermin fleet is far out of range, and the Escort Fleet is accelerating to join us. They will arrive here long before-"

New alarms blared, and for the first time this year, Sobekhotep saw the impenetrable shields of the Throne lose energy as they intercepted enemy fire.

"The enemy fleet is in range! The enemy fleet is in range! COUNTERMEASURES! COUNTERMEASURES NOW!"

**Emperor-class Battleship *Dominus Astra***

**Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller**

"They opened fire exactly at 2,151,510 kilometres...exactly like they did against the fleet of the Second Legion." Oskar Reuenthal gave him an amused look. "I don't think we have a very creative Necron commander facing us."

"I really don't know what to think about them," Neidhart confessed. "The more we fight, the less it makes sense. As proven during the attack on the Replicator Forges, they are capable of extremely dangerous tactics...and then they refuse to adapt, even when it becomes evident we have observed their battles and recovered the databases of the *Tsunami*."

Save the naval force which had charged to attack their rear, the whole attack had been a perfect copy of the battle of the Great Crusade-era, and if the Necron commander had the same amount of Battleships at its disposal, the Lord Admiral was convinced they would have been used the same way.

"I see only two explanations at this point: either we are facing a schizophrenic Necron, something we sadly can't dismiss out of hand, or we are facing a combined force where competent and incompetent xenos share command."

"If it's the latter, let's hope the incompetent will continue to drag the competent ones down," the young black-haired Admiral replied. "Our losses are more than tolerable for now, but a major part of our battlefield domination relies on the Necrons doing exactly what we expect them to. If they don't, it's going to get ugly."

"How 'tolerable' are we speaking about?"

"Two Cobra Destroyers lost with all hands, one more which is a job for the next shipyard it can reach, seventy-eight Fury Interceptors, and twenty-one Starhawk Bombers," the Admiral of Bakka admitted. "It was mainly a coordination problem on the second Cobra flotilla's part. They tried to be as aggressive as our Warrior commanders...except they don't have the guns to pierce the heavy armour of the Necrons."

Neidhart grimaced inwardly. The Cobra class of the Imperial Navy wasn't a bad design, but it relied a lot on firing its torpedoes at long-range to make sure its relative lack of armour didn't cause its doom. As the Necrons ships demonstrated an ability to appear in a flash – the Tech-Priests confirmed the Ymga Monolith had the equivalent of catapult launchers for starships – staying at long-range had not really been an option. To make things worse, the torpedoes, while not useless, were unable to really inflict damage able to overwhelm the living metal's repair threshold.

"I hate to say it," Neidhart began, knowing his subordinate had likely thought the same before him, "but if operations against Necron fleets become common, the Cobras are going to be phased out of our order of battle."

"I'm sure the Segmentum Fortresses are going to love that, since we've yet to build a single Warrior-class Destroyer."

Oskar von Reuenthal had a point, but this political issue could wait until the end of Operation Stalingrad. If they were successful, he would have years to deal with it...and if they weren't, it wouldn't matter.

"Anyway, the Necrons have now lost seven thousand of their Doom Scythe-class starfighters, not counting the ones caught in the middle of the Ork rampage. I believe, and the simulations confirm, we have removed roughly ten percent of their available strike force. And with all fleets save one unable to intervene, we are ready to begin the next phase."

"We'd better hurry, yes," Reuenthal nodded soberly. "This damned null zone is causing plenty of our officers to become apathetic, and the lower we get in the ranks, the worse the effects are. We can endure it for a bit, but with how many of our men and women that are not performing to our standards, it's going to be a major problem if we don't act soon."

"We always knew it was going to be a problem," that coupled with the Necrons' ability to teleport everywhere, but fortunately the jammers performed flawlessly, ensuring the Necrons were spiralling somewhere in the void right now. "But now it is our time to show them we aren't afraid of matching their monstrous firepower."

And 'monstrous' was the accurate word, only the merging of the Heimdall shields powered by the Aegis-class Battlecruisers had permitted them to survive this apocalyptic bombardment.

"The two Gloriana Battleships have lowered the targeted section of shields by thirty percent. Now let's really teach these xenos the meaning of fear."

They were at one million and eight hundred thousand kilometres now, and no experienced captain could miss a target as big as the Ymga Monolith at that range.

"It is retribution time. All capital ships: open fire."

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Apocalypse-class Battleship *Sun of Splendour***

**8.200.310M35**

**Lord Admiral John von Bismarck**

Lord Admiral John von Bismarck should have been very happy.

By all rights, he was the senior officer of the Imperial Navy for what had been a complete and resounding victory, having seen eight enemy Space Hulks and five Traitor Battleships perish while he had lost none of his most valuable capital ships – though many were going to need months of repair when this battle was over.

None of this mattered when the ripples of Saint Josmane's Hope's blazing demise echoed across the Cadian System.

Knowing the Inquisition had prepared contingencies to ensure the Archenemy wouldn't be able to use the Penal World for its abominable purposes was one thing. Seeing it die with your own eyes was far more painful.

It went without saying that the Warp Miasma dissipating for several seconds was no coincidence. The Archenemy wanted them to know this act of self-destruction hadn't been enough to stop them.

They wanted to fill their hearts with fear and despair. They would fail...he hoped.

"The destruction of Saint Josmane's Hope appears to have cost them a lot of Heavy Cruisers."

"Yes, Admiral. And the Raiders who threw themselves against Vigilantum have been slaughtered."

"Whoever on the other side thought this would work deserves a few congratulations from us," John smiled. "If they want to die in vain, accommodating them isn't going to be a problem."

Raiders and Destroyers could be dangerous when they were gathered in significant numbers, but against an intact line of Battleships waiting for them, their one-sided destruction had been assured before they entered the extreme range of the Imperial Navy’s Lances.

"Lord Admiral, a new Traitor Fleet is emerging from the Miasma. It looks like...several squadrons of Heavy Cruisers."

"I want a more accurate count. Are they Hades?"

"Fifty...fifty-eight Heavy Cruisers, Lord Admiral! And they are all Styx!"

"In that case, they aren't likely to approach much further," the Cadian Admiral commented. When it had still been in service in the Imperial Navy – over two millennia ago – the Styx Heavy Cruiser had been a fleet support warship. It still was, except now it fought on the other side. "However, please remind me to find and shoot whoever had the duty to oversee the mothball fleets of Obscurus."

John von Bismarck knew no human could stand eternally vigilant. Only the God-Emperor was capable of that. But given the energetic signatures of these Traitor ships, it was obvious the heretics had merely rearmed former Navy hulls. Fifty-eight. Not one, not ten, not twenty, fifty-eight. And those were just the ones confirmed, there might be more fighting elsewhere.

"I agree, Lord Admiral," his chief of staff coughed. "It is a colossal failure. Many procedures and positions will have to be completely upturned after this battle."

"Let's hope we aren't going to pay a heavy price for correcting those mistakes..."

"The Styx Cruisers are launching what appears to be their entire complement of starfighters and Heldrakes...we have a lot of starfighters of types never seen before."

The Imperial Navy began to fire, but this time it was not as successful as it had against its previous opponents. These heretic starfighters were fiendishly swift and agile, and comparatively few explosions signifying direct hits bloomed in the void.

"They aren't trying to bleed us, Lord Admiral. They're trying to reinforce their friends on Cadia."

"That would mean these starfighters can also play the role of atmospheric air-superiority fighters," the Rear-Admiral in charge of the Aeronautica operations realized with an expression of disbelief. "And...by the Golden Throne! Their bombers seem to be three times the size of ours!"

"Starhawk or Marauder?"

The latter after all were far smaller and lighter than the former, being built for atmospheric bombing.

"Starhawk," was the laconic answer.

"Damn them," John von Bismarck narrowed his eyes. "Tell Intelligence to find out names and technical specifications of these heretekal machines."

"Lord Admiral..."

"I know, one of the reasons the heretics act like they do is to force us to commit our own Interceptors."

The Fury starfighters had so far been engaged relatively little; the fight against Space Hulks wasn't the type of battle where their abilities shone.

"If we do so, it's going to get ugly," one of the Lieutenants of the Sun of Splendour remarked. "Aside from their new vile toys, they have brought ten thousand Heldrakes."

"And if we don't?"

"Except for two military districts, the Aeronautica is slowly gaining air superiority over the Daemon Engines."

Meaning if they let tens of thousands of these things fly in the Cadian skies, their fighter wings were going to go down in flames very quickly.

"Commit our starfighter wings...and send in our Light Cruisers for long-range support."

"The Styx squadrons are going to pounce on them, Lord Admiral."

"They will try," John replied. "They will soon realise the mistake of reinforcing failure."

**Korolis**

**Kars Yin**

**Captain Aramphael**

"Blood of Baal," the Techmarine of the Crimson Paladins swore as he saw the ruined carcass of the heretic bomber in full for the first time. "How were the Traitors able to build such a thing?"

For some reason, the Angel Sanguine Captain didn't find it very reassuring that the tech-specialist who was supposed to answer his questions had identical ones.

"Unknown," Aramphael answered drily. "Before the Cadian Hydras managed to kill it, we didn't even know the Traitors had something like this in their arsenal. We found a code name for it easily, however. Behold the Traitor Harbinger Super-Bomber."

"The name is appropriate, at least," the other Space Marine acknowledged. "Give me a couple of minutes, brother, and I will give you my observations."

"Only a couple of minutes," Aramphael replied, "while we've exterminated the enemy in this zone, that is not guaranteed to last."

The Techmarine nodded and began to seize different objects with mechadendrites whose only function seemed to be dissecting either machines or flesh.

"Is this wise?" inquired the Sanguinary Priest behind him. "The Flesh Tearers are already attracting too much attention for the cause of the Blood, we don't need more Inquisitorial eyes looking in our direction."

"We need more information about the damned aerial threats which just killed twenty of our best pilots, brother," the Captain countered. "We knew the heretics were going to unleash new weapons for this Black Crusade, but we certainly didn't expect *this*."

One new 'chaotic innovation' would have been bad enough, but the heretics had unleashed *three* in the last several hours. And all of them appeared to be superior to what the Aeronautica Imperialis had, meaning the Space Marines had to make up the difference...and they couldn't. They weren't numerous enough. As a result, they had to rely on anything able to shoot down an aircraft to minimise casualties...and of course this put the promethium and atomic facilities of Korolis in significant danger.

"I won't deny it is disquieting. But we have plenty of good news as well. The attempts of the Traitor Sorcerers to awaken both Black Rage and Red Thirst have failed miserably, ensuring we retain our tactical awareness in melee and other operations while the betrayers do not."

"Allowing us to to settle many old scores," Aramphael had always loathed the Night Lords since the moment the Blood's indoctrination had told him what they were, but after seeing their atrocities perpetrated on the Drookian Fen Guard, wiping out their Raptors had never felt so satisfying. "And it is not over. I intend to petition the Cadians to...lend us their artillery corps. Since we lost the Locke Plains, hereteks and heretics are pouring more strength onto it. I think it's time we lead a fast armoured assault to disabuse them of their delusions, brother."

"I admire your spirit, but I will remind you we've just lost aerial superiority...at least until the Agripinaa Battlefleet finishes dealing with these Styx Cruisers in the void."

"And the Flesh Tearers are still as aggressive as ever, which forces us to distribute more Bacta to ensure they don't all die in their mad assaults into the midst of the heretics' landing zones, yes."

The Techmarine came back on these words, and from his pace alone, Aramphael knew he wasn't going to like what the Mars-trained Space Marine had to say.

"These twelve-damned hereteks have combined four servitors to drive this Super-Bomber, and then someone," the words were filled with unimaginable loathing, "decided to Possess them, before tying them to the aircraft's machine-spirit, soul and mind. In all my years of service, I have never seen such an abominable desecration and so many violations of the Omnissiah's laws! If I find the hereteks who conceived these vessels of damnation, I will not grant them a quick death!"

A loud explosion echoed not far from their advanced position, and the Angel Sanguine knew they may have overstayed their welcome in this region.

"Well spoken, brother." The veteran Captain wasn't going to say the Crimson Paladin was wrong, oh no. "Do you have any inkling why it was surrounded by Warp Lightning?"

"Oh that's the easy part. They tied several beating human hearts to the engines and regularly zapped them with the sparks flying out of the heretekal devices. The Traitor sorcerers must have bound the souls of the sacrificed to the hearts so that daemons feed upon their unending agony and expel the closest thing the Empyrean has from lightning."

Each and every time Aramphael thought he had seen the worst thing the Traitors could do, they strove to prove him wrong in the following days or weeks...

**The** **Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**Gloriana Battleship *Flamewrought***

**8.200.310M35**

**Chapter Master Ta'Phor Hezonn**

Ta'Phor Hezonn had heard some commanders say that the Ymga Monolith was nothing but a gigantic pyramid floating in the middle of nowhere.

That was incorrect. It was a *planet-sized* pyramid – though it was smaller than Nocturne – and it boasted an offensive and defensive armament capable of deterring the assaults of multiple unprepared Battlefleets.

But from an outsider's perspective, it indeed looked like a pyramid. Except structures like these were in general unable to present a perfectly smooth surface of green-black metal for thousands of square-kilometres. The Monolith was in many ways the dream of the Martian Priesthood come true: a realm where there was no organic life – since there was no air, it wasn't like anyone could breathe on its surface – and where the twisted nihilism of the Necrons was the law.

There were gaps and imperfections in this vision of xenos technology. The enemies of the Imperium had to open colossal hangars and artificial canyons to allow their guns to fire, no matter how ineffectual it was against the Heimdall shield of the Aegis-class Battlecruisers.

And at the 'summit' of the pyramid, was the structure which registered to their auspexes as a vast amount of Necron-prepared anti-Warp Noctilith.

"The Lord Admiral has given his permission to begin Saturn on our own initiative." The shipmaster of the *Flamewrought* announced calmly. "Our Black Templar cousins report they are ready too."

"Enemy shields?"

"They are at twenty percent and trying to recover." The Salamander Astartes shook his head in disbelief. "I don't want to imagine the size of the energy reactors needed to activate those, never mind keeping them at maximum power."

"And we have twenty-four Battleships hammering the shields to arrive at that result."

"Not counting the dozens of Cruisers participating."

"Yes," the Regent of Nocturne replied. "We can only hope the Necrons won't be able to build another once we will have neutralised this Monolith."

And thank the alliances of Lady Weaver for the reality of not fighting it in the middle of a human-inhabited system. Any victory won from such a confrontation would be extremely bloody, assuming the Necrons didn't find a way to use the presence of loyal souls against them.

"The chrono-torpedoes and the other special ammunition weapons are ready?" The Chapter Master asked his Techmarine for the second time.

"They are," the Salamander struck his armour in salute. "We have checked and re-checked every torpedo twelve times, and all systems are working to perfection. They are going to work like Lady Weaver and the Lord Admiral want."

"Let's hope so," Ta'Phor Hezonn smiled. "Mars isn't exactly next door for resupply."

Nor would the Fabricator-General relinquish such weapons easily if the Salamanders asked him a second time. As it was, integrating the fire-control, the cogitators, and the other advanced systems into the rest of the automated torpedo tubes aboard the *Flamewrought* had required a lot of bargains between the Lady of Nyx and the High Lord representing the Adeptus Mechanicus.

"FIRE!"

"FIRE!

"OPEN FIRE!"

The *Eternal Crusader* fired first. Unlike the previous bombardment it had made against the shields, this time no less than four projectiles were hurled from its prow cannons.Despite the blue streaks they left in their wake, the Salamander Astartes was rather sure those weren't plasma-based torpedoes or some modified Nova ammunition...but something altogether more lethal and ancient.

After all, the chrono-weapons stored about the *Flamewrought* certainly predated the Great Crusade – one of the conditions for their release had been the support of Nyx and several Chapters' homeworlds in passing certain decrees to reactivate abandoned Forges of the Red Planet.

But it had been worth it, as the weapons didn't disappoint.

Striking like a bolt out of nowhere, the fire of the Black Templars' Gloriana ignored the desperate Necron counter-fire like it didn't exist, before tearing apart the massive green shield's section protecting the Noctilith and the machines generating the damn null-zone.

It wouldn't last long...but the *Flamewrought* had already fired, and two seconds later, the chrono-weapons struck.

Technically, any weapon could have done the deal, but apparently the damn 'Crypteks' had repair abilities which were on par with Eldar sorcery, and Battle Group Volga couldn't take the risk.

The Battleships shifted their fire and fired their Nova Cannons nonetheless, of course, since it was always better to be sure.

But as a terrible succession of explosions rocked the Ymga Monolith's 'summit', Ta'Phor Hezonn felt like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and smiled. It had worked.

"Null-zone generators heavily damaged, Chapter Master. Their secondary synchronizers inside the structure appear to have activated, creating a second null-zone...but this one only extends to the Monolith's shields. Plan Saturn was successful."

"As per the directives of Lady Weaver, keep an active watch for hostile psychic attacks now," the Chapter Master ordered his Chief Librarian. "The removal of the null-zone will allow our psykers to use their skills, but the slaves of the Ruinous Powers are also going to be able to directly interfere."

"We are going to watch the veil," the Lord of the Librarius promised. "For now, the Warp is incredibly calm...the Necron devices appear to have created a lasting effect, destroyed or not."

It sounded too good to be true...which usually meant it was. The presence of Battle Group Volga here was so hurtful for the Traitor Legions there was no way they would fail to intervene. No, if it was calm at the moment, it just meant they were biding their time before the strike.

"Shift back to standard ammunition. It is time to make sure the Ymga Monolith's shields have more holes in them than our battle-servitors after a vigorous training session..."

**Necron Battleship *Light of Gidrim***

**Vargard Obyron**

"The secessionists certainly have made enormous progress in the last years," his suzerain declared. "While their tactics supported the fact they had found a way to breach the Throne's shields, I was hesitant to believe it."

"I admit I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't just witness it myself," the Vargard acknowledged before bowing. "That is why you are the Overlord and I am the Vargard."

"Don't sell yourself too short, Obyron," the skilled military commander of the Sautekh Dynasty shifted his Staff of Light into one of his favourite poses, indicating he was thinking about new strategies. "Young Sobekhotep refused to ask himself a fifteenth of the questions you voiced. And his Court has an unimpressive blindness when it comes to Secessionists."

"Yes, my suzerain." The commoner-born Necron replied dutifully. "What now? The main Contra-Empyrean matrix of the Throne of Oblivion will need years of repairs, if the screams of the Dust-Maker and his chief executors are proportional to the damage caused. The...enemy...is bombarding the shields assiduously, and while two-thirds of it is completely undamaged, several shots are scoring hits."

Obyron didn't mention how the massive Reaper batteries had not fired for a long time. It was a grave mistake in his opinion: the Szarekhan Nemesors had ceded the initiative to their opponents completely.

But then, except for Zahndrekh's exploits and victories, it seemed whoever was in charge of the other side had read the modus operandi of the Silent King's Dynasty beforehand, and deployed the adequate weapons and appropriate plans when Sobekhotep or one of his lackeys followed their millions of years-old list of obsolete tactics.

Since their fleet was still far out of range, all the Sautekh ships could do was observe the spectacle. And it was one worth watching. Obyron knew threats when he fought them, and this young race which had decided to assault the Throne was one. They had annihilated an entire Necron fleet, even if it was led by an utter moron. They were still not dead, after the Szarekhans had unleashed enough firepower to sterilise several planets.

They weren't up to the level of technology and tactical skill his suzerain had.

But then, as more and more alarms of worlds under assault came from the Dolmen Gates, their enemies didn't really need that to be dangerous.

"Obyron." Zahndrekh began walking at a frenetic pace around the immense holographic map representing the battlefield. "Order all our ships to accelerate and get as far away from the Replicator Forge as their acceleration permits."

"Yes, my suzerain," Obyron gave the orders immediately before asking the question haunting his processing memory. "Why?"

The last replicated Battleship had just begun pushing its drives when a concentrated storm of Warp energy struck the last Replicator Forge. It was like an assault of white lightning and golden flames, and the Vargard almost believed there was a sort of avian creature tearing into the irreplaceable core of the Forge before it ended as abruptly as it began.

"Because," Zahndrekh continued conversationally, as if a priceless asset had not just been mangled and transformed into a large amount of Necrodermis good for the recycling yards right in front of them, "the secessionist leader has so far tried to remove the maximum number of young Sobekhotep's most powerful advantages using a minimal amount of strikes. It was entirely possible the secessionists inflicted grievous damage to the Contra-Empyrean Matrix to regain their organic vitality...but why settle only for that, if they made bargains with other secessionists for psychic power?"

For a moment Obyron had hoped that the Overlord would have realized no secessionist of the First Wars had ever had the ability to wield psychic energy...this was after all a major problem they'd never found a solution for – and they likely never would, since they shed their fragile mortal shells.

But no, Zahndrekh's vision of this galaxy was still as delusional as ever.

"Yes," Obyron tried to quickly change the topic. "However they did it, the result is we have no more Replicator Forges...and we are now limited to twenty-five Battleships and three times that in escort ships. If they try a second psychic attack of that nature..."

"Oh, they won't, Obyron," his suzerain was prompt to answer, "the secessionists remain honourable foes, and will prefer to face me in direct combat to inflict great disarray to the cause of unity. And in the unlikely case they don't, their first attack would have targeted our entire fleet. The Replicator Forge was not far enough from our hulls for them not to have seized the opportunity."

The second reason, Obyron decided, was most likely the correct one. Even assuming the enemy leaders knew who Zahndrekh was, it was unlikely beating a Sautekh fleet would be trumpeted around as a victory to surpass all victories. Not after the millions of years the Necrons had spent sleeping. And not when there were attacks on all Sautekh worlds as they fought here.

"I hope you will disagree with my words, my suzerain," Obyron began grimly, "but in my opinion, the opportunity for a fast and costless victory has passed. Sobekhotep should order the evacuation of this system. The Throne's FTL drive is repaired. Staying here will only mean fighting the enemy on his own terms."

"I do not disagree, Obyron," the shadow of a sigh echoed on the command bridge of the *Light of Gidrim*. "Do you think young Sobekhotep will listen to me?"

Obyron thought that the answer to that was obvious; the options ranged between 'not a chance in the Fifteen Hells' and 'when the Szarekhan nobles learn humility'.

The Dust-Maker's ego and limitless urge to control everything in military strategy was so...intense, it was likely whoever was sent as a messenger would be executed on the spot.

"No, my suzerain. He won't." The Vargard didn't say more, the old Overlord he was dutifully protecting was not insane and had likely compiled the number of assassinations and other political offenses committed by Szarekhan and Sautekh nobles alike. "What are the enemy leaders going to do?"

"The shields of the Throne of Oblivion regenerate too quickly and are too powerful for them to consider a mass infantry assault...yet." Zahndrekh replied thoughtfully. "In addition, our fleet is arriving to flank them, though the loss of the Replicator Forge and the destruction of all outer defences and help mean our counterattack is delayed."

Obyron didn't show any sign of opposition, but as enforcer of his Overlord's decisions, he knew very well the new planned course which had just been projected on the map was not the optimal one.

Zahndrekh was slowing down his ships...and allowing the young race to fight the Szarekhans longer than strictly necessary.

"They must cause severe damage to the shield's generators," the Sautekh legendary commander declared, as if speaking half for himself and half for Obyron. "If the secessionist' enemy leader is skilled, they are going to cripple a shield's section soon, and then send a mass teleportation assault with the greater war engines in their arsenal."

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

The Silver Skull Marine of her Dawnbreaker Guard had good news for her this time.

"The Necron commander has abandoned the idea of repairing the Replicator Forge, my Lady," Sergei Bourne affirmed after completing his Tarot divination. "Two of his ships will tow it away, in the hope his Crypteks can return it to a fully functional state...eventually."

"Good," Taylor commented. The enemy commander – who had been confirmed to be the too-capable Overlord Zahndrekh by the presence of his flagship – was far too skilled and intelligent for her to be at-ease with the idea of giving him hours to play with a Replicator Forge. "And the...prudent course he has just ordered?"

"The Jackal and the Sword," the Prognosticator passed a finger on the two cards, "the commander of the Ymga Monolith and his subordinate Admiral clearly have inimical feelings for each other."

"That's good to hear," the Lady General nodded. "Jegudiel, please go thank the Librarius for a perfect psychic attack. It seems that whatever happens now, the Replicator Forges aren't a factor in this battle any longer."

"I will transmit your compliments," the Epistolary of the Angels of Defiance bowed.

Most Space Marines who had circled near her for several minutes departed, and Wolfgang Bach slowly approached her command seat.

"Just out of curiosity..." the Rogue Trader cleared his throat. "Which member of your Guard had the idea in the first place?"

"You don't believe I could come up with this tactic on my own?" The legitimate owner of the *Enterprise* attempted a – not very convincing – wounded expression.

"I know you, Lady Weaver. When it comes to psychic abilities, you are usually prudence itself unless events force your hand."

"Your knowledge of my strategic vision is truly worrying," the golden-armoured parahuman replied sarcastically. "Yes, the idea came from Stormseer Uriyangkhadai. As he pointed out, it's not often we have an enemy we are certain will muster no battle-psykers in its ranks. And he was absolutely correct that if things went wrong with Isley and Golden Fleece, we would need a good plan to get rid of one or several Replicator Forges."

The sad thing was that it didn't matter if they destroyed a Necron fleet of forty-five Battleships every day if their enemies were able to rebuild it with a snap of their fingers. These automated super-duplication facilities had to go, and the sooner, the better.

"In that case...hmm...I'm not saying it would be very honourable, but shouldn't the psykers launch a second attack upon the Necron fleet and rid us of this problematic Necron commander?"

"Unfortunately, while I realise this attack may not have been particularly impressive to your sensors," Taylor feigned a yawn. "It took most of the strength of twenty Librarian Marines and one hundred battle-psykers aboard the *Enterprise* to prepare, channel, and execute this attack. It will take several hours before they recover from their exhaustion...and we must be careful with them. Other enemies, after all, can exploit their moments of vulnerability now."

For the time being, the Warp remained calm, despite the null-zone being brought down. It was possible hell wasn't going to break loose in the next several hours...and it was also possible the opposite was true. There was simply no way to know.

"You are correct that this Necron fleet is a major problem, however," Taylor replied after reading the newest reports signalled on her personal hololithic screens. "I doubt Zahndrekh is going to do us the favour of throwing himself into the first trap we set in his path."

"That seems...unlikely, my Lady," the blonde-haired Rogue Trader conceded.

"Nonetheless, we still have a large amount of time to inflict direct damage to the Ymga Monolith."

Wolfgang gave her a dubious expression.

"I know land-based operations are your specialty, my Lady, not mine, but this isn't Commorragh and the Webway. Landing a significant force without the anti-air batteries of the Monolith slaughtering them is going to take days...days we likely don't have."

"Yes," Taylor agreed...before smirking. "How fortunate for us we don't have to care about these pesky Necron defences."

The golden-winged commander of Battle Group Volga turned to Firedrake T'klis Rubix of the Magma Spiders.

"Can you open a communication with Princeps Senioris Darius Sobek, please, T'klis? I believe Legio Astorum was enthusiastic about walking on a Necron world..."

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**High Orbit over Kasr Holn**

**Retribution-class Battleship *Intolerant***

**8.200.310M35**

**Admiral Ormuz Vandire**

"They can't be here! Their entire fleet was moving towards Saint Josmane's Hope! Our auspexes must be wrong!"

"They're nearly at effective range, Admiral! It isn't a mistake, the heretic fleet is really advancing towards us! We have an estimation of at least thirty Traitor Battleships incoming, led by that gigantic...pyramid thing!"

"And I'm telling you, this is their sorcery!" Ormuz retorted. "They can't be here!"

Why was it so evident to him and not for everyone else?

"Admiral, with all due respect, we must engage with the fixed defences in the next seconds! The enemy outnumbers us that badly-"

A massive explosion illuminated the armaglass of the *Intolerant*'s flag bridge.

"Golden Throne...they have destroyed the *Prince of Terra* in a single attack! The void shields didn't defend against this attack!"

Ormuz felt his face take an expression of abject terror despite all his efforts to hide it. The sister-ship of the *Intolerant*, destroyed in a single attack they'd not even seen coming? It was-

"Admiral, we can't stay there! They are going to slaughter us, if we are-"

"SILENCE!" The son of Lord Xerxes Vandire screamed. "We stand our ground, we have the support of Kasr Holn's defences-"

"Admiral, these defences are no guaranteed protection against the sorcery they just deployed-"

"Cruiser *Victor of Centauri* destroyed! Two Frigates destroyed! Light damage to the Battlecruiser *Aquila's Revenge*!"

"We-"

Against all traditions, the lithocast lit and the three-dimensional image of an armoured Space Marine in blue, gold and red materialised. Ormuz recognised him immediately, it was Captain Marcellinus of the Knights Unyielding Chapter...and he looked positively furious.

"IMBECILE!" The Astartes roared, and Ormuz flinched under his terrible gaze. "WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? FOR THE ENEMY TO ANNIHILATE YOUR FLEET?"

"The Imperial Navy is not under your command, Captain Marcellinus!"

The blonde-haired Knight Unyielding took a deep breath before baring his teeth. Ormuz thought it was the most terrifying smile he'd ever seen an Angel of Death make.

"If we left you to your own devices, there wouldn't be an Imperial Fleet tomorrow!" The Space Marine barked in a tone that brooked no argument. "Divert all power to your engines and use Kasr Holn's as cover to prepare a counterattack!"

"They have-"

"If the next words I hear aren't 'we will obey your orders, Captain' I will personally come to your flagship and use this Bolter," the massive weapon was raised with one hand like it weighed nothing for him, "to blow what little brains you may have out of your skull before throwing the rest of your corpse in an incinerator! Am I clear?"

"Yes..." Ormuz hated how weak his voice sounded. He had to cough and raise his voice several times before finding the strength to answer with a powerful tone. "Yes, you have made yourself perfectly clear. We will follow your strategy."

Humiliation of all humiliations, he saw that at least two-thirds of Battlefleet Solar Decimus was already moving. That bastard of Marcellinus had already gone behind his back and contacted dozens of officers without his permission!

"Do as he said," the *de jure* fleet commander of the spatial theatre around Kasr Holn ordered. For the next seconds, the son of the High Lord of the Adeptus Administratum took his time to ensure no one was looking in his direction before accessing the core-database of the *Intolerant*.

The Astartes thought he could threaten his life and get away with it? Ignore thousands of laws which ensured the Adeptus Astartes would never hold authority over the warships of the Imperial Navy?

No, Marcellinus would pay for this insult. And if his Chapter supported him, the Knights Unyielding would pay too-

"Admiral, we have lost four Frigates!"

Assuming they survived today, obviously.

**Kasr Holn**

**Gladius' Edge Spaceport**

**Coryphaus Kol Badar**

If things were proceeding according to plan, Kol Badar's landing should have been greeted by a crowd of prostrated mortals.

Instead the terminal of the Gladius' Edge Spaceport where his force arrived was in chaos, and not the one the plan called for. Mortals – the non-enslaved kind – were running for their lives. Other mortals were also fighting tooth and nail against the Volscani Cataphracts they had released in the first waves.

"The runt has failed again," Kol grunted to his Astartes, seeing no reason to hide his disdain for Marduk. Hopefully Jarulek would allow him to personally crucify Marduk for this failure. "Kill every mortal who is not prostrating himself before the Bearers of the Word! Kill them all and locate the cargo Blessed Lorgar wants!"

Jarulek would have given his troops a sermon, but Kol wasn't a Dark Apostle, and every instinct cultivated over the entirety of the Legion Wars told him that if he didn't salvage the situation, the Seventeenth Legion risked failing its objectives – a disaster which would be so terrible falling upon their blades wouldn't be a relief.

"OFFER THEIR SOULS TO THE GODS! KILL THE UNBELIEVERS!

"DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR!"

"CADIA STANDS!"

Kol Badar charged and his Combi-Bolter began claiming new lives for the glory of Lorgar. The Lasguns were not coordinated enough, and the mortals froze as they always did against a Legionnaire charge.

"You aren't on Cadia," the Coryphaus taunted them as he severed limbs and heads with his new sword. The gift of Dark Apostle Jarulek was better than his power talons, the bloodthirsty aura of the weapon included. This was war as he loved it, and with each heartbeat, Kol thinned the ranks of the mortals, crushed the skulls of their feeble leaders, and shot whoever showed an ounce of courage by trying to challenge him to a duel. "YOU ARE WEAK! YOUR WORLD FALLS TODAY!"

It was half-impressive for mortals, but the regiment's survivors didn't break, didn't run...and he had made sure to kill the Commissar first. The Legionnaires under his command really had to kill the entire force to clear the terminal. As satisfying as it was, the military strategist he was worried about the time lost.

"My Coryphaus!" A young blood of his Cohort contacted him via the agreed vox-frequency. "We have located the containers Blessed Lorgar wants...they are one kilometre south of your position in the Dark Acolyte's custody."

"I'm on my way." Kol answered, stepping on the corpses of the mortals and cleaning his sword. His mood, temporarily improved by the easy massacre, was beginning to sour again. Speaking with the runt was certain to be a litany of excuses and shifting blame, because it couldn't be Marduk's fault, oh no!

Not two minutes later, the time required to break through another regiment and run to the position his warriors had indicated, and Kol Badar realised he hadn't been angry enough.

"Reassure me," the Coryphaus began, his voice full of cold fury, as the runt blustered something he ignored. "Tell me no one has seen what is in these containers."

The fact one was breached and onyx-coloured Noctilith fragments had leaked out of this hole was not a reason for optimism, but Kol had to ask.

"We were ambushed by Tech-Priests of Stygies! How was I supposed to know they were searching for rumours of Noctilith Pylons!"

Disaster. No, that was too weak a description. Absolute disaster? Awful fiasco?

"How long?" He turned to the lackey of the runt. "How long since this...costly and deadly ambush of the red-robed fools?"

"Forty minutes?" unlike his master, the warrior seemed to realise how badly they had screwed up.

"Forty minutes," Kol Badar shook his head. "No wonder the mortals and everything they can gather are trying to retake the spaceport."

"We have seized orbital supremacy," the idiot replied with an insufferable air of nonchalance, "let them come, we will be able to-"

"We can't fire upon them from orbit as long as the Noctilith isn't aboard our ships!" The Coryphaus roared. Was this moron of an Acolyte unable to grasp the simplest military realities?

As if to validate his dark thoughts, a green Thunderhawk strafed a nearby control tower and thousands of their mortal slaves.

"And it's getting worse..."

"It's only a lone Thunderhawk."

Yes, the runt understood nothing about enemy intentions. In the end, maybe crucifying him was too gentle...

"That is a Thunderhawk of the Aurora Chapter, Guilliman's tank specialists," Kol grunted to his men, he wasn't going to waste his saliva speaking to Marduk. "If they follow their Codex like the whelps they are, we have a column of Land Raiders incoming from the south-west."

Kor Phaeron had told him there were two companies of these Codex-worshipping bastards upon Kasr Holn. If they followed their doctrine with typical Ultramarine-blindness, they would easily have twenty Predators and as many Land Raiders, most of them built to the highest specifications. He, on the other hand, had landed with only the antique and slow tanks of the Volscani Cataphracts and the Vandal slave-dogs sacrificed to plunge Kasr Holn into unending war. The spaceport's fortifications were already halfway destroyed, and there was no way he could rebuild them before the other Space Marines arrived.

"On my order, send all the Volscani Cataphracts south-west against the armoured column rushing to reinforce the mortals!"

"This is going to leave us-"

"Acolyte," Kol glared at the runt. "If in the next ten minutes the Noctilith isn't in a macro-hauler on its way to the *Word Bearer* or the *Trisagion*, I will personally make sure to rip off your legs and arms...before throwing you into a Helbrute's sarcophagus."

The look of horror the runt showed was one he would treasure for the rest of his life.

"Better," Kol commented as the Dark Acolyte began to bark new orders at his bodyguards and slaves to repair the damaged container and move all of them to the Landers awaiting them. "Now...aren't those a bit light? Are you sure you were able to extract all the Noctilith from the secret dig sites?"

**Cadia**

**Kasr Tyrok**

**8.201.310M35**

**Governor Primus Andreas von Waldersee**

"You were right. The heretics had their reasons for launching this sort of over-complicated plan."

Andreas could have disagreed for several more hours, but it wouldn't do the armies of Cadia any good and he was a loyal soul sworn to the God-Emperor of Holy Terra.

"I would prefer not to be," the Warmaster replied. "The heretics have placed us in a fiendishly dangerous situation at Kasr Holn. And it is Kasr Holn which is at the heart of their plans, I have no doubt about it. Still, I don't know how they found an underground Pylon site which had so far remained unknown to us. The Mechanicus has only found three Pylons on Kasr Holn, and the Magi have just contacted us to affirm those are still in our hands."

"As much as I don't like to say it, we must have high-ranked traitors at Kasr Holn." It was the only scenario which made sense. Nothing less than extensive geological survey could have found a Pylon which had escaped the Tech-Priests' search. And to transport it to the spaceport, the administrative forms alone betrayed a dangerous level of infiltration inside the local Administratum and Munitorum.

"I agree." Warmaster Ender Trevayne turned to one of his personal assistants and whispered what seemed to be a question before grimacing at whatever answer he received. "Well, it seems the situation has simplified itself somewhat. Judging by their actions and the way they manoeuvre, I can make a hypothesis or two about the Traitor Marine's goals. Above all, they want Noctilith for their nefarious purposes."

"Why not assault Cadia to take it, then?" Andreas waved at the representation of the Elysian Fields on the right side of the command room. "I perfectly understand grabbing Pylons from Kasr Holn while we weren't looking in the first place has to be easier than a full invasion of Cadia, but I know how many Pylons we have...and how few there are on Kasr Holn. Even if they managed to wipe out all defending garrisons and stole all the Noctilith of that planet, they wouldn't get half of a thousandth of our chief Fortress World's."

"I am not convinced they have abandoned the idea of seizing Cadia's Noctilith," a complex combination was executed, and at the edge of the Warp Miasma clouding everything, eight Traitor starships shone were modified to take a malevolent black colour. "The Styx Heavy Cruisers and their lethal attack craft are blinding Lord Admiral von Bismarck to the true threat, I fear."

Andreas was a man who believed a lot of dangerous secrets were best left to the Holy Inquisition, but this formation was eminently recognisable.

"They are preparing a ritual."

"And not a small one," the Warmaster approved. "In my opinion, it is one of the reasons they were so keen on bleeding their most expendable forces on our defences. Whatever they intend to do, it is going to require the Cadian System being ravaged by war."

"Saint Josmane's Hope’s destruction was not enough for these Traitors?"

"Evidently not," the commander of the Cadian theatre replied with a smile. "Suggestions?"

"Well, first we should definitely order the Lord Commissar of Kasr Holn to execute Ormuz Vandire," the Governor Primus didn't need to look at his men to know this measure would be met with fierce approval. "If the Space Marines hadn't intervened, the situation at Kasr Holn would be far worse than it currently is."

And for the sake of it, the Cadian commander was ready to acknowledge the situation there was horrible. The Shock Troopers had lost more than ten regiments with all hands, the Orar Grenadiers were busy dying against the monstrous Night Lords, and there were so many horrors which landed, the Knights of House Vyronii and Navaros were killing one hundred major enemies for each loss they themselves suffered...and they were still being overwhelmed.

"I can't do that." Ender Trevayne grimaced. "Or rather yes, I can, but my life expectancy as Warmaster wouldn't last past this battle. The title of Warmaster gives enormous privileges and authority, but if I antagonise the Adeptus Administratum and the Imperial Navy High Lords..."

The Warmaster didn't finish his sentence, the implication was clear enough.

"What do you intend to do, then?"

"Don't worry, Ormuz Vandire is going to be on a starship bound for Holy Terra the moment I can justify sending him off," the Armageddon-born officer promised. "I confirm Captain Marcellinus as space commander around Kasr Holn. He is to continue his hit-and-run attacks on the Raiders and escorts of the heretics."

"You still focus on the escorts?"

"Of all the starships we have seen, the Navy and the Astartes have destroyed a third of them. And the Heldrakes and other monsters can't leave the gate if they have nothing to transport them elsewhere. Whoever fights them next, the Traitor Astartes will bleed enduring torpedo bombardments."

It was a somewhat logical reasoning, yes. The Warmaster profited from his silence to turn towards a man in black robes who had not said a word or showed any advisor role.

"This ritual mustn't succeed. Do you agree?"

"I agree," the words were somewhat...wrong. Not the metallic apparatuses of the Tech-Priests...just wrong. "The Execution Force is going to deal with them."

Andreas wasn't going to say he was sorry to see this being leave the room.

"The heretics have made a mistake here."

"You mean...aside from the fact they clearly bungled their Noctilith robbery?"

"Apart from that, yes," the Warmaster answered. "They try to threaten us with their massive fleet, but except at Saint Josmane's Hope and Kasr Holn, they refuse to directly engage our largest and most dangerous Battlefleets. And their Warp Miasma, for all the problems it causes us...it is a mark of weakness."

"It may be they don't want to give us an idea of the order of battle of what they want to unleash in Segmentum Obscurus."

"No," the other officer bluntly disagreed. "I rather think they have a lot of vulnerable supply and support units they don't want us to discover."

The Warmaster looked at the largest war raging on all planets one last time, before nodding once more.

"They have made a mistake and they are going to pay for it," the last words caught him completely off-guard. "Priority message to these coordinates, Alfred. It's time for the Rogue Traders to earn their pay."

Andreas von Waldersee coughed.

"Forgive me, Warmaster, but I didn't see any starships belonging to Rogue Traders in our order of battle." It had not been surprising when the plans were made: the holders of Warrant of Trade rarely considered the Cadian Gate a place to risk their investments and hulls.

In hindsight, however...

"Yes, Rogue Traders."

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

**Warlord *Terribilis Vindicta***

**8.201.310M35**

**Princeps Senioris Darius Sobek of Legio Astorum**

The aftershock of the teleportation subsided and Princeps Senioris Darius Sobek breathed out in relief.

He was alive...and his venerable Engine was undamaged.

"Legio Astorum, report."

"*Meritus Catigatio*, we are ready to teach the xenos the errors of their ways."

"*Militem Argento*, we are prepared to walk."

"*Expeditio Sacra*, we stand ready to obey His Will."

One by one, the twenty-three other Warlords of his command answered, followed by twenty-six Reaver Princeps, two Komodo commanders, the four belligerent sirs of the Warbringer Nemesis, and finally the thirty-nine Warhound pack-hunters.

All were operational and ready to fight in less than one minute.

Ninety-six God-Engines of the Collegia Titanica were operational after what had to be the largest and longest teleportation of their long and proud history.

"The Chosen was right. The difference in teleportation technology allows the beacon-breakers to teleport safely here," his First Moderati informed him.

"She was," Darius canted via their Noosphere link. "Now it is time for us to do our part and carve our exploits into the living metal of this xenos battlestation."

"The infiltration teams will be fully deployed in twelve seconds, Princeps Senioris," his second Moderati added for his benefit.

"In that case, a glorious day await." This might be his last operation before they plunged him into an amniotic tank, but the pain and suffering were all worth it. "Legio Astorum! Begin the walk. Alpha Targets are the energy-producing matrixes of the Necrons and every piece of machinery tied to their shields or anti-air defences. The rest of their military command have been assigned a Beta priority. Do not hit the signatures which register as the generators of artificial gravity. Onwards, Titans of Lucius!"

"We will banish the darkness!"

As honour demanded, the Volcano Cannon of *Terribilis Vindicta* was the first to fire and score a hit. The green shimmering veil protecting a shield generator collapsed...and his triple-barrel Laser Blasters had no difficulty finishing the job.

"Shield Generator destroyed!"

The Warlord Titans one by one imitated him, and for all he was *Terribilis Vindicta* now, there was something epic about seeing twenty-four Titans roaring and unleashing their fury.

The Necron defences and infrastructure were extremely fortified. They were barely at the surface of the Ymga Monolith, and Darius Sobek had seen Fortress Worlds which didn't have a third of these massive macro-cannons to defend themselves with. Against the firepower of Legio Astorum, the Necrons were under-equipped. The Reavers followed in the Warlords' wake, and Gatling Blasters broke the complex xenos guns while trampling their infantry.

"A lot of hover-vehicles incoming, my Princeps."

"The Warhounds will take care of them...if the Warbringers don't first."

These units had their shields up, but against the Plasma Blastguns, the Vulcan Mega-Bolters, the Inferno Guns, and the other numerous examples of Lucius' state-of-the-art weaponry, they were eradicated faster than you could sing a canticle for the machine-spirits.

"Maximal aggression, maximal offense," Darius had to grit his teeth as *Terribilis Vindicta*, far from being sated by this raw destruction, asked for more, contested his authority to inform him it was not enough. Any other day he was the one who would ask for more of the God-Engine's formidable spirit. The irony of it wasn't missed.

"WE ARE NECRONS. SURRENDER AND DIE."

"They should adapt their diplomatic overtures to reflect the military reality," his first Moderati joked. "We have destroyed twenty medium-sized shield generators in this sector, incidentally."

"Maybe this will teach them a lesson about not placing their critical nodes in a single location." Darius groaned as the taste of his blood appeared in his mouth. And his right arm was in pain. The Princeps Senioris gritted his teeth and continued commanding...and firing his Volcano Cannon.

"Maybe," secondary systems located beneath that silver dome. "*Expeditio Sacra* is trying to gain momentum on our left to reach the firing position first."

"Someone is in need of being reminded of his place," Darius replied as ineffectual Necron weapons tried and failed to pierce his Void Shields. "Let us do it with a new tally of broken foes which will never again threaten Legio Astorum."

**Cryptek Ah-hotep**

If someone had told her one year ago that in a single battle Simut would get himself incinerated and that some gigantic enemy walkers would manage to tread upon the Throne's surface, Ah-hotep would not have believed it.

But they were here, these blue-gold machines. They were here, and the Szarekhan phalanxes, which towered over the other Dynasties with their overinflated sense of arrogance, were unable to stop them...or even slow them down.

Had she been alone, Ah-hotep would have cackled in glee. To see the destroyers of her cherished Muphekta Dynasty brought so low was everything she had prayed to the C'Tan to make happen since she had awoken from the Great Sleep. The only way things could have been better would have been if she had been able to kill Simut herself...but since the Szarekhan tyrant had gotten himself killed *and* humiliated, one couldn't ask for too much.

But she wasn't alone...and so Ah-hotep had to play the role of the subservient Cryptek utterly loyal to the Szarekhan Dynasty. For now.

Behind a loyal mask however, the agent of the Technomandrites of Magistrakh was literally giggling at the sight of Overlord Sobekhotep. The ruling noble of the Throne of Oblivion had been in a bad mood since the Arch-Thief Trazyn sabotaged his Replicator Forges and the Star-Eater Drive, but that was nothing compared to the devastating fit of rage the Dust-Maker was having now.

"WHY HAVE YOU FAILED TO STOP THEM? YOU ARE A DISGRACE TO YOUR RANK, NEMESOR!"

A molecular-disintegration ray removed the 'defeatist' noble from the throne room...and material reality.

"My Gracious Overlord! With so many shield generators destroyed in the Seven Frost Novas' Quadrant, the enemy fleet is able to support its walkers! Many of our greatest war machines have been destroyed before they could even engage the enemy!"

"THEN USE THE ANNIHILATION ARKS AND THE INFANTRY IN A COORDINATED ASSAULT!"

"We can't, Mighty Overlord!" another Nemesor spoke. "These huge walkers have the same jammers their warships use."

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?"

"I am saying that it will take time to muster a proper counterattack, Overlord," the courageous – and in her humble opinion, suicidal – noble answered. "With so many energy nodes crippled and this mass teleportation being unexpected, we need some time to encircle them. Once it is done, however, their end is certain. Our firepower is limitless, and the enemy has landed no infantry or any form of support to help them. And besides-"

"BESIDES?"

The Nemesor suddenly seemed to realize his arguments had not calmed Sobekhotep at all.

"Besides, we have secondary shields, and the Mephrit Crypteks are already hard at work repairing the damage. This is a blow to the Throne, yes, but one which will be forgotten in-"

A new blast of energy later, and the Silent King's Own was short one Nemesor. Bah, there were so many of them, he wouldn't be missed.

"THIS. WON'T. BE. FORGOTTEN!" Oh, someone was beyond enraged. "VERMIN WALK ON OUR SACRED THRONE OF OBLIVION! MAYBE SOME OF YOU THINK THIS IS A TOLERABLE SITUATION! STEP FORWARD IF YOU WANT TO DEFEND THIS IDEA!"

Predictably, nobody moved.

"AND WHERE IS ZAHNDREKH? I SUMMONED HIM! I WANT HIM TO PROSTRATE HIMSELF FOR HIS RIDICULOUS DELAY IN FLANKING THE VERMIN FLEET!"

"The fleet of Lord Zahndrekh is experiencing...ah...communication issues."

No one spoke following the Cryptek's announcement. The pressure in the throne room grew immensely...Ah-hotep couldn't describe it properly.

But for the first time, Sobekhotep appeared to realise the peril to his rule that was approaching. This wasn't a mutiny against the Szarekhan Dynasty, far from it. But it was the closest thing to disobedience that had happened in millions of years.

And this was Zahndrekh the Unbreakable they were speaking about. One of the most famous and skilled Sautekh Generals. It wasn't a minor underling's misdeeds one could erase with a mind-wipe program.

"Summon him again," the Dust-Maker's fury abated at last. "And order all Nemesors of the Seven Frost Novas' Quadrant to converge on the vermin walkers with their greatest weapons! This ridiculous farce has lasted long enough!"

Ah-hotep continued to play the role of the dutiful Cryptek, and it was in this role she began to summon new phalanxes on said Quadrant. And if said troops were teleported right in front of the blue-gold machines where they died in less time than it took to say it...well, she obeyed the orders of her superiors, no?

Still, as the words of the defunct Nemesor replayed in her mind, Ah-hotep understood the dead noble had made an excellent point. Oh, the enemy could destroy some anti-landing batteries and a section or two of shield machinery, but the lasting damage would remain extremely limited...and easy to repair. These weren't unique components like the Star-Eater Drive.

But the enemy, these humans – the previous battle against them had given her a small trove of information – were well-prepared. So they had to know that.

What was...ah, now she understood. At the very moment the walkers had teleported, they had sent infiltration units.

The walkers weren't the real threat. This was just a feint. They were likely going to teleport out when the infiltration party was successful.

Something still bothered her, though. What sort of weapon did these curious lifeforms believe could do greater damage than their largest walker-guns?

**Sister** **Alice Gaius**

"I still don't see why you spend three hours in prayer every day."

When she had joined the Templar Sororitas, Alice had not thought debating her time schedule and theology lessons with a giant spider would be involved. But here she was.

"And we still don't know why you pestered Her Celestial Highness until she added her own name to your species' High Gothic classification."

"It added a majestic tone!" Ilmarina, first and only Adjutant-Spider to have undergone the process to become a mechanical spider, protested. "And we didn't pester the Webmistress."

Claire next to her whispered something into the vox, and unavoidably the proud arachnid caught it.

"What was that?"

"I was saying, oh noble Ilmarina," Claire repeated in a hurry, "that sending ten thousand messages to Her Celestial Highness sounds a bit...invasive."

The Adjutant-Spider made a series of rattles before increasing her speed once more, which meant she recognised the invalidity of her arguments. The twelve Templar Sororitas serving as her bodyguards pushed their power armours harder.

One minute later, they arrived at their destination...well, almost. A gigantic wall and multiple security systems – undoubtedly lethal, given the Necrons' security doctrine – barred the way.

"Time to see if the thief respected his agreements with the Webmistress," the Adjutant-Spider went into a bipedal position. It was less impressive than when Artemis did it, for Ilmarina was 'only' the size of a Leman Russ, but there was something incredibly beautiful in her movements, for the arachnid was entirely built from precious metals and highly-valuable technology. According to the rumour – that Her Celestial Highness had not chosen to naysay – the body had cost more than an entire Armoured Regiment.

From a secret compartment in her body, the biotransferred *Araneidae Gigantis Nyxian Amazonia Hebert* grabbed what looked to be a strange key, inscribed with dozens of xenos glyphs, before placing it into one out of three holes before the very threatening green lights.

"Prepare yourselves, young ones," Ilmarina told them, "if the thief was wrong about the measures, we are going to need to run for our lives very, very quickly."

"And if he was right?"

The defences vanished. Not deactivated, or progressively went inactive, they just...vanished. The wall was there one second, the next it wasn't. Massive constructions which had to be annihilation guns disappeared from view, either descending into gigantic elevators or merging with the walls.

"Necron technology is truly terrifying," the young Nyxian Sister commented. "Thank the God-Emperor we have Lady Taylor Hebert to lead us in this fight."

"Yes, all praise the Webmistress," Ilmarina agreed before she agitated several of her legs. "Let's move on. The Legio Astorum's assault is not going to last eternally before the Necrons react in force."

"Agreed. Which set of stairs is the correct one?"

"The right one. We are going to take the servants' tunnels. It's highly likely they changed the passwords and command protocols of the nobility access."

The next two minutes proved this course was correct. The Templar Sororitas met only a few 'Canoptek Scarabs', and Ilmarina was able to neutralise them without a single shot being fired.

And finally they arrived in the hall which had been their destination all along.

Did Alice say 'hall'? No, it was too big to be a hall. The young woman couldn't be sure, but it was possible the chamber would be able to fit the entirety of the Azkaellon Stadium on Nyx within its confines.

Then again, maybe the gigantic amount of free space made this zone look bigger than it truly was. But she didn't think so.

"Mighty Emperor, spread Your divine light to protect us from the darkness, for we serve your Living Saint." Claire began as they approached the immense black cube which was the only thing of note built here. Then again, knowing what was inside, the Sororitas would not suggest anything be built next to it.

For all her faith in the God-Emperor, for the myriad of miracles and extraordinary deeds performed by Her Celestial Highness and the Dawnbreaker Guard, Alice was very aware there was something extremely powerful held prisoner in that cube of utter blackness. An obsidian colour which when she thought about it was extremely familiar.

"Ilmarina? I didn't think to ask the question before leaving, but is it possible these...cubes...are built from pure Noctilith?

"I think they refined it first into the anti-Warp substance the Nyxian analysts officially designated as 'Sepulcrand', Alice," that the large arachnid called her by her first name, a widely out-of-character behaviour for her, betrayed how nervous she was. "But yes, this is Noctilith. It is one of the many uses the Necrons have found for it. They are also using it for their Pylons and all their anti-Warp weaponry, obviously, and we think it also is a main component in their AI cores...one of the two theoretical reasons why those haven't gone mad and tried to unleash a new Cybernetic War."

"That is the first reason. What is the second?"

"Don't tell the Tech-Priests I said this, but...well, humans aren't that good at programming AIs...compared to the Necrons anyway."

They continued running as they spoke. The distance was so vast and there was no time to lose.

Ilmarina stopped at a point well short of the black cube, albeit one which was richly decorated in a series of golden xenos symbols.

*"Place the first Melta charge here, please."*

Their orders from Her Celestial Highness being to obey the Adjutant-Spider at all times – the arachnid was regularly anointed in Bacta and blessed by Lady Taylor Hebert, she was as incorruptible as one could get – it took five seconds for the command to be executed. The explosion was not exactly spectacular, after watching Battle Group Volga deliver terrible retribution upon the Necron space fleets and defences trying to kill them for hours.

But for the room, the effect was visibly spectacular. The large veins of green energy present across the room flickered violently before a sort of vividly blue energy engulfed them. In a matter of seconds, the immensity was not the penumbra it had been, but brightly illuminated.

It wasn't the light of the God-Emperor, however. It was more the kind of terrible beauty found on Ice Worlds of the Imperium, the kind of spectacle you could only appreciate in void-sealed armours or behind several panels of armaglass.

It wasn't only her imagination or her faith being tested. The systems of her Angel's Sword Power Armour indicated that somehow, the temperature was dropping.

The blue energy rose in intensity until it became utterly blinding for her armour's sensors.

And then **it** was there.

It was vaguely humanoid, but...it was definitely not human. It never had been. It looked vaguely like a figure of a thousand shades of blue, levitating several metres above the ground.

"**Sobekhotep should have been my next visitor**," the creature spoke with words so powerful Alice thought the very space around it was unable to endure them. It was a voice which crossed the lack of air, the ineluctable march of aeons. "**Instead...twelve descendants of primates...and an Adjutant to a pretender. Speak."**

"My Mistress, the Great Webmistress and Lady of the Swarm, salutes you, Hsiagn'la, Voidsong of the Ten Frost Nebulas, the Frosthell, Victor over Ten Thousand Old Ones. In her name, I propose an alliance."

"**An alliance**?" Had it been possible, Alice thought the C'Tan would have felt amusement. "**Careful, little spider. You play with forces you can't possibly comprehend.**"

"You made one with Phaerakh Neferten. Why not my Mistress?"

"**So you are part of the Nerushlatset efforts to regain their lost liberty**."

"We have a great desire to destroy this pyramidal battlestation too!"

"**Yes**," the C'Tan teleported a thousand times in several seconds...or at least it felt that way...before once more appearing before Ilmarina. "**Yes, you do. What does the enemy of Iash'uddra propose?**"

"The Webmistress proposes...your liberty against your military help to inflict as much heavy damage to the Throne of Oblivion as possible."

"**Tempting**," Hsiagn'la admitted. "**But it won't be enough. The Szarekhans have too many countermeasures to stop me if you manage to breach my prison. And the Throne remains too powerful, empowered by too many shards of the other Star Gods. And you lack the power to hurt them where the Necrons are truly vulnerable**."

"Does that mean-"

"**I will accept your alliance, little spider**," the C'Tan confirmed. "**But if you want it to last beyond my initial escape, your Webmistress, claimant to the Endless Swarm's Throne, must come to negotiate with me in person**."

"This might prove...difficult." The Adjutant-Spider answered.

"**It will happen. I see. The time streams have changed, and the light of this galaxy is rising one last time...but for Oblivion or Salvation**?"

"Your words do not frighten me," Ilmarina declared, which was frankly exemplary courage. "The Webmistress told me you would try to confuse me! I stand true and obey her will! Glory to the Swarm!"

"**We are the C'Tan. We do not lie. Let me prove it to you**." Hsiagn'la rose one meter higher and the expression on its face was definitely malicious if this humanoid thing could be said to even have expressions. "**By the fault of the Necrons, your Artificial Intelligences found the dead shell of Llandu'gor. His curse imprinted itself in the circuits of your species' metallic creations. As long as you do not have real protectors, they will never stop rising against you, no matter how many safeguards you create**."

\*\*\*\*

**WANTED**

**DEAD ONLY**

**ARKOS**

'**THE FAITHLESS'**

'**THE SCION OF ALPHARIUS'**

**TRAITOR SPACE MARINE**

**LEADER OF THE FAITHLESS WARBAND**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-GAMMA THREAT**

**ENDENGERMENT OF GAMMA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**BEWARE: THE FAITHLESS HAVE SHOWN A TENDENCY TO OPERATE USING THE APPEARANCE OF LOYALIST ASTARTES**

**REWARD: 2 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 PLANET, 3 STRIKE CRUISERS**

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**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadia Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Battleship *Anarchy's Heart***

**8.203.310M35**

**Warlord Arkos the Faithless**

Arkos smiled as enemy ship after enemy ship entered the auspex range of the *Anarchy's Heart*.

"Look at that," the Alpha Legionnaire noted sardonically. "It appears that, contrary to what Erebus and Kor Phaeron told us, someone has indeed been able to match the genius of Lorgar."

"And with gusto," his specialist in fleet operations added his two Gelts. "They have traced a perfect course to pass fifty thousand kilometres behind the slowest supply ships. That way, they will avoid the fleet of Sota-Nul and its Death Guard escorts."

"Where did they find said ships? The Battlefleets are all busy defending the Cadian planets!"

"Identification of the enemy task force at the moment indicates ten capital ships, all at least having a Cruiser tonnage. Is that a Bellerophon Assault Cruiser? I didn't know the Imperial Navy still had a couple of those in service."

"The Imperial Navy doesn't," Arkos replied thoughtfully, before reminiscing about the top-secret record he had once received from some of his agents imbedded in the Inquisition. "But the Band of the Hawk does."

"Lord Arkos...err...no offense, but I've never heard of a Band of the Hawk."

"Not surprising," the warlord of the Alpha Legion told his vassal. "They are a coalition of Rogue Traders who operated in Segmentum Pacificus until recently. The Imperium always had a distinct shortage of loyalist warships, and the 'Band of the Hawk' served as trouble-shooters as the reconquest of Pacificus went on. The fact they're here means the Segmentum must be pacified."

And that someone with deep pockets must have offered them a very profitable contract. Rogue Traders rarely went near the Eye of Terror, and even martial mercenaries like the 'Hawks' would think twice before facing the might of a Black Crusade.

"This is all very interesting, my Lord," his second pointed out, "but assuming I can still correctly read hololith information, the warband of the Daggerfangs is placed exactly where these Hawks are heading to intercept a raid like this one. I'm not saying there aren't two or three ships which will manage to break through their defensive formation, but I think it's going to cost them dearly for little gain...and they are going to be granted a single attack wave, not two."

"You're right," Arkos agreed seriously, "it is problematic."

The leader of the Faithless caressed the marshal's baton placed on the table before him.

"Remind me how our overtures to Vykus Skayle went?"

"We had to kill the Legionnaires we contacted aboard. They literally worship Kor Phaeron, those blinded fools."

Arkos watched the situation unfold for several more seconds...and nodded.

"In that case, it's time we get to work. Activate all our operatives aboard the 'Grand Armada'. When the *Anarchy's Heart* will succumb, the Legionnaires and all saboteurs must continue the fight for the cause. Though the primary objectives take utmost priority, if you have the opportunity to further decrease the effectives of the Emperor's Children, you have my benediction to do so."

His officers chosen for independent command struck their chest in salute and left the bridge.

Soon, Arkos was the sole Space Marine on the bridge, leaving only the mortal men and women to manoeuvre the *Anarchy's Heart*.

"The Word Bearers believe their religion must be a disgusting parody of what it once was. They believe there must be creeds. They believe there must be a *status quo* and *rules*." The warlord wasn't speaking into a vox relay or another form of communication device, but he knew his warband could hear him. "This is offending. This is pathetic. We didn't break the leash chaining us to our twin Primarchs' will to find a new slavery at the feet of the Three. We didn't refuse the conformity of the *Codex Astartes* only to beg for more *Litanies of Lorgar*. We didn't rebel to toil under the yoke of things which treat us as slaves!"

Arkos took the marshal's baton – taken from the cold dead hands of a Loyalist at the Siege of Terra – and examined it carefully one last time...before deliberately breaking it with a brutal strike.

"I reject Chaos Undivided and its false promises! I reject Lorgar and his foolish vision! If this masquerade is what the Gods expect of us, to die kneeling in service to the Seventeenth, then they are not my Gods! No more order! No more rules! No more complex rituals! Let us reveal our true nature!"

"LET THERE BE ANARCHY!"

"HAIL MALAL!"

And the *Anarchy's Heart* opened fire on their cousins of the Daggerfangs.

Arkos laughed.

"Did you see that one coming, Lorgar?"

**Bellerophon-class Heavy Assault Cruiser *Dragonslayer***

**Rogue Trader Guts**

"They asked us to put our lives on the line. What they don't understand is that everyone's life is always on the line. We live in an uncaring universe where next to nothing stands between our souls and the horrors of bygone eras. The real question...is whether you want to risk it for your comrades? If not, you will be another pawn for that evil bitch we call destiny."

"Until the last words, I wondered if we had an impostor replacing you."

"Shut up, Griffith!"

Predictably, the other Captains of the Band of the Hawk chuckled.

"Now that Guts has struck us down with his philosophy-"

"Hey!"

"We can return to the business of killing the heretics. Casca?"

His lover was prompt delivering the essential news.

"Since the Traitor Battleship has destroyed the Battle-Barge which represented the most dangerous obstacle, the way is opened. We won't be able to do more than two cycles of attack, but this should allow us to cripple or kill about ten percent of their supply fleet."

"Only ten percent?" asked Pippin.

"Have you seen the endless quantity of starships they have?" It was a rhetorical question if there ever was one. Now that the Miasma was unable to hide them, the heretic armada was revealed in all its ugly glory.

It was an impressive spectacle, that much Guts wasn't going to deny. The technology was still trying to distinguish what was warship and what was supply ship, but across four million cubic kilometres, there were easily twenty thousand hulls...at least.

"Thank the God-Emperor the majority are supply ships and army transports," Judeau muttered. "Though I don't see how they built so many of them. Even the Warmaster didn't get that many army transports to reinforce Cadia."

"Well, they are here," Griffith smiled. "And while I am always ready to stand by the belief the enemy of my enemy is just another enemy waiting to strike at us...in this case this enemy has given us a priceless opportunity. We have the chance to cause tremendous damage to the Traitors and their pet monsters. Guts, I think our strategy is going to please you."

"We strike them until they're all dead?"

"Exactly." The silver Rogue Trader stood and drew his power rapier. "We have found a new battlefield, Band of the Hawk!"

"TO VICTORY!"

**Battleship *Anarchy's Heart***

**Warlord Arkos the Faithless**

The supply fleet was in a beautiful state of pandemonium. If someone wondered why promethium super-tankers and ammunition ships had no place anywhere near the frontlines, the unmitigated disaster unfolding before him was the short answer.

Hulls were opened to the void as macro-cannons gutted their precious hangars and engines. Lances melted iron and bone, unleashing bright explosions wherever they hit something particularly flammable. Many transports, ordered to ferry the debris of Sicarus' industry, were meeting ignominious ends there, as the parts and slaves stored in their bellies were slaughtered mercilessly.

The Band of the Hawk, Arkos was honest enough with himself to acknowledge it internally, was a superb instrument of war. At first, he had believed whoever was in command of the Bellerophon Assault Cruiser was an Ork in disguise, but that wasn't the case. The aggressive space commander may be only avoiding some collisions by mere hundreds of metres, but he was no fool. The mortal was hammering the most dangerous opponents on his own, those Arkos and the *Anarchy's Heart* had not destroyed in his initial surprise attack.

With the warships busy dying under the fire of this tenacious captain, the nine other ships were massacring the supply ships, all executing their own parts flawlessly. One fired exclusively at the fuel tankers, ensuring each kill caused a monumental explosion which had high chances to take two or three other ships down with it in the resulting conflagration. Another made small but precise attacks against the rear of the hulls, demolishing the engines and other critical sections of the Enginarium, ensuring these crippled targets would never leave Cadia without hundreds of hours in an actual shipyard.

"Sota-Nul has not deigned to consider your offers, my Lord."

"I wish the opposite had happened," the former Captain sighed, "but it appears the Hell Forge-Mistress has decided to support the Word Bearers for at least another battle."

It certainly wasn't because she was fond of Lorgar. His spies had told him the former disciple of Kelbor-Hal had found another master, though he hadn't been able to discover the identity of said patron. Personally, Arkos thought Perturabo and Abaddon were the most likely suspects. Those two were the Legion Masters who had the most to offer, and each for their own reason could appeal to a dedicated innovator of the Mechanicum.

"Eleven percent of the supply fleet has been destroyed, Lord. You wished to be warned when this mark had been reached."

"Indeed." Arkos studied the spatial battlefield, and arrived at the disappointing conclusion the attackers were going to reach the end of their successful operation in a few minutes. The other transports, supply tenders, and other support hulls had fled towards the defensive cover of the Word Bearers' 1st Great Host, and it was unlikely even a reckless commander would charge head-on at a line with so many Battleships and Grand Cruisers. "Which means that it is time for us to go. For some reason, I think a certain Primarch isn't going to be amused by-"

The mortals screamed, and many clawed their eyes out as a breach in reality opened directly on the bridge. Then the fire shockwave hit, and all save him died instantly.

It was definitely a mercy, for one second later, Lorgar himself stepped through onto the *Anarchy's Heart*.

"Ah, if it isn't-"

"**Be silent, miserable worm**."

The sheer power compelling him to be silent forever struck...but a part of him, one he had embraced body and soul so recently, rebelled.

"No, I won't."

And as the terrible aura of the Daemon Primarch consumed everything, the hydra paint faded away to reveal a white-scaled armour on his upper left and black scales on his right, helmet included, while on the legs, it was the reverse.

"**You have embraced heresy**." And for the first and certainly last time, Arkos saw a Daemon Primarch be utterly dumbfounded.

"The time has come for the hydra to rise up and reveal its true scales."

"**Then you will be annihilated**."

A telekinetic grip seized him and began to crush his bones and organs. For all the resistance the Chaos Lord had received from a lifetime of betrayals and unholy pacts, this was beyond what he could regenerate from.

"**Any last words, heretic**?"

Well...since the Bearer of the Word insisted...let's see...what would hurt him the most?

"I have acted under your brother's orders." That was a lie, but it wasn't exactly like the Daemon Primarch would be able to disprove. "Corax sends his regards."

Arkos had barely enough time to see the expression of utter fury on his executioner's daemonic face before a ray of darkness erased him from this galaxy's reality.

**Kasr Holn**

**Bastion Line**

**Major-General Otto Richter**

Otto had not believed his father when the bookish elder – for a Cadian guardsman, of course – had told him the Black Crusades were a very different affair than the usual 'havoc' raids launched periodically by the monsters regularly sallying out of the sky.

Well, he had been wrong. Not that he expected to see the day where he could apologise. The Kasr where his old man had gone with his Lasgun had been lost in the first onslaught.

"General, all our reserves have been committed..."

"I know." Two fighters fell from the sky in flames, pursued by the blade-like heretical machines. "The Space Marines?"

"Last time I asked, they were two hundred kilometres away fighting a horde of Berserkers." His second grimaced. "From the screams I heard, they weren't exactly winning one-sidedly."

The ground shook violently and plasma streaks illuminated the battlefield to his right.

"Traitor Titans. As if this day couldn't get any worse..."

"Let's look on the bright side...their fleet is retreating, leaving only a few ships to contest the space above our heads."

"That would be more reassuring if our damned fleet wasn't crippled..." Otto Richter coughed and wished he could remove his re-breather mask, but given how the last man who had tried that had died, it was...inadvisable.

"Anyway, our path of retreat is cut off, and since these shoddy lines won't hold against a full assault...I think it's time to stop running."

"General? The Archenemy outnumbers us about four to one..."

"And our reinforcements are ahead of us, not behind. Besides, so far their Traitor Marines have been relatively discreet in the last hours. If they have departed and all the enemy has is these waves of mad cultists..."

"We are going to have to expend most of our artillery shells, General."

Before he had the time to answer, the sky turned red. Not the red of dawn or dusk, a malevolent red, complete with screaming faces which swallowed the smoke and the falling debris from the space battles.

Even by Cadian standards, this was a very bad sign.

"Send the signal to all our divisions. We must break the enemy NOW! Artillery bombardment in one minute, then we charge!"

"General, the wounded-"

It began to rain. It began to rain blood, and as the pools of the cursed liquid gathered, the first daemonic whispers howled in victory.

"CADIA STANDS! Begin the attack within the minute, we must stop the heretics at all costs!"

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**Necron Battleship *Light of Gidrim***

**8.203.310M35**

**Vargard Obyron**

"My suzerain, the enemy has teleported back to its fleet."

There was no great proclamation of a herald shouting victory for all to hear in the army's engrams. It simply wasn't the Gidrim way...and besides, Obyron felt something was wrong about the entire affair.

"Strange." The response of Zahndrekh didn't give any reason to set his fears aside. "They could have held their ground on the Throne for longer before withdrawing."

Obyron hesitated.

"It's possible they realised they were only causing superficial damage, my suzerain."

"Obyron," the rebuke was mild, but it was there, "I realise the secessionist leadership has not impressed us at the Battle of Black Dust, but that is no reason to assume the new commanders they have found to bolster the efficiency of their phalanxes share the same mental deficiencies. A child could see the largest weapons of these teleporting units couldn't cause more than minor inconveniences to the Throne's Necrodermis outer layers. That they still did it meant they were aware of this reality and yet proceeded with the operation anyway."

The Overlord of Gidrim shook his head.

"Strategy is often the simplest manner to look at military facts, and today, I fear the secessionist's plan is not difficult to understand at all. This destructive assault was nothing but a mere feint...a distraction, a worthwhile attempt to make sure we looked elsewhere while the real attack went on."

Obyron's process of doing several tasks at once slowed dramatically as he considered his fleet commander may have very well have guessed the enemy's goals before anyone else.

"It may have failed, my suzerain. The real attack, I mean. Their fleet is mounting a fighting retreat away from the Throne of Oblivion. If they had stayed there, they would have been flanked, encircled, and then annihilated." The fleet commanded by the Gidrim nobility should have parity in tonnage – their Battleships were heavier, but they had a lot more escorts than the typical Necron battleline – but it didn't matter when one part of the scythe reaping the Battleships of the enemy was the Throne of Oblivion.

"This isn't a new reality, Obyron. And they didn't show any fear contesting their superiority before...so what changed? They can't have seized control of the Reaper batteries, those are far too heavily defended for it to be plausible..."

It was then a sort of miniature blue light burst into existence on the Throne. It was close to the Quadrant the enemy had landed on.

"Well, one way or another, they have really annoyed Overlord Sobekhotep," Obyron declared. "He is unleashing a C'Tan against-"

There was a gigantic explosion, not green, yellow-green, or white-green like most Szarekhan weapons were, but a terrible blue. And then the Vargard heard words every Necron had hoped to never hear after the War in Heaven ended.

"**FREE! I AM FREE**!"

"Hsiagn'la..." Zahndrekh murmured.

"**YOU HAVE BETRAYED ME, NECRONS. NOW YOU ARE GOING TO PAY FOR IT**."

Reality was distorted and enormous ship parts, undoubtedly teleported from the Ork Graveyard or some other part of the battlefield, struck the Throne of Oblivion like meteors. Obyron knew from experience it was worse than an asteroid strike. These projectiles were burning with the power of the void itself, the breath of a God, the very act of freezing everything, no matter how impossible it sounded or physically was.

"Obyron. How many replacement Tesseract Hyper-Prisons do we have available?"

The chief bodyguard did not need to consult the manifests to find the answer.

"Two."

"We are going to need one." Zahndrekh noted calmly, so calmly Obyron thought- "Damn the secessionists for forcing me to sacrifice them, but needs must. Once the preparations are ready, send a phalanx with it, and use the new formation we tested at the Battle of the Three Megaliths."

"Yes, my suzerain." Obyron nodded. "Overlord Sobekhotep may not appreciate our intervention, I must point out."

He had just enough time to say these words before Hsiagn'la tore a massive rent into the Throne's armour. Given how clearly the sensors could see it from their position, the C'Tan shard must have created a canyon hundreds of kilometres long and several kilometres wide.

"The tactical blindness of young Sobekhotep is irrelevant," Zahndrekh replied seriously. "All that matters now is imprisoning the Voidsong before it wipes us out in its divine rage."

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

"It is over, my Lady. They have recaptured the C'Tan." Epistolary Catalan of the Doom Fists told her.

"Thank you." The Lady General turned towards Archmagos Sagami. "The Astorum losses?"

"Two Warhounds have suffered moderate damage, the rest of the Legio's God-Engines have only light to minor damage which can be repaired in a standard day with the facilities we have available, all praise the Omnissiah."

"This must be one of the most one-sided victories of these last centuries," General Rokossovsky stepped forwards. "And the Necrons must be reeling from such a blow."

"Are they?" Wolfgang Bach had clearly decided to play the Devil's Advocate in this conversation. "We see a lot of damage and debris, but internally, I don't think we can guarantee having hit anything vital. Maybe if we tried the same strategy a second time-"

"Wolfgang," her experience as an officer had taught the ruler of Nyx that most of the time, it was better to encourage subordinates to speak their mind. But for every rule there was exception, and some ideas had to be killed in the cradle. "No. To begin with, I doubt any infiltration force will be able to sneak in again and reach one of the main Tesseract Vaults of the Ymga Monolith. It worked this time because we used Legio Astorum in a shock assault they never saw coming. The fact that our enemies probably never considered freeing a C'Tan was a valid strategy for us helped too. But now that they've had a demonstration of the usefulness of said tactic, there will be massive armies protecting the C'Tan prisons. They would have to be completely brainless to not do that."

Silently, the blonde Rogue Trader conceded the point.

"But this is secondary to the most important point. The star-devourers are entities I don't like negotiating with at the best of times, and this time was bad enough." Ilmarina and her Templar Sororitas escort had plenty of things to say about Hsiagn'la, none of them positive. "Unless I have no other choice, we won't attempt to free any other C'Tan from its impenetrable prison. Consider that a formal order."

"Yes, my Lady." The man ordered to explore the Marathon System and the dangerous Eastern Fringe saluted. "But in that case, we're going to have to fight a conventional war. It's going to be...difficult."

"It's not going to be a walk in a park, that's for sure," Werner Groener interjected, "unless said park is on Cadia that is. But as per the agreed plan, the Mars contingency will force the Necrons to station elite armies around their Tesseract Vaults. Now, we were unable to obtain anything even close to accurate information from the Nerushlatset Dynasty, but Trazyn the Infinite confirmed there were at least nine major C'Tan shards imprisoned in the Ymga Monolith. That's eight armies we have immobilised, and they will surely have to rebuild some kind of facility for the one they just recaptured."

"Not to mention the gaping wound they now have on their Monolith," Nikolai Rokossovsky added. "Plus their Replicator Forges are out of the game. And the Navy managed to hit them with something like sixty-three major hits as their shields went down."

Taylor smiled at the mention 'wound'. Yes, the Monolith had been 'wounded'...that was one way to describe it. Across about four-fifths of the entire Monolith's pyramidal height, there was now a huge canyon, the likes of which made the famous Martian ones look like phenomena having delusions of adequacy. Hell, it wasn't even really necessary to use the magnifying effect of the *Enterprise*'s detection systems to see the shocking devastation.

The Ymga Monolith was a battlestation the size of a planet.

Hsiagn'la had inflicted an apocalyptic series of disasters upon it which would have broken many, many Imperial worlds. Earthquakes the likes of which were only recorded in Exterminatus bombardments had smashed the Necrodermis plates apart. Continent-sized ice maelstroms had gathered and bombarded the Necrons and their defences for nearly two full hours. Gravitational anomalies had been detected, on a scale and of a power Missy Byron would never be able to imitate. And then there was the 'wound'. It was like the 'Frosthell' had tried to dig as deep as possible in an attempt to find the Necron leadership...which was far from impossible.

One C'Tan shard had done that. Alone. Unsupported, save the various pot-shots from the *Flamewrought* and the *Eternal Crusader* as Battle Group Volga withdrew to a distance of three million kilometres.

"I am very pleased by the damage we have inflicted on the Monolith," The commander of Operation Stalingrad began. "I am less than pleased by the reality they still have an entire fleet to protect it."

"Overlord Zahndrekh is a careful opponent, which leaves little room to catch him off-guard," Dragon piped in via the lithocast. "And I don't think we should try to be too clever this time."

"I agree," Wolfgang immediately moved to support the Mechanicus Tinker. "This time, we summon another Battle Group and leave them no room to manoeuvre. It isn't going to be pretty, but if we want to begin a mass landing of the Imperial Guard, there is-"

An incredibly bright beacon of green light began to illuminate the entire Volga System. Its source came from the 'bottom' of the pyramidal structure of the Monolith.

"What is that?"

"If Trazyn's information is accurate," the Lady General smiled ironically, "this is the signal this battle is over. The Monolith is about to use its FTL drive to escape the battlefield."

On the one hand, it was frustrating. Battle Group Volga had inflicted massive losses to the Necrons, and they scored important victories, especially the C'Tan rampage, the crippling of the null-zone synchronisers, and the annihilation of forty-five Necron battleships.

On the other hand...many of her officers and spacemen badly needed rest, there was still an enormous Ork fleet in the Volga System, and the safety distance they'd taken prevented them from launching an assault before the battlestation left the system.

"We don't know yet if they have swallowed the bait we placed before them."

"At this point, I don't think it matters a lot." The Lady General barely reacted to her advisor's words. "We can't prevent them from fleeing. We can only prepare to execute Plan Carrhes...and pray we did a good job in planning our war strategy."

"We withdraw?"

"We withdraw...towards the Ork-Necron battleground. Let's not miss the opportunity to eliminate a few more enemies. That way they won't be there for the second round."

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Infernus-class Battleship *Lord of the Ruinstorm***

**8.208.310M35**

**Assassinorum Operative K-1**

One of the least annoying things about Chaos worshippers, K-1 of the Vanus Temple had discovered, was their tendency to *gloat* when they believed their triumph was imminent.

"THAT'S ALL THEY SENT? A VANUS! YOU SHOULD HAVE STAYED IN YOUR INFOCYTE ROOM, MORTAL! YOU ARRIVE TOO LATE! THE RITUAL IS COMPLETE AND OUR VICTORY IS ASSURED!"

As such, it was truly a pleasure to use one of the armour's spikes as an improvised dagger, promptly stabbing his two hearts and using his aptitude for martial arts to throw him against several devices sprouting a lot of tongues and daemonic teeth.

"AARRGH! BUT YOU ARE...A...Vanus..." The light in the eyes of the Chaos Marine decreased before vanishing entirely.

"One more imbecile who underestimated the temple," K-1 recovered his weapons and verified his main tools weren't broken before again running towards the bridge of the heavily corrupted Battleship.

For the record, the Vanus Temple had not intentionally tried to influence things so that enemies looked at them that way. But as they weren't really a combat-oriented Temple and the Traitor Astartes lived and breathed for war, a certain level of scorn and contempt was unavoidable from the moment the oath-breakers turned against the Imperium.

K-1 didn't complain. He eliminated five more Chaos Astartes and ascended a flight of stairs which appeared to be made of flesh, before performing perilous acrobatic moves above carpets of screaming faces and paintings of imprisoned souls.

The Assassinorum's conditioning, as brutal as it was, was a blessing in circumstances like these. It allowed him to keep his sanity, while even a veteran Cadian Shock Trooper would have lost his mind to this feast of madness. And yes, he had seen it happen through his spy network thousands of times since the battle began. Against the monstrous rituals unleashed by the heretical sorcerers, anyone not having received psycho-indoctrination needed exceptional mental strength to not be driven insane.

This wasn't an issue for K-1. No, the chief obstacle to his goal of interrupting the Chaos ritual right now was the many, many Chaos Marines protecting the ritual hall, between thirty and forty, if his estimate was correct. The poisonous incense burned in huge dark clouds and reduced visibility.

His improved vision, bolstered by magna-optical goggles, acknowledged the Traitors would have been a problem under any circumstance. They were even more of one now, since surrounding them was a small army of Traitor Guardsmen. According to his private databank, it was an entire line infantry regiment of Volscani Cataphracts.

This was a very big problem. K-1 had the third highest number of completed missions of the Accident Cell, but this didn't make him immune to Lasgun fire and daemonic sorcery. The Vanus was a master of Noosphere-warfare, a skilled agent who could infiltrate a system to arrange a tragic series of fatal events half a planet away without touching what people would call a weapon once. As a hobby, he had mastered ten martial arts and regularly had shooting contests with a Vindicare.

For all his arrival had been unremarked – even Space Marines often failed to spot someone using the ceiling to infiltrate their headquarters – it wasn't something that was going to last long. The monstrous gargoyle not ten metres away was far, far too realistic to be a stone artwork, that was all he was going to say on the subject. And in the middle of the eight-pointed star, the heretical song reached a new crescendo, with Cadian prisoners being gutted upon an altar of black stone. Where were the Eversors when-

The heretical stained glass – which despite its fragile appearance was likely tougher than armaglass – exploded, and a familiar roar of challenge for once overwhelmed the Traitors' litanies.

"REPENT! REPENT IN THE NAME OF THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

The Traitor Volscani, to their credit, didn't ask questions or wait for their masters to give new commands. They immediately opened fire.

The first mangled corpses began flying in all direction before the first red lasers had missed their target.

"REPENT! REPENT TRAITORS!"

There were many things one could say about the Eversor Temple of the Holy Wrath. They were drug-addicted crazy monsters. They couldn't recognise subtlety even if it were to hit them in the face. Several times in the last few decades, they had to be terminated on the battlefield after the mission was over because of their determination to murder everything, including their 'allies'.

Today though, they were a battering ram which could succeed where the Vanus Temple couldn't. And thus K-1 did his best to stay out of the way in the shadows as no less than four Eversors charged Volscani Cataphracts and Chaos Space Marines.

"REPENT, FOR TODAY YOU DIE!"

**Dark Apostle Angra Mainyu**

It was a punishment, of course.

Angra Mainyu was lucid: Blessed Lorgar had not saved him and seven other powerful sorcerers from Sicarus' destruction for the sheer benevolence of the deed.

The universe didn't work like that.

Their sire needed eight powerful sorcerers to cast the ritual which would force the Cadians and the rest of the unbelievers serving the False Emperor to acknowledge their false beliefs needed to be cast down and embrace the Primordial Truth.

This was their chance to atone for their failures. This was to be their redemption.

For in the end, Blessed Lorgar, the Bearer of the Word, had seen what the Sons of Horus hadn't. Cadia wouldn't fall to the fury of Legio Krytos, the loathing claws of House Lucaris, or the infamous Speartip of the First Warmaster's orphaned sons.

It would fall to the children of the Gods, and this ritual would make sure of that. The desperate assault of the Assassinorum would arrive too late.

Angra Mainyu finished uttering the long incantation in Ancient Colchisian and smiled.

Then a blade imbedded itself in his right arm.

"You arrive too late." The Dark Apostle ignored the pain. He had felt far, far worse after the sacrifice of Sicarus.

"REPENT! REPENT!"

Ah, the Eversors. Poor conversationalists, and had there ever been things more dedicated to the purpose of brutally killing everything in their path?

Angra threw a spell, and the assassin was sent flying back into the furious melee where another Eversor tried to slaughter his bodyguards and the last Volscani mortals.

Two legs almost hit him. Idly, Angra wondered who they belonged to...before the heads of his assistant-sorcerers began to explode in what was certainly a good mortal attempt to kill Astartes.

Alas for the shooter, it was too predictable. A sidestep at the right moment, and the sniper's shot missed.

Then something painful echoed in his chest, and the Dark Apostle realised something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

"No..." He gasped. The veil shivered before tearing apart entirely. This he had expected. The parts of the ship and the corpses being sucked into the growing rift body and soul...he hadn't.

And it grew worse. A true sea of blood poured over the altar and everything nearby. If the wards around his ritual circle had not protected-

The red runes pulsed, and Angra Mainyu saw the Colchisian ritual wasn't protecting him. It was draining his life energy, like it did of everyone anywhere near the circle...one assassin understood what was about to happen and detonated something against the hull, perhaps thinking the void was less dangerous compared to what was coming.

This wasn't a stupid choice.

"Father...why?" It wasn't his fault the rats had become too strong in their deep warrens! Erebus had affirmed the vermin threat was no more! How was he supposed to defend himself when the Astartes garrisons were withdrawn and the enemy was officially vanquished, leaving no resources or assets for hunting purposes. "Why did you..."

The blood was an uninterrupted flood. It was oddly poetic, since his own body was bleeding from a thousand places.

But before his final death and the eternity of torment awaiting him in the Sea of Souls, Angra Mainyu was alive enough to see a gigantic hoof of bronze and red daemonic flesh step through the rift, followed by an equally formidable body.

And he recognised the monster, though he had never summoned it before this battle.

There were eight Exalted Bloodthirsters serving the Lord of Blood and Skulls. They were, as their name implied, the mightiest of their kind, the grand Warlords of Khorne, commanding sixty-four Legions each, and their presence when they stepped through reality was as dangerous for those who summoned them as for their enemies.

Ka'Bandha, the Angel's Bane, was obviously one of those eight. But the nemesis of Sanguinius and Weaver couldn't be summoned at Cadia. There was too little weight to support a ritual involving him. The Destroyer of Commorragh wouldn't abandon her battles and rush to Cadia.

So instead, Lorgar, his cursed gene-sire, had used him as a conduit to summon An'ggrath.

Lord of Bloodthirsters.

Guardian of the Throne of Skulls.

Most Favoured of Khorne.

The Unbound, the Deathbringer, Rage Incarnate, Blood Lord of Eight Hundred Eighty-Eight Legions.

An'ggrath was here. Cadia was going to fall.

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!" The Exalted Bloodthirster roared. "**SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!"

Angra Mainyu closed his eyes and died.

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

**8.208.310M35**

**Overlord Sobekhotep**

"Star-Eater Drive activated. We have gathered fifty percent of the energy necessary to make the interstellar jump."

"Inform me when we've reached ninety percent."

"Yes, Mighty Overlord!"

"Thakmatar's surviving fleet is recovered. All Szarekhan and Sautekh commands are anchored in the Throne's fleet ports."

This was good news...and Sobekhotep barely acknowledged it. After so many disasters, one couldn't feel proud about a mere fighting retreat.

Finally, it was time to ask the dreaded question. One which he had hesitated to voice since the C'Tan had been recaptured. A part of him tried to convince himself it was to give his Cryptek servants time to assess the magnitude of the damage. A rising percentage of his engrams, however, told him it was fear. Fear to discover how badly he had failed the Silent King.

"Sihathor. How bad is it?"

"My Mighty Overlord...I regret to report the damage caused to the Throne of Oblivion is *extremely* bad. Where mobile assets are concerned, we lost more than thirty million warriors, twenty-two Nemesors and their entire courts, plus the Arks and Monoliths attached to their commands. And this loss is permanent. Hsiagn'la went after the stasis crypts, the Necrodermis forges, the resurrection nodes, and the engram centres, as well as the most secure weapon vaults, the command thrones, the fortress-palaces, and the relics of the War in Heaven of the Quadrant where it was imprisoned. The Voidsong completely and irreversibly destroyed *everything* it had the time and opportunity to strike at."

Despite being a creature of Necrodermis and high technology, Sobekhotep was shocked by the... thoroughness of the destruction. He had never doubted the C'Tan utterly loathed the Szarekhan Dynasty for their leading role in their imprisonment, but until now, to his best knowledge, no major C'Tan shard had ever gotten the opportunity to unleash its rage upon a Necron world.

"Fortunately, the joint alliance of Zahndrekh's forces and our own elites managed to stop the Frosthell assault before it reached the vital sections of the Throne." The Royal Warden continued. "Thus the Star-Eater Drive and the primary engines are intact. The same is true for our most protected and valuable vaults. After the latest...incident...the Crypteks have begun moving all the Tesseract prisons to these depths. We don't want the vermin to use this tactic a second time."

"No, we don't." The Dust-Maker should have felt rage, but his mind was shivering at the idea of a second C'Tan unleashed so shortly after the first. One possibly stronger than Hsiagn'la, for the Voidsong, while it had been counted among the fifteen most dangerous C'Tan, was not the most powerful of the broken shards imprisoned in the Throne's Tesseract Vaults. "Now give me the infrastructure damage."

"Between the macro-destruction the C'Tan unleashed and the enormous strain placed upon the Reaper-conduits, we have lost roughly six percent of the total energy output of the Throne, mightiest of all Overlords. We have woken hundreds of lesser Crypteks to assess the damage and begin preliminary repairs, but the...exotic ammunition used by the vermin and the C'Tan prevent the use of reverse-chronomancy and many of the noblest repair technologies. The Contra-Empyrean synchronizers and outer generators have been utterly disintegrated. The Crypteks refuse to estimate how long a partial reconstruction giving us fifty percent of the range will take. The Replicator Forge..."

The more Sihathor spoke, the more Sobekhotep was aghast at the scale of the defeat the Szarekhan Dynasty had just been on the receiving end of.

And it was a defeat, there was no way he could erase all information and convince himself it was a victory. Worse, the defeat and humiliation was so decisive it appeared his decision to retreat was not only correct, it was the best option remaining to him.

"You have said enough," the Overlord interrupted the Royal Warden after more bad news was revealed to him, "we will continue this report after the Star-Eater Drive has transported us out of this stellar battlefield. For now, I want to know how long the Crypteks think it will take us to repair the damage to the outer shell, so that our shield-generators and the Necrodermis armour can play their role and the ones responsible for this tragedy will be slaughtered if they try a second time."

"Assuming we can count upon the Sautekh's full support as was your plan, my Overlord, approximately fifty years by the old calendar."

"Fifty?" Necron years – at least for every Dynasty which used the old calendar – were shorter than those of the vermin races, but this was absolutely outrageous! "Fifty! What do they intend to do for those decades? Playing repair games in slow-motion?"

"My Overlord...it isn't just Nemesors and their courts we have lost in considerable numbers. The Crypteks have suffered similar casualties...perhaps worse. Hsiagn'la seemed to have considered them a priority target."

And the Voidsong had not even bothered killing Sneferka for good. Truly the broken God was always more trouble than it was worth.

"The Crypteks are doing their very best, but optimistically, it is really going to take years to discover everything the C'Tan has either broken or weakened to the point it will cause a catastrophe if we use it without checking the components to the molecular level first."

"And the Dolmen Gates?" Hsiagn'la had somehow emitted a pulse that had switched them off.

"The Plasmancers are confident they will be able to reopen them within the year."

It wasn't the answer he wanted to hear. Alas, even blasting apart Sihathor and all his court wouldn't change the report.

"If I understand your report correctly, it is vital to avoid another battle of importance until the Throne of Oblivion has been repaired."

"Yes, my Overlord. That was the Crypteks' and their councils' conclusion when I ordered them to answer without deflection."

"Then that is what we are going to do." As much as he hated fleeing before a triumphant enemy, and that was exactly what they were doing, he saw no viable alternative. "Behind the defences of Mandragora, we will recover our strength and ensure the damage caused by this odious and honourless treachery will be erased."

Sobekhotep glared at the symbols representing the two vermin fleets. How he loathed these two upstart species, these 'Orks' and these 'Humans'.

"And when the Throne of Oblivion will be battle-ready again, I will ensure there is no corner of the galaxy where they will be able to find refuge in. We will track them, we will hunt them, and we will harvest their organic bodies until we can make a field of banners with their flayed skins.”

"Yes, Overlord. Your commands will be obeyed to the letter!"

"These species have challenged us. Their extinction is long overdue..."

**Kroozer *Over-Defiler***

**Warboss Arrgard the Metal-Defiler**

"Boss! Boss! Da big moon 'as left da battle!"

"Datz not fair!" Arrgard bellowed. "We'ze were just gettin' warmed up"! Or..."

"Or, Boss?"

"Or dey are bored by ourz battle, and are goin' ta find another WAAGH!"

"Makez sense," the Weirdboy next to him agreed. "Dis is da start of Ragnarork, dey must 'ave otha friendies we'ze can fight!"

"Dat'z right!" Arrgard roared. "We'ze are going to a bigger, better fight boyz!"

The roars of enthusiasm to that were enormous.

"Prepare da Warp-tellyporta! We'ze be following da Tin'eads moonz!"

"But Boss, Da Swarm Bringa is 'ere! We not fightin' 'er?"

"Da Swarm Bringa will go to da same WAAGH we'ze are!" Arrgard explained to the Nob. "'er Mekboy 'umies are just slowa dan Mekboyz!"

"Call all da other Warbosses of da galaxy! Dis iz Vallawaah and Ragnarork! Every band dat stays out of dis iz a rusty squig! WAAGGGH!"

"WAAAAAAAAGHHHH!"

**Emperor-class Battleship *Dominus Astra***

**Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller**

"That was a very crude and brutal Warp-translation, Lord Admiral," the male Navigator shook his head. "But yes, the Orks are gone. This was no micro-jump to gain a temporary advantage. They do not intend to come back to the Volga System."

"I thank you for this expert judgment, Navigator. The Imperial Navy will compensate you generously for this role performed outside the bounds of your contract."

Neidhart waited until the last of the enormous group serving as escort and procession to the Navigator of the *Dominus Astra* had left before speaking again.

"Apparently, today isn't the day that I will learn to predict the behaviour of Orks."

"To be fair," Oskar von Reuenthal gave him a neutral smile, "I don't think anyone anticipated that. I certainly didn't, and none of Lady Weaver's contingencies mentioned something like this either."

"Indeed. Who would have thought the Orks would refuse to attack Battle Group Volga?"

Assuredly the Ork fleet had been mangled, but the Imperial Navy had records of tens of thousands of historical battles where such a minor detail had not deterred the greenskins.

And yet today they had not tried to engage the Imperial Battlefleet.

"In my opinion," the younger black-haired Admiral announced, "we can't count on this departure being a retreat. I certainly don't think the scuttling of the Necron ships was explosive enough to get rid of their current Warboss. They weren't showing any signs of disorganisation in the aftermath."

"I agree with you...besides I'm not sure the Orks know what a retreat is before they've lost ninety-nine percent of their order of battle."

Plenty of men and women on both Battleship's bridges chuckled.

"They aren't fleeing." The Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Volga concluded seriously as the chuckles and laughs ceased after twenty seconds. "They are pursuing the Ymga Monolith."

"That is the most logical conclusion, yes," the Admiral of Bakka nodded. "I wonder how the Orks think they can do that. The Necrons don't use the Warp to travel between the stars, and I remember assisting in enough meetings of the High Command which insisted our methods to track this pyramid-battlestation were crude and unreliable. And the greenskins believe they can do it?"

"No one has ever accused the Orks of thinking before jumping into a nest of serpents," Neidhart answered. "Unfortunately, since they're Orks, a lot of them always tend to survive what should be a guaranteed death trap. These xenos are brutes and particularly stupid most of the time, but they are also tough and nearly impossible to eradicate. As a result, I am not ready to say it is impossible they will manage to reach Mandragora or any other destination the Ymga Monolith could have fled to."

And this was a massive headache for all Imperial commanders involved in Operation Stalingrad, though a few others outside it weren't going to be happy either. Everyone had made the – reasonable – assumption that, after the gigantic slaughter the Necrons had inflicted upon the greenskins, there wouldn't be any significant force of the green xenos anywhere near the theatre of operations.

To learn they had been wrong – even if it had been in a painless manner – was not exactly a pleasant surprise.

"We certainly can't expect them to not translate out of the Warp in the middle of one of our battlefields," Reuenthal affirmed before grimacing. "And this means we can't stay in the Volga System for long. I know the Astropaths are certainly warning the other Battle Groups of what just happened, but it is out of the question to give the Orks the time to spread across another system. The Tigrus Tech-Priests and other forces are going to be busy cleaning up this battlefield for decades, we can't let them do it again with a Necron fortress."

"I concur." Neidhart agreed. "Still, let's take a few minutes to savour our tactical victory. After all, as all our enemies have chosen to abandon the battlefield, we are today's winners."

"Let's pray to the God-Emperor this is only the first victory of a long series..."

"I will certainly raise several toasts to that."

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Cadia**

**Kasr Feros**

**8.208.310M35**

**Sergeant Joseph Edgar**

"Sergeant, the skies have turned red again."

"And?" Joseph barely raised his head before taking a new las-cell and shooting a few more beastmen. "Two hundred, four Spawns, melta."

"See them. Artillery?"

"We don't need the Basilisks for that scum. One, six, ten, Alpha, Alpha."

"DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR!"

"Those must be new heretics, Sergeant." The remark was appropriate, since it was just enough noise for three Leman Russ tanks and several Chimeras plus a few thousand guardsmen to open fire on the heretics. Since the defenders had cover and the cultists and their pet monsters didn't, it was a one-sided massacre...one more to add to the 82nd Cadian's list of honours.

"Don't care," Joseph replied. "Now they're dead heretics."

"We're going to need to find a few machines to dig some fosses for all the corpses they're leaving behind," the Captain spoke and all the men of the Company shut their mouths. "They're beginning to be a problem."

"I don't know, Captain, the 410th wasn't happy about our...our creative interpretation of orders last time we did that."

"Well, interpret the rules creatively again. Five-seven. Get me a sniper on the walls, there's a new circle of sorcerers trying to call forth something nasty."

Five seconds later, some las-shots and several powerful grenades sent these fallen psykers where they belonged, which as far as Edgar was concerned was the pits of hell.

"Captain, new orbital debris about to fall near our position."

"Again?" their commander's face couldn't be seen behind the rebreather mask, but his words made sure to convey his mood. "Someone should tell the Navy to improve their accuracy...else we'll soon end up having whole starships falling on our heads."

"Yes, that would be a shame..."

The impact was loud and once more brought much fire and smoke. Edgar sighed. Cleaning up Cadia after this war was over was going to be a chore...

"Sergeant..."

Joseph Edgar had turned his eyes to reload for two seconds, but he refocused immediately as he heard imprecations and exclamations of surprise.

"God-Emperor save us..."

The smoke had been blown away, but instead of revealing a crippled starfighter or some part of a Cruiser like last time, something rose from the crater. Something which was definitely very, very big...and not friendly at all.

Something the old Cadian tales whispered about from time to time, and never after the sun had set.

It was immense. By the Golden Throne, it had to be more than six metres tall! Its face was that of a beast, and the same was true of the rest of its body. Immense black wings were unfurled, creating a powerful storm on their own. Its skin was brass and red, and in the rare sections where armour was worn, it was only more horrible, for the protection was made of skulls. There had to be thousands, no, not thinking-

"Bastion Adamant, I want aerial strikes and full artillery bombardment on coordinates..." the Captain spoke each word with care. "I...I think we have a Greater Abomination here..."

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!"

The monster roared and charged.

Then the Cadian artillery shells screamed and landed. Joseph wasn't an artillerist, but there had to be over twenty companies of Basilisks firing at once on the...on the *daemon*.

Seconds later, the pimping jocks of the Aeronautica descended from the skies, Thunderbolts and Marauders in multiple squadrons, to unleash everything they had.

The ground shook like a hundred earthquakes happening simultaneously. Smoke engulfed the battlefield. Joseph, like every man of the Cadian 82nd, threw himself into the trench shelters.

For more than five minutes, the long-range support fired everything they had. And then it stopped.

"Let's look," one of the guardsman coughed, "let's look on the bright side, we won't need to find enginseers to get rid of the corpses..."

The battlefield was once more unrecognisable. New craters had demolished everything, and the first trench before them had entirely collapsed...fortunately, they had evacuated it not one hour ago.

"It must be-"

The sky rained blood once more. And as the smoke dissipated-

"No...it's still alive! Fire again! The target isn't dead! I repeat, the target isn't dead!"

The few chinks in the abomination's skull armour disappeared as the Captain shouted new orders.

"**CADIA. MAY I BEGIN**?"

"FIRE AT WILL! FIRE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE!"

Tens of thousands of Lasguns obeyed the order across the frontline, and soon the artillery resumed its bombardment.

The monster didn't care. It jumped, great wings flapping...and imbedded its large axe into a Marauder, which crashed far too close to them and-

It was too fast, it was too-

"CADIA STANDS! KILL IT FOR CADIA!"

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!"

The Cadian 82nd did their best. It wasn't enough. Their world ended in blood and despair.

**Elysian** **Fields**

**Chapter Master Argentius**

An Astartes was supposed to know no fear. At the moment though, each battle-brother of the Silver Skulls present on Cadia felt the shadow of that emotion.

"Iron and silver...what did the heretics summon?"

This was what happened when your servo-owls and other monitoring methods saw a well-defended position with no obvious weak point be overrun by a single daemon.

But even if they hadn't gotten this advance warning, there was no missing the very Warp tempest of blood which was heading straight for them, a line of fire and blood originating from the destroyed Kasr Feros.

"Death." Argentius replied to the question which had probably not been meant to be answered. "This is the death the Traitors summoned to deal with us, since they are too cowardly to step onto Cadia themselves."

The commander of his Honour Guard managed an utterly joyless laugh.

"You have a way with words, brother." A moment of silence passed. "I suppose we should be honoured. Our fortifications held without a single breach against the Sons of Horus and a horde of several million mutants, so they're sending us one of their foremost Astartes-killers."

"It isn't the Angel's Bane." One of the Prognosticators pointed out.

"I could be wrong," one of their Librarian battle-brothers chimed in, "but given the sheer power it has at its disposal, it is likely one the peers of the Angel’s Bane."

Every Silver Skull present had the humility and the good sense to not say anything against these words.

"In hindsight," Argentius frowned, "maybe I should have asked Lady Weaver for more information about her previous exploits. How do we banish this abomination?"

"Lady Weaver had her swarm and the Emperor's power, brother. We lack both to defeat this archfiend."

The largest minefield began to explode under the feet of the Greater Daemon, which didn't even pretend to slow down.

"Prepare the Land Raiders and the Predators. We go on the offensive. Hunter formation, we try to engage it in a Cyclone-pattern assault. Stay out of range of its whip and axe. The Cadian 4th Army group stays in support and fires its artillery until something breaks."

"That is unsubtle."

"I don't think subtlety will win anything here."

"Request assistance from the Black Templars too. If they can take him from the right while we attract his attention..."

His instincts suddenly screamed something dangerous was threatening him, and the world exploded in flames just as Argentius donned his helmet.

One second later, the sky seemed to distort, and the Bloodthirster impacted the ground once more, killing one of his battle-brothers who had been too slow in getting out of the way.

"**DON'T HIDE BEHIND YOUR WALLS, BASTARD SONS OF GUILLIMAN**!"

"PRIMUS INTER PARES! Argentius screamed. "KILL THIS ABOMINATION!"

"FOR GUILLIMAN AND THE EMPEROR!"

The whip struck and transformed several Cadian Shock Troopers into butchered corpses. The daemonic axe slammed down, faster than lightning, and when it touched the ground, over fifty Space Marines, including Argentius, were tossed aside like leaves in the middle of a storm/like toys in a child's tantrum.

It took everything he had to rise after this shockwave, and his heart mourned as the daemonic creature was scything down his battle-brothers and the guardsmen indifferently.

The Chapter Master of the Silver Skulls screamed a battlecry and fired his Volkite Blaster, but the monster didn't even bother with a parry...and the hit barely caused a sunburn to the Bloodthirster.

"**I ALMOST FELT THAT, ASTARTES**," eyes the colour of malice stared at him as it poised its hoof upon a Predator and began to flatten it as if it were an aluminium can. "**YOU CAN DO BETTER. NOW, SURELY YOU HAVE SOMETHING MORE DANGEROUS TO THREATEN ME WITH. SOMETHING TO GIVE ME A CHALLENGE**."

Argentius didn't answer. He was trying to find a weakness in the daemon's stance, something that would give him an opportunity to strike a blow and fulfil his oaths of protecting the Pylons.

But there was no weakness, real or feinted from the vile enemy.

"**OH I SEE. IT IS ALREADY OVER. YOU HAVE BEEN A PERPETUAL DISAPPOINTMENT, SERVANTS OF THE ANATHEMA**."

The axe was raised in a mocking challenge under a red sky.

"**KHORNE, HEAR YOUR GREATEST SERVANT! I, AN'GGRATH, OFFER YOU THESE SKULLS! BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR YOUR SKULL THRONE**!"

The daemons trailing behind howled louder and repeated the heretical battlecry.

And suddenly the blood rain stopped. The Warp-corrupted sky seemed to shriek in agony, and a scar of light burst into existence over the Elysian Fields.

An angel descended on Cadia. Argentius almost uttered Lady Weaver's name, but as the golden-winged living miracle got closer, he realised this was not the Basileia of Nyx. The angelic armour was green and gold; and though the victor of Commorragh used the latter in abundance, the former wasn't in her heraldry. The angelic-shaped helmet was also completely different.

The Silver Skulls didn't care. Argentius didn't care. They had been about to fail, and at the last moment, they were granted a reprieve.

The Greater Daemon was less than pleased by this new enemy, obviously.

"**YOU ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE! THIS ISN'T YOUR HOUR! YOU ARE BREAKING EVERY RULE**!"

"And you parasites have the gall to pretend you don't lie," the gold-and-green Living Saint landed, and where she walked, the power of the Warp retreated. Her voice – because if her identity was hidden behind a helmet, her female gender was not in doubt – managed to be almost soft and yet wrathful. "It is your presence which first disrupted the fragile equilibrium of this Black Crusade. If the Word Bearers didn't want me to be summoned, they shouldn't have brought you here."

"**THIS IS THE FIFTH BLACK CRUSADE**! **YOU HAVE YET TO BE BORN**!"

A blade materialised in the emerald-decorated armoured hand, and Argentius was startled, for it was undoubtedly *Galatine*.

"How amusing," the Living Saint told her daemonic opponent. "The Ruinous Powers complain about breaking the laws of causality. Next you are going to tell me the so-called Architect of Fate doesn't try using time loops and manipulating past events to break the future."

Argentius had a feeling Bloodthirsters were in a permanent state of rage. This one, though, seemed to experience a whole new level of loathing at being called out on its hypocrisy.

"**IT DOESN'T MATTER**." The Greater Daemon decided after a couple of seconds. "**YOU ARE HERE. YOU ARE WEAK. I WILL BREAK YOU, AND OFFER YOUR SKULL TO KHORNE**!"

"You will try."

And two meteors of psychic energy, one shining with all the power of the Emperor, the other imbued with red malevolence, threw themselves against each other.

**Marshal Tillmann Coburg**

"Thank you, your Most Holy Majesty, for answering our prayers and sending Your Angels to punish the heretics, the mutants, and the abominations. Thank you for illuminating the day and denying evil the corruption and the victories they desire over Your Imperium. Thank you."

Tillmann Coburg ended the prayer and almost cried as he watched as in the distance the Living Saint engaged the immense Bloodthirster in a fight which shook the skies and the earth of Cadia.

"Brothers, though this Angel is not Her Celestial Highness of Nyx, she has given us a priceless opportunity here."

"Indeed, Marshal!" His Castellan exclaimed. "No doubt the Archenemy thought breaking the defensive lines with their archdaemon would be enough, but since the abomination is distracted, our Silver Skulls cousins have sundered these breaches and turned the defences around the Elysian Fields into several kill-zones." It didn't take much imagination to see the grinning face of his battle-brother. "Therefore we have an entire army of mutants and Traitors with zero aerial cover and no defensive positions whatsoever. Whereas we have an entire armoured column, supported by five companies of Dhonovar Heavy Armour, ten regiments of Merovincha Sentinels, several Catachan fighter groups, and an entire Cadian Army Group."

"And the Knights of House Cadmus are arriving from the west. They are barely an hour away."

"The God-Emperor is with us, brothers! The Ruinous Powers will once more suffer rout, despair, and utter defeat today! Forwards, Sons of Sigismund! NO PITY! NO REMORSE! NO FEAR!"

"FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

The Cadian artillery screamed its hate at the heretics, and this time there was no daemon to endure the massive bombardment.

"LAND RAIDERS! BEGIN THE ATTACK! IMPERIAL GUARD! FOLLOW US!"

"CADIA STANDS!"

**The** **Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**8.210.310M35**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

It was strange to begin, fight, and end a battle without leaving her command seat, aside from the usual periods of rest, lunch, and going to the toilet. Taylor Hebert wasn't going to complain though.

"In my opinion, My Lady, we were extremely lucky."

"I know," the insect-mistress replied, "but I suppose you have something more specific in mind, Diamantis?"

"Yes," the Imperial Fist confirmed. "First, obviously, the majority of the Necron commanders were cretins or slaves to their own doctrine."

"True. But then we also encouraged them to use the tactics which worked against the Second Legion."

After all, the best way to convince an enemy to underestimate you was to let him think you had learned nothing from the previous engagement. It was even easier to spread this view since, as the blindness of the Szarekhan Dynasty proved, they hadn't noticed the *Tsunami* had been towed away and its databases recovered.

"Where things could have really, really gone bad was the onslaught against the psychic shields. We only had enough energy to protect our vanguard for thirty minutes. The initial bombardment lasted fifteen. Five minutes longer, and the first signs of strain would have been noticed...and the Necrons certainly wouldn't have fought like they did had they spotted it."

Taylor sent a sardonic look to the Astartes.

"It's a point I'm well aware of, Diamantis. But in a null-zone, the only sources of psychic energy we could use were Lisa and myself. And since I was busy commanding our forces, that left only my Moth."

The Heimdall Psy-tech Force Field was an extremely complicated device, but once integrated into the hull of an Aegis-class Battlecruiser, the principle was simple. At 'normal' activation, it required approximately fifty percent of the total energy output of the Generatorium maintained by the Tech-Priests...meaning that with the other indispensable things like drives and shields, it had no offensive armament beyond flak turrets, ECM decoys and a few other things.

Fifty percent was a lot. And yet it wasn't enough. To ensure the Psy-tech Force Field functioned correctly, someone had to continuously feed it psychic energy, otherwise the cohesion and effectiveness of the field degraded in short order.

"Now that the null-zone has collapsed, we will be able to rotate our psykers to these duties, leaving Lisa in reserve."

"I think that's an extremely optimistic assumption, my Lady."

"Explain."

"It is true the Heimdall Force Field will function far better and far longer, and with far less stress on your Moth," the yellow-clad Space Marine acknowledged, "but the Necrons will have learned from their mistakes, and next time they won't make the mistake of focusing their firepower only on our vanguard. Worse, given how fast their 'Reaper batteries' reacted, I think we have to seriously consider the possibility that larger and more powerful weapons are hidden in the crust of that pyramidal battlestation. Rhodes, Renaldo, and Ben-Ur agree with me."

"Still-" for once, a member of the Dawnbreaker Guard actually interrupted her.

"And then there are the jammers, my Lady. I know they functioned extremely well, but in my opinion, this was because the Necrons made only two or three half-hearted attempts. The panic we generated with repeated blows helped, but they are going to be given the time to think about where they went wrong, and unless they're irremediably stupid, they will know it is the key asset of our Battle Group they must negate at all costs. I suggest placing Astra Militarum demi-regiments aboard all capital ships as the supply ships do their work. That way we will be ready if they manage to teleport in the equivalent of our stormtroopers in platoon strength."

"The Captains of the Imperial Navy are going to love this..." Taylor could already hear their outraged screams. "But your point can't be dismissed out of hand. I don't like how much administrative paperwork it's going to create, but I am going to use the 19th Army of the Faeburn Vanquishers. They are shock troops, if they aren't able to successfully repel Necron boarders, nothing save Space Marines supported by elite units will."

And unfortunately, she couldn't have those tied up in defensive stratagems. The Second Legion had tried that, and it hadn't worked...forcing them to try the 'death ride' at close-quarters against the Monolith. Yeah, that battle had been like the mythological dilemma of choosing between Scylla and Charybdis.

"The Warrior-class Destroyers' electromagnetic gun works exceptionally well against the Doom Scythes, my Lady, but is utterly insufficient against the Necron capital ships. It certainly can't pierce the vulnerable sections of what the xenos call a Light Cruiser. Their Necrodermis armour is too resistant and regenerates too quickly."

"It was the Destroyers which performed the best against the Necron ships," Gamaliel protested. "We didn't lose a single one!"

"Yes," Diamantis conceded, "the Hoplites were several percent inferior to them." And then the coup-de-grace was given. "It is Theisman's and mine opinion that, save the Warrior and the Hoplite classes, none of our current designs of Destroyers and Frigates have any business being on the frontlines against the Necrons."

"That..." Taylor looked at Wolfgang, who chose to remain silent. "I had no idea it was so bad...that we were so...outclassed."

The son of Dorn looked apologetic for a second.

"To be clear, our losses remain totally acceptable so far. We fought a major space battle, and the enemy lost easily ten times the tonnage of Battle Group Volga. The forty-five Battleships of the fleet we destroyed at the beginning and the crippling of the Replicator Forges alone guarantee this victory is an enormous strategic gain for the Imperium. But we had everything going for us, the lack of adaptation of the Necrons, the rigidity of their reaction forces, the enmity between their senior commanders, and their persistent underestimation of our capabilities. And despite all of this, we lost five Frigates and seven Destroyers, with an additional two and three respectively will need months in a dockyard, assuming they can be repaired at all. One hundred and eight Fury Interceptors lost, fifty-one Starhawk Bombers shot down, several Warhound Titans out of commission for days...they managed to hurt us, even if they were tactically and doctrinally inept."

"You are worried about the lessons they're going to learn from this short battle." The golden-winged parahuman realized, and the Imperial Fist nodded.

"It was you and the Lady Magos who gave me the example of this Terran leader...Napoléon Bonaparte...who waged so many wars against the same enemies that they learned through campaign after campaign how to beat him. The Necrons, I think, won't be so adaptable. But they don't need to be. Their last fleet commander is already an extremely capable xenos, and their technology, despite all the fantastic work of the Adeptus Mechanicus, is far superior to ours. If they wise up sufficiently, we will lose."

Taylor had a feeling she wasn't going to like what the Imperial Fist was going to propose. But then, she didn't keep the Astartes of her Dawnbreaker Guard just because they looked intimidating.

"Continue."

"I think," Diamantis began carefully, "that given the ineffectiveness of the Nova ammunition, it is time to consider the hypothesis that our chances to capture the Ymga Monolith are lower than our preliminary estimates indicated. And that Battle Group Berezina and Dnieper may need to employ their Exterminatus weapons along with all their most dangerous surprises from the start. We may also need to reinforce our capital ships with Battle Group Muskha..."

And the blackout of Astropathic communications over Segmentum Obscurus was gaining in strength, not decreasing. It was good they had won in the Volga System, because the Lady General had a feeling she wouldn't like to see what defeat was like...

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Cadia**

**Elysian Fields**

**8.211.310M35**

**Chapter Master Argentius**

Argentius, like any Space Marine charismatic and talented enough to rise to the rank of Chapter Master, knew the incredible value of reinforcements at the decisive moment of the battle, which was why the terrible assault of the Black Templars flanking the heretics had been greeted with the thanks it deserved and would be properly honoured when this battle was won.

It was this experience which allowed him not to swear several curses incompatible with the dignity of Guilliman's teachings when the second wave of reinforcements came in...a second wave which was composed more or less entirely of three Great Companies of the Space Wolves.

"FOR RUSS AND THE ALLFATHER!"

The Silver Skull commander would have loved to say it was the only battlecry they shouted, but that would be a lie. About two-thirds of the Astartes which had once been named the Sixth Legion howled like they had an urge to be mistaken for beasts...or for the gigantic animals too many used as mounts.

"I don't know who said there are no wolves on Fenris, but I think he was ridiculously misinformed..." the interim commander of the 1st Company noted in a disenchanted tone.

"I am more worried about the fact their attack is targeting exactly at the wrong place to support the Cadians." Argentius frowned. "At this rate, the Cadians' offensive will have to stall if they don't want to be overwhelmed by the retreating mutants. We are missing an opportunity here for a perfect encirclement straight out of the Codex!"

Argentius was not a scion of those Chapters who thought that every tactic had to be explicitly described in the majestic work of their spiritual Lord, but it was galling to see this opportunity slip away because *someone* launched an ill-timed attack, precipitating the retreat of the heretics before the trap was inescapable.

"How many times did we try reaching the Wolves' Wolf Lords?"

"Three times, each," the Space Marine in charge of this duty replied unhappily. "I can try again..."

"I doubt it would be of any use," Argentius slowly and reluctantly shook his head. "Maybe the Living Saint could force them to listen, but..."

Eyes automatically turned to the sky over the Elysian Fields, where in a total disregard of the saying that duels were quick affairs, the angel-winged servant of the Emperor and the Greater Daemon were still fighting in a clash which shook Cadia every time blessed sword and malevolent axe clashed.

"If things like this happen on Cadia regularly, maybe it is a good thing we aren't part of the Astartes Praeses..."

"Come on brother! Where has your militancy disappeared to?"

The Bloodthirster roared again, beginning to burn once more in that cursed Warp aura the colour of blood before rushing to close the distance and trying to swat the Saint with its two damned weapons. It was impossibly fast. Its opponent was faster, burning in golden light, and cutting into one of its wings before striking the abomination which suddenly seemed on the defensive again and again.

The tumult of war seemed to quieten as the two enemies plummeted in a fatal embrace, Imperial and Warp power locked together into a deathly struggle.

The Greater Daemon hit the soil of Cadia a second time, but this time the fiend's fall was completely involuntary, and a terrible scream was heard, hatred and agony fighting for supremacy in the sound.

Smoke and debris hid the details from view for several seconds...and when they dissipated, there was no trace of the creature which had called itself An'ggrath. The Living Saint had also disappeared as spectacularly as she had arrived.

For the hordes of the Lost and the Damned though, this defeat was quite clearly the final straw. The creature they worshipped had been vanquished. They were caught between the undisciplined hammer of the Space Wolves, the hastily repaired fortified walls of the Silver Skulls, and the anvil of the Black Templars tanks.

Volkite and Plasma weaponry was thinning their hordes fast. The power of the Warp had abandoned them.

The greatest army of Chaos, a force of beastmen, mutants, and Traitor Astartes which had managed to land on Cadia with insane casualties, broke.

"PRIMUS INTER PARES! BEGIN THE PURSUIT!"

"IN GUILLIMAN'S NAME, LET NONE ESCAPE!"

It had cost them too much. One entire Company was dead, and more than a demi-Company was going to be crippled despite all that Bacta could do...but it was victory.

They had held, and that was everything that mattered.

"Cadia still stands," the Chapter Master of the Silver Skulls went to join the advance and the purge of the enemies of Mankind. "Pass the word, brothers."

**Ruins of Kasr Feros**

**Legion Master Drecarth the Sightless**

The wolves were howling in the distance, and Drecarth couldn't see them.

"Where are the Stormbirds?"

"We don't know, Legion Master. Last we heard of them, they were under fire from several Hell Talons..."

Drecarth felt a tide of anger engulf him. After several long seconds, he banished it.

"I suppose the Word Bearers are going to insist this is fair, since we betrayed them first."

The wolves were howling, and he couldn't see them*.*

*Your eyes shall fail when the wolves will howl for your death*.

The curse of the Eldar, uttered an eternity ago when he had assaulted one of their precious Maiden Worlds, resonated again in his head.

Drecarth had remembered laughing and decapitating the xenos witch. By then, he had removed his Astartes eyes and replaced them with purified psychic-attuned crystals, giving him far better vision than most warlords would ever gain.

It had gained him the very ironic name of 'Sightless'...and gradually more lore about the Immaterium and the Materium than the Thousand Sons grasped. What was the dying stammer of a long-eared enemy save some insignificant rambling?

*Your eyes shall fail when the wolves will howl for your death*.

He had gone above and beyond suppressing the ancient name of the Luna Wolves, praising the traditions of the Sons of Horus countless times, binding new recruits with oaths to never serve the Black Legion as long as he was alive.

And it appeared his reading of the prophecy had been wrong all along.

He would not be killed by the vengeance of some long forgotten remnant of the Sixteenth Legion which had refused to join Abaddon's Black Legion or his warband.

He was going to die against the hirsute horde of wolfish creatures Leman Russ called 'sons'.

"What do we have in terms of aerial transports?"

"Three Thunderhawks, Legion Master."

The artillery and the tank bombardment's fury impacted all around him. Shells found their mark, as the smell of blood and death rose to new heights. Daemons cursed the existence of the living, only for them to be immediately banished back into the Sea of Souls.

The laughter of the Three was heard, a sound of madness, but it was something almost...forced.

"So few..." The familiar sound of incoming bombers reached his ears, followed by several battle-cries uttered in what had to be the Fenrisian dialect of Low Gothic. "Load them with your warriors and go, Sargaddon."

"Legion Master?"

"You heard me correctly." Drecarth grimaced as the crystals were now showing him a hell of shadows and corpses. Reality for him was getting more and more nightmarish. The end was near. "The warband of the Sons of the Eye is dead...through my fault. We have lost everything. Save your life. There must be a few starships hiding among the graveyard of dead Space Hulks. Take one and escape into the immensities of the galactic west. The region is unstable, and a dedicated Captain may be able to forge a new warband there. Do not return to the Word Bearers. Forget the idea of Black Crusades...they are nothing more than a lie."

"But Legion Master, we can resist!"

"With what?" the Sons of Horus commander asked rhetorically. "Our warband is dead. The Legio Krytos and House Lucaris which accompanied us are routed. The daemons are banished. And in his wrath, the Guardian of the Throne of Skulls razed this Kasr so thoroughly it is impossible to mount a credible defence in it. No, this battle is lost."

Drecarth chuckled.

"Your loyalty does your credit, but it is over." The Legion Master threw his possessed axe to his last lieutenant. "Cadia will not fall to me."

The last Sons of the Eye ran and the roar of the Thunderhawks soon followed. Drecarth hoped they would manage to escape. After all these efforts, after all these battles, these Legionnaires were his legacy, the last proof the Sixteenth Legion had once stood proud, fighting against the betrayers of the False Warmaster, the backstabbing Legions, and colossal entities wishing to punish them for a failure they had in no small part engineered.

But this was a cruel galaxy. The survival of such a small warband would always be a question of chance, he recognised that now.

May they have more luck than him.

The noises of battle came ever closer, and at last, the sound of huge paws struck the ground.

The wolves howled, and Drecarth saw nothing.

"The hunt is over," one of those arrogant whelps the Sixth Legion always produced barked.

"The hunt is never over." Drecarth corrected. "There will always be more battles, unless you perish first. War is eternal, and Khorne does not care whose blood flows, so long as it does."

The first and last Legion Master of the Sons of the Eye raised the old power sword he had wielded at the Siege of Terra.

"Come, sons of Russ! I am Drecarth, son of Horus, and I am alone! Come and test your mettle against me!"

They were Blood Claws, mere Neophytes. They jumped into the melee without waiting for their elders.

Drecarth killed three before losing his life.

**Outer Cadian System**

**Carrion-class Heavy Battleship *Vox Dominus***

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

"In the name of the Architect of Change, what happened to the Guardian of the Throne of Skulls? In fact, why do I even bother asking you the question? I want to speak with Erebus. Transfer the Metatron connexion to him, *Acolyte*."

When one of the senior Dark Apostles of the Dark Council told you to do something, usually his inferior obeyed without question.

"My Master, the great *Hand of Destiny*, the elevated Dark Apostle Erebus is-"

Paristur lost what remained of his patience and conjured a spell of Decay before hurling it at the insolent loudmouth.

And miracles of the Pantheon, it worked. Erebus arrived within five seconds to save the life of his Acolyte.

"I am really busy, Paristur."

"So am I," if the other Dark Apostle thought this was going to give him pause, he thought wrong. "You promised us you weren't going to summon any Exalted servants of the Gods."

"And I kept my oaths," the bastard had the gall to shrug. "It's not my fault if Blessed Lorgar decided to punish Angra Mainyu by letting him summon the Deathbringer."

Paristur had to control himself to not hurl a few more spells which would result in the utter destruction of the flagship used by the Vile One. Not only would it probably not work – Erebus was annoyingly competent at using other Acolytes to erect counter-sorcery wards – their father would certainly not be amused by the inter-Legion conflict.

"You were aware of it. Don't deny it."

"I was aware of it, yes. It seemed a fine idea-"

"It was a stupidity beyond words." Paristur tightened his fists but did not snarl.

"Now-"

"Did you miss the point about this entire campaign being waged under the Pantheon's eyes? What we do for one God, we must do for the other two!"

He had thought this would bring some sanity back in the conversation. In that, he was utterly and completely wrong.

"Well, yes. I fail to see where the problem is."

"We sacrificed eight capital ships including one Battleship! Eighty-eight gifted Astartes! Eight hundred eighty-eight thousand eight hundred eighty-eight souls in addition to the previous sacrifices! And I'm sure the list of special ritual ingredients and the other assets expended to summon this Bloodthirster were hardly common!"

Paristur had only summoned two Bloodthirsters in his lifetime, and though his possessions were sizeable, each time they had taken a significant hit. No matter the circumstances, summoning one of these Greater Servants was not cheap, in souls or material resources.

"We sacrificed failures. And we almost succeeded, in the end. The Unbound would have destroyed the Silver Skulls and broken the Pylons if the False Emperor hadn't sent one of its deluded golden-winged fools to stop us."

"Excuse me?" Just as he thought this day couldn't get worse.

"I won't repeat myself, Paristur. Now I am really busy. Goodbye." And the Vile One cut the Metatron communication.

The slaves and the Legionnaires of little importance left the bridge. Of those who stayed, most were wearing the same expressions of disbelief he did.

"Gods," his Coryphaus swore. "Are my ears failing me, or did the Vile One just imply the False Emperor *intervened* to counter the Guardian of the Throne of Skulls?"

"It certainly sounded to me like that was exactly what he said." Paristur's mind was reeling with the implications. "This is...a disaster."

"Lord Apostle, I realise this is suboptimal but-"

The veteran of the Siege laughed.

"No, this isn't suboptimal. It's a defeat, and a severe one. The fact the False Emperor has a living weapon capable of beating the Guardian of the Throne," even so close after its banishment, Paristur would not utter An'ggrath's name aloud, "is already something unprecedented. This is the most powerful Bloodthirster around, slightly more powerful than the Angel's Bane."

And the latter had been beaten by Sanguinius and then Weaver. Their enemies seemed to have a gift when it came to hurling Bloodthirsters back into the Warp.

"Which would already be bad enough by itself, but now we are going to have to summon a Greater Servant of the two other Gods in our next battles, unless we wish to incur the wrath of the Pantheon. And by Greater Servant, I mean ones extremely favoured by the Gods."

They would have to summon an Exalted Lord of Change *and* an Exalted Great Unclean One. The chances of the sacrifices required to summon them being lesser than those which had done the job for An'ggrath was essentially zero. This would bleed them of skilled sorcerers.

"Have we the lore and means, Lord?"

"Yes, we do," Paristur gritted his teeth, "but it won't do us any good if each summoning fails to accomplish its goals! *Almost* is never good enough! *Almost* didn't give us Cadia! What do we care if a few million mortals were slaughtered and several Space Marine Chapters crippled? The Imperium has plenty more of those things to throw at us. The Pylons are the irreplaceable assets...and this plan I wasn't informed of in the first place failed!"

And this wasn't the only source of anger as he studied the information brought in by his countless spies. They had really committed too many Styx Heavy Cruisers against Cadia and the other worlds of this System. Paristur had agreed with Sota-Nul the new aerial force purchased from Xana II – and then copied by the other Mechanicum Hell-Lords – needed to be tested, but a lot of their carriers were destroyed in the ferocious fighting for little strategic gain.

"Thank the Gods we never intended to begin the ritual of the Cicatrix Maledictum here," the Dark Apostle tried to control and release his fury without hurting someone...or a lot of someones. "With the Pylons intact and the planetary shield re-activated," the third assault and An'ggrath had been able to bring it down temporarily, but it had not lasted, "the Legion would need to launch a fresh assault on this Fortress World."

The Seventeenth Legion could probably do it...if they turned around and stopped the Black Crusade here. And since Cadia wasn't the priority target...

"How bad is the situation with the escorts?" Paristur asked after several seconds daydreaming about strangling Erebus.

"We lost about fifty percent of every hull-type below Cruiser rank. The lower the tonnage, the higher the losses. The Starforts of Cadia have slaughtered our Raiders and the losses in Heldrakes and starfighters are...significant."

"Still, most of our battleline is intact, Lord Apostle. We still have one hundred and eight Battleships and three Super-Battleships forming the core of the Grand Armada, supported by twenty-eight Grand Cruisers and two hundred and seven Heavy Cruisers or Cruisers. And this list doesn't include Sota-Nul's and Krieg Acerbus' fleet, or the nine Silver Towers of the Thousand Sons plus the other lesser warbands."

Deliberately, no mention was made of Arkos and the two major Alpha Legion warbands which had just been wiped out. They had to blast apart the *Anarchy's Heart* in the end...the name had truly proved prophetic, and the fact it had been attached to the Great Host of Erebus was one more failure to the Vile One's name.

"And all of those warships are useless at playing escort for our transports...or any duty not involving a conventional fleet-on-fleet-action."

Ironically, it was this exact kind of battle the Word Bearers were avoiding right now as they raced away from mauled Kasr Holn and the rest of the Cadian System. Someone among the mortals had understood what they were trying to do...fortunately too late.

The mortal fleets were far from intact, but they still had over forty serviceable Battleships. If they fought this mass of ships – one which had an advantage in escorts – they would never be able to gain any lead over their pursuers.

And the Rogue Traders' raid upon their supply fleet would be a mere inconvenience compared to what would happen then.

Their fleet was too Battleship-heavy, Paristur acknowledged...unfortunately he had already voiced his point of view on that topic, and the senior Dark Apostle had not been listened to.

"But yes, we have the required warships to accomplish our part of the Great Plan," though he couldn't help but wonder how many alterations said ideas had suffered after his conversation with the Vile One. "Divert more energy to the engines. Lord Magnus and his sorcerers are going to cover our retreat, and I don't want our Great Host to be listed as collateral damage."

**Cadia**

**Kasr** **Tyrok**

**Warmaster Ender Trevayne**

The Traitor Marines loved their rituals. If there had only been the Warp Miasma, Ender could have passed it off as a coincidence, but at every turn of this monumental battle, the sorcerers of the Archenemy had tried to unleash daemons and other horrors through mass rituals.

And now there was a gigantic storm of...let's call it Warp lightning, polluting the reality across an extremely large zone of space, blocking any attempt of the different Battlefleets to bring them to battle. Not that the loyal Warmaster was sorry about that, of course. The Archenemy fleet badly outnumbered the Cadian warships, they hadn't had the time to form a proper united command after all the desperate fighting, and most importantly of all, the Traitor ships were intact and their crews – or whatever equivalent they used to man their hulls – were well-rested. The Imperial Navy could bleed them...or could have bled them, but a space battle could only have one outcome.

The problem was that the enemy knew it too, had calculated how much it would cost them to fight an attrition battle or to storm Cadia again...and decided it wasn't worth the cost.

"Our psykers, at least the ones who remain stable enough, affirm the tempest raised by the heretics will be extremely short-lived." The Inquisitor representing the sum of assets of the Holy Ordos in the Cadian system declared. "The most pessimistic estimations give forty-eight hours of existence to this ritual."

"I expected they would go for a longer period," the Armageddon-born officer noted his surprise.

"They certainly intended for something more powerful," the Inquisitor consented to explain. "But their hold on their treacherous powers was severely weakened by the banishment of the Greater Daemon and the intervention of a Living Saint of the God-Emperor. All victories have symbolic power in the Immaterium, and this was no small victory."

Ender nodded, feigning to not notice the big smiles of the Cadians at the 'official recognition' their planet had just been ground zero for a Miracle...note the capital 'M'.

"I will take your word for it." He assured politely. "Do we know the name of the Living Saint who intervened at the decisive hour?"

And which had probably saved them from a major disaster, because the Bloodthirster had torn apart solid defensive lines, one Kasr, Inquisitorial task forces, and several Companies of Space Marines like they were made of paper. Cadia was regularly fighting daemons, but even the Angels of Death had admitted this kind of monster was one of a kind.

"No." The black-cloaked man was an impressive figure of austerity, grimness, and solidity. Then again, he needed all of these traits to serve at the Cadian gate. "The Silver Skulls told us it wasn't Lady Weaver, Celestial Highness of Nyx, and I'm inclined to take them at their word. We were tempted to think it was Saint Gerstahl, this holy angel wielded his sword after all..."

"But Saint Gerstahl was definitely male," Andreas von Waldersee pointed out with non-hidden pride in his voice before returning to a more stern expression. "And besides, while reports are generally ambivalent about the details of his armour and powers, no one ever mentioned golden gauntlets with emeralds and jade-coloured purity symbols."

"It is quite an interesting topic," the representative of the Inquisition admitted freely, "there are a lot of hypotheses coming from my colleagues. But without word of the Living Saint Herself, we lack vital information."

The slight edge in his voice was a good hint of letting the matter lie...which every notable commander did.

"Now for the matter of the pursuit I am going to lead against the servants of the Archenemy." Ender began. "As the Black Legion failed to show itself, the majority of the ground forces having survived this battle and Battlefleets Cadian Primus and Secundus will stay where they are."

For the former, he didn't have the transports to take the millions of veteran guardsmen having survived the Battle of Cadia with him anyway...and there were a lot of broken mutant forces to mop up in the wilderness. Best to make sure they were properly exterminated. Regarding the latter, these two Battlefleets had been viciously targeted by the heretics, certainly to avoid them leading the pursuit. They would need heavy repairs in the Agripinaa shipyards.

"I intend to take Battlefleet Scarus Secundus and the ten regiments of Cadian Shock Troops from Prosan," of all the planets, this had been the only one where the enemy had not managed to land at all. "I will withdraw the Elysian Regiments and Battlefleet Agripinaa Secundus from Korolis. The Praetorian regiments and Battlefleet Corona Secundus of Kasr Sonnen, and the Orar Grenadiers of Kasr Berg with Battlefleet Obscurus Sextus will be added to this expeditionary force. The Space Marines will join on a volunteer basis"

"You're leaving us extremely understrength in naval assets if the Black Legion truly comes," Lord Admiral John von Bismarck commented, his face betraying the extreme mental exhaustion the events had inflicted upon him.

"Only temporarily. I firmly intend to convince High Command," which for him, meant Holy Terra, "to deploy two new Battlefleets here to guard the Gate against further incursions."

"Do you think it is likely there will be one?" The Inquisitor asked.

"No," Ender admitted, "but then one year ago, I wouldn't have believed the Traitor Astartes had the kind of muscle inside the Eye of Terror required to gather, repair, and arm a fleet of over one hundred Battleships with easily five times that number in lesser warships. And yet that's the forces they threw at us. So I fear we can't decrease the defences by that much. We still have seventy percent of the Starforts of our original order of battle, and in certain kill-zones we also have plenty of surprises left if the heretics want to come back for a new slaughter."

"Granted, but many veteran regiments will be committed on different planets," the Governor Primus interjected. "We don't need to be concerned about Saint Josmane's Hope – aside from where we will send our criminals now – but the fighting is not dying down on Kasr Holn. We will have to send at least one Army Group there. And on a totally related subject, I want the head of the bastard that made this disaster possible."

"An excellent idea!" There were times Lord Admiral John von Bismarck was very much the image of the typical noble having meteorically climbed the ranks until he commanded his Battlefleet with a combination of nepotism and politics which would likely make a guardsman sick. And then there were moments the man 'remembered' he was a Cadian first and foremost.

"An awful idea," Ender shook his head while keeping his eyes half-closed.

"Don't tell me you don't want to shoot that defeatist scum!"

Ender checked the communication was secure and the Inquisitor had activated the sound-modifying device a few seconds ago...just to be safe.

"Of course I want to shoot him," the Warmaster replied. "Thanks to him, over eighty percent of the Imperial Guard regiments stationed on Kasr Holn are dead, and the others will need massive reinforcements to be brought back to strength. The surviving elements of Battlefleet Solar Decimus able to move without suffering internal explosions will be folded into Battlefleet Solar Tertius, and I think the Ultramarines are going to love hearing how their Successors had their Battle-Barges suffering so much damage they will require years of repairs to be re-commissioned."

Ormuz Vandire was one of the main architects of this disaster, Ender was absolutely convinced of that. Somehow, he didn't think it was a coincidence thousands of cultists had managed to infiltrate the spaceports – province of the Imperial Navy, as per the Militarum-Navy accords on Cadia.

"But I am going to pursue the fleet of the Archenemy, and I can't fight this battle if the High Lords of Holy Terra decide I abused my privileges and vote for my demotion." His life would likely not end – the Custodes casting a very long shadow nearby was a guarantee of that – but as a 'mere' Lord Commander Militant, his influence on one of the greatest military campaigns waged by the Imperium would wane enormously...and bring more confusion. It was not in the best interest of the God-Emperor's realm and military efficiency.

"Not to mention the commander who took command instead of a Vandire was a Space Marine," the Inquisitor pointed out. "I agree the Astartes Captain made the right decision; inaction would definitely have created a bigger disaster than the one we currently have to deal with. But there's no pretending this wasn't an illegal move. If Admiral Ormuz Vandire loses his life with these accusations levied against him, several Admirals of Battlefleet Solar are not going to be very fond of everyone involved in this mess."

Ender Trevayne thought that the Admirals of Battlefleet Solar should be more concerned with leading their monumental Battleships into battle rather than spending their time playing politics. The deployment of two Battlefleets at Cadia was ludicrously small compared to the firepower available...and it had been the first deployment outside Segmentum Solar this *millennium*.

"You think I should send him back to Holy Terra with the first courier ship," yes, he knew how to read between the lines of Inquisitorial talk. And courier ships were as far removed from a Battleship Admiral's accommodations as was humanly possible.

"Leave his court-martial to his peers," the black-cloaked intimidating holder of the rosette...suggested forcefully.

Ender wanted to lash out and ask whether said peers would go for a court-martial at all. Many of the Admiral-politicians were going to be more concerned a Space Marine had usurped an Admiral's command than studying the disaster which had led said Angel of Death to take such drastic action in the first place.

But he couldn't afford to make a mortal enemy of the High Lord of the Adeptus Administratum right now...and maybe not ever. The bureaucrats were already functioning extremely badly, the God-Emperor knew what would happen if they decided to deliberately screw things up!

"One direct courier duty for a disgraced Admiral," the Warmaster conceded. "I will recommend a court-martial for him, given the...extreme gravity of the accusations." Whether or not it would go anywhere...

"Now let's return to the main threat of the heretics' fleet. The Band of the Hawk managed to destroy three transports in the successful raid against their supply fleet, and I'm afraid this presages nothing good where their treacherous motivations can be analysed."

Andreas coughed.

"Perhaps you could...err...entirely explain the clues and how you analysed them, Warmaster?"

"The transports were filled with Traitor regiments of the Volscani Cataphracts, along with enormous amounts of war equipment, judging by the wreck the Rogue Traders were able to properly study. Then there is their supply train. It was abysmally small for such a huge fleet, but the fact they had one at all is a clue in itself. Coupled with their obvious reluctance to commit their Battlefleet here, I heavily suspect they intend to attack a major stronghold in Segmentum Obscurus. The battles on every world proved they consider non-Astartes as worse than cannon-fodder; for them to have mustered so many transports filled with Traitors from our own ranks, they must have an extremely well-defended target in mind that they don't want to waste Astartes on."

"The Fortress Worlds of Segmentum Obscurus are well-defended bastions," John von Bismarck agreed before grimacing, "but if we don't correctly guess which world they want to hammer, I don't know if it will be able to hold. The three gargantuan hulls they have make the legendary Gloriana look *small*..."

**Sautekh Space**

**Mandragora System**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

**8.499.310M35**

**Overlord Sobekhotep**

If traditions were respected, the arrival of the Throne of Oblivion in the domain officially recognised as part of the Sautekh Crownworld's space should have seen long, prestigious, and utterly boring ceremonies organised.

Sobekhotep definitely missed those boring times, as unbearable as they had been before. Because it would mean he didn't spend his time listening to the criticism of Thakmatar the Oppressor.

"And leaving the Tesseract Vault of Hsiagn'la unguarded with only the minimum of security protocols reeks of incompetence!" The Sautekh Overlord proclaimed, infuriating the Dust-Maker.

"Don't try to give me lessons, 'Oppressor'!" the Szarekhan noble thundered back. "Your tactics utterly failed to account for the importance of new reinforcements for the debased descendants of the Krorks!"

"The green vermin is unpredictable! What happens when one of our shattered ex-Gods is free to unleash its wrath is many things, but unpredictable it is not!"

"Back in my days-"

"Yes, yes, Zahndrekh," Sobekhotep sneered. "Back in your days I'm sure we would have won the Secession Wars twice over and destroyed this vermin in less time than it takes to say it."

The Regent of the Throne of Oblivion was surprised by the reaction from Thakmatar.

"You should be on your knees thanking Zahndrekh for saving your life!" the Sautekh commander roared. "If not for him, the Voidsong would have disintegrated your court and melted the weapons of your Dynasty to forge itself a seat of power!"

"Preposterous! My forces adopted extremely potent defensive tactics which allowed the new imprisonment of this cruel force of the stars!"

"Like you adopted a strategy which will allow us to accomplish goals of military conquest, I assume?" Thakmatar snapped back. "Your decision to listen to Orikan has so far created a series of disasters. Most of these defeats being directed at Sautekh worlds, not Szarekhan!"

"It is not my fault you were incapable of effectively hiding your worlds, now-"

"You brainwashed all Dynasties into forgetting the very spatial coordinates of your bases!" The other Overlord shouted. "Of course the Nerushlatset couldn't give them to the lesser species they use as their hired blades in this campaign."

"The path of the mercenary was an honourable one during the First Age of Exploration-"

"I do not need a history lesson, Overlord Zahndrekh." Senile. The old fool was completely senile. "And the Nerushlatset Dynasty will not escape my vengeance!" Nor would the secessionist-thief. In fact, if Sobekhotep knew where Solemnace was right now, it would be his first target, and forget the Nerushlatset.

"Why do you assume I care about the Nerushlatset?" Thakmatar boldly spoke. "My world suffers under the organometallic occupation of these 'humans'. Hyper-dimensional communicators are reporting disaster after disaster. If nothing is done soon, the Sautekh Dynasty will be limited to Mandragora and Gidrim in a few years!"

"You have billions of Necron warriors and more resources in this very system than you can properly count," Sobekhotep tried to use the other Overlord's own words against him. "Or so you pretended anyway. The Sautekh armies sleeping here are limitless, I believe were your words?"

"Yes," the Oppressor acknowledged, "and these Sautekh armies fight for Phaeron Djosakhat, Master of Mandragora, Creator of the Golden Crown."

"Your armies fight for the Silent King!" Sobekhotep hissed.

"Yes, and look at all the good it did us!" the Oppressor snapped back. "We awaken millions of years after our victory against the Old Ones, only to see all our conquests forgotten and buried in the sands of time. Considerable damage was done to our engrams and the most important systems of our civilisation. We broke our Gods, and for this betrayal they cursed us. What have the Szarekhans done for us, apart from enslaving us with your damned command protocols and using us as your executioners?"

"They have given us unity," the answer of Overlord Zahndrekh was...well, surprisingly sane.

"And you will cease your treasonous talks, unless you want to test the secondary protocols available to a noble of the Szarekhan Dynasty."

But Overlord Thakmatar was not cowed by the threat.

"If you had protocols which permitted you to command us while retaining our military capabilities, you would have already used them. The Szarekhans have always enjoyed the power of the Silent King, and the moment the C'Tan gave you uncontested authority, you enslaved us!"

"We saved you," Sobekhotep the Dust-Maker addressed the ingrate Overlord. "Without us, you would have torn each other apart until nothing was left during the Secession Wars!"

"So you affirm. The problem is that all of our oldest engrams have clearly been tampered with by your Dynasty. Thus you will excuse me if I have my doubts about the reliability of the 'true history' which for some reason presents you as paragons of nobility, justice, unity, and respect for traditions!"

"You are dismissed of all your military commands and-"

"I don't obey you anymore," the arrogant Sautekh dared interrupting him. "I already sent several Heralds ahead of the Throne to request a complete reawakening of our Dynasty troops with utmost urgency. And I now have confirmation Phaeron Djosakhat once more walks the halls of Mandragora, with his greatest Generals by his side."

"Your Phaeron is loyal. He will obey my orders."

Deep inside however, Sobekhotep felt a flicker of doubt in his super-engineered metallic 'brain'. The Sautekh had been utterly loyal...when the Command Protocols of the Mighty Silent King were active. How had they behaved before the biotransference? The question had to be asked given Thakmatar's...antagonistic behaviour.

"This is irregular," Zahndrekh protested, and Sobekhotep dared hope for a moment. "Even at the battle of the Acid Jungle against the Mephrit, the traditions had not been so disrespected."

The old Overlord mumbled some more of his old tales no one cared about before returning to a semi-sane...for him...behaviour.

"But if the Phaeron summons us..."

"Do you really think you are going to get away with this?"

"The Szarekhan Dynasty, as your own tirades admit, needs the fleets and armies of Mandragora if they are to survive in this unrecognisable galaxy," the younger Sautekh Overlord replied.

"You are really lucky the enemy is far away from this system," Sobekhotep snarled, "or I would activate my protocols on your miserable body, and send you fighting the vermin until your engrams and metal give out!"

**Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado***

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

"The Ymga Monolith has translated into the system, Archmagos."

"And exactly within our ten minutes-long estimated window," Gastaph commented, recording the time in his personal Noosphere files. "This FTL method is remarkable."

The old conservatives of the Mechanicus who delighted in repeating that the Warp was the one and only method of travelling across the stars were going to collapse in tech-shock once they were told the news.

"Err...yes, Archmagos." The Magos he had assigned to relay the prime-communicates to him emitted a cant of embarrassment. "Forgive me, but isn't this FTL method also...horribly dangerous?"

"It is not horribly dangerous per se," the Voice of Mars in the Nyx System corrected. "It is completely lethal by design. Anything that uses the 'Star-Eater Drive' is irradiated by exotic energy which kills most organic matter in minutes. The Necrons are made of Necrodermis and other alloys, and as such of course care little about this 'minor inconvenience', but any other species won't share this opinion. Now obviously, the important question is if this faster-than-light technology is really something only the Necrons can use, or something we can exploit with a new type of anti-exotic energy shield?"

"An interesting question, Archmagos...one which...err...will certainly cause the Navis Nobilite several crises of fear."

The younger Tech-Priest made a very good point there, Gastaph admitted internally. The Adeptus Mechanicus, like nearly all organisations of the Imperium, was completely reliant on the Navigators for interstellar travel. It was why the Quest for Knowledge's non-insignificant costs in part served to pay for the service of elite Navigators.

"Indeed. Though it is just a musing...for now. First, we have a battle to win."

"Yes, Archmagos. Archmagos Dominus Executor Samartian Eta-Eta of Battle Group Dnieper reports all his warships are ready. The 'torpedo swarms' are in position. The Destroyer packs have received their modified instructions, and all maintenance and repairs on the Battleships have been completed. The same is true for your own Battle Group Berezina."

"The Deathwatch's infiltrated teams?"

"Team Alpha's transport is extracting its Astartes as we speak, Archmagos. They have the Protocol artefact they were after. As for the other teams, so far, their missions appear to continue according to the agreed plans."

This was somewhat reassuring, though Team Alpha, despite the name suggesting the contrary, had the easiest mission. The Sautekh didn't seem to have given even a minor priority to guarding an artefact allowing the Szarekhans to hold dominion over the Nerushlatset Dynasty.

"The Ork fleet?"

"No sign of it so far. The contingencies are prepared."

"Archmagos! Extremis-level communications between the Ymga Monolith and the tomb-fortresses of Mandragora!"

Archmagos Gastaph Hediatrix immediately turned towards the tactical data-streams and saw the worst-case scenario had just begun.

"They are awakening the entire Crownworld." The senior Tech-Priest growled. "How many hours until Lady Weaver and her two Battle Groups' predicted arrival?"

"Ninety-eight hours until the arrival of the Chosen of the Omnissiah, Archmagos!"

Four standard days. Four days before receiving major reinforcements. It was not a lot...until one remembered the Battle of Commorragh had lasted approximately that long.

"Archmagos," the Magos of Atar-Median he used as liaison with the other Battle Group canted. "If we wait for Lady Weaver, we will have a decisive advantage-"

"Did you see what is awaiting us in the 'Golden Crown' of the Necrons?" The Voice of Mars was quick to disabuse the Tech-Priest of such ridiculous notions. "We don't know how long it takes to reactivate a Necron Cairn-class Battleship, but given the existence of the Replicator Forges, simulations predict grim scenarios if we leave them intact for hours.”

Gastaph considered this gigantic xenos structure a heresy in the eyes of the Omnissiah. But he had to be pragmatic. The sum of these shipyards, mega-plates, hyper-forges, and super-complexes of xenos industry was bigger than the Ring of Iron, and its monitoring stations and star-fortresses also served as sentinels for the planet's defences deeper inside the gravity well.

Mandragora alone, thanks to the incomplete information delivered by the thief, was known to be more heavily defended than Blessed Mars itself.

If he allowed them to fully activate the 'Broken Crown', it wouldn't matter if Operation Stalingrad had ten or one hundred Battle Groups, because none of the Imperium's Battlefleets would be able to engage these defences and survive. These monstrous xenos defences wouldn't even need the Ymga Monolith to fire in anger once.

"We attack as per Plan Carrhes." The Archmagos announced, his decision only confirmed by several thousands of simulations and the latest astropathic transmissions from Battle Group Volga. "We may not be able to engage the Ymga Monolith before Lady Weaver reinforces us, but we can definitely ruin the Golden Crown fleets before they can manoeuvre. We have the advantage of surprise, for I doubt they would have allowed us to come so close if they knew we were here. We have four Arks Mechanicus and thirty-six Mechanicus Battleships divided into two Battle Groups. We have two Army Groups of the Astra Militarum. We have new STC-blessed weapons. We have Legio Ignatum and Legio Atarus. We have Space Marines for boarding operations. And above all...our Tech-Priests know what the Chosen of the Omnissiah has done to these Necrons at Volga."

"The Imperial Guard regiments don't, Archmagos." A Magos pointed out.

"Are you seriously trying to convince me our Tech-Priests managed to maintain the veil of secrecy concerning the news?" Gastaph asked sceptically.

"Err...no, Archmagos."

"Good, I would hate to have to send you to monitor the servitors." One more quick study of all information arriving on his bridge, and the Archmagos Primus nodded.

"For the Omnissiah and the Chosen we swore our vows to," he said formally. "Launch the attack on the Golden Crown of Mandragora."

**Author's note**: The Black Crusade Arc will continue in the next chapter, which is tentatively titled *Black Crusade 10-3 The Dragons of Mandragora*. The glorious cycle of Escalation must and will continue.

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: w[ww](https://www) .alternatehistory.com /forum /threads /weaver-option-thread-3-the-5th-black-crusade-story-only.506948/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption