**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 is the most terrible thing of the entire affair? Of all the Legions involved in this great treachery, yours is the one I was the most surprised to discover. The oath-breaking of Curze didn’t give me pause. The Night Haunter may pretend he did it because the future was always destined to lead us where we stand, but it is a lie. Konrad did it because it is way easier to slaughter innocents and defenceless people when they can’t oppose a bloody resistance to 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 exception. 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 were never able to discover 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 presenting the interior of his ships as morbid catacombs. Angron...he was broken long before the Imperium found him. I’m sure he still blames our Father with what little intelligence left in him, but the truth is that the arena where he made his bloody debuts 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 at the Battle of Gate 42 what he really was concerned about. 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 critically mistaken.*

*Horus was the worst...before you topped him from this 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, weaponry resupply, ship boarding’s 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 the replacement of Malcador. You certainly had the administrative capacity and the 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 that. And when people come to remind you 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 is there 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, billions of men standing guard across the stars, loyal to their oaths, inheritors of the dream you deliberately broke because atheism wasn’t someone 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, none.*

*You think you have planned for anything. You think your insane gambits can force back your problems into non-existence 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.*

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“*Whoever pretends a game of Regicide or any variation of chess is a good preparation for war will be demoted from one rank minimally. And if anyone insists, make it two or three. The conduct of military operations isn’t a game. Enemy forces on both sides of a battlefield are never equal in numbers and capabilities. You rarely have the opportunity to look at 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 enacted 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 near-always hold the view that the Great Heresy was the most devastating conflict ever fought in the Imperium history. And to be fair, it isn’t completely wrong: the scale and the military size 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 hundreds of Space Marines could bring into submission an entire Sector are 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 it most evident 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.

**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 788th of Cadia 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 themselves in the mirror and find nothing was wrong, in Ender’s opinion. It was their belief the galaxy found their brand of irony funny. “It seems the world they were training some of their officers has been corrupted without raising the Holy Inquisition’s suspicions.”

“If we survive this year, the purges are not going to be minor. Where does it 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 Arch-Enemy 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 of data at once, “you will realise the 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 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 think 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 the list of them.

“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 reading’s 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 go too close.”

And it 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 – the heretics had not shown them half of what they had brought to the party.

“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 bound on a collision course to Cadia, and given how many close-quarter monsters they have around them, our first waves have no chance reaching them. We must slaughter their screen first. The sooner we do that, the more their Battleships will be vulnerable 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 don’t ask him to be happy. Holy Terra does not demand us to be happy. It asks us to defend Cadia and kill all these heretics. Pass 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 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 enough 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 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 on their wake. The priority targets are the warships below Light Cruiser Tonnage and all the heretical machines of starfighter-equivalent signatures.”

“This is going to leave the enemy battle-line more or less intact,” 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 Arch-Enemy, 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 right 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**

**ENDENGERMENT 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 at each other.

The bombardment of today fired by the slaves of the False Emperor disagreeably reminded him of the Siege, not that he was going to say 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 convinced themselves they could go 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 the 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 this 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 it 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 torpedoes incoming and their long-range guns won’t seriously hinder a Battleship, be it from the Infernus or the Carrion class,” Paristur growled, “at worse, 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 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 in the Cadian System, the carcasses and devastated hulks of dozens 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 not exactly 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 the preparation maps of the 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 used. 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 profiles coming from Mechanicus Barques! Twenty thousand torpedoes!”

“Shit,” his Coryphaus spoke, “How by Nurgle’s holy bowels did they manage to transfer so many ammunition stocks 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 to do, after all.”

The environment created by a Warp Storm was properly fascinating in countless aspects. Yet, for all its advantages, it had many drawbacks too. One of the biggest obstacles which were known to everyone was that many metals and alloys’ properties were not stable outside of any 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 were falling 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 Lords raiders are breaking formation! I repeat, dozens of Night Lord assault ships are breaking formation!”

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

“So Drecarth the Sightless has decided to betray us.”

“His disinterest when we spoke 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 for...how many times was it?”

“Eighteen times?”

“Yes,” the veteran of the Siege shook his head. “It should be around that number. And it isn’t 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 had not 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 defends, utterly ignoring the orders of their betters to turn around.

“Curse you, Drecarth,” Paristur said aloud as laughter echoed on 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 the 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 truly 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 birthday.

“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 said in a thunderous voice for the benefit 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 eternal-cursed Daemon Engines...especially the Heldrakes.”

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

“We will have to use our starfighters and our Destroyers in close-interception modes, 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 better not to be another of these ‘requests’ which were impossible to approve, politically or bureaucratically...

“Lord Admiral!” The good point about having so many mechadendrites and a ugly box of metal instead of your face, was that no one would be able to pass himself – or herself – as the Archmagos and usurp his – or her – identity. “The planetary shield is ready for activation. Praise the Omnissiah and the Sacred Laws of Energy!”

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

“You can power the shield immediately,” the grey-haired man answered. 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. Excitation mingled with anxiety.

But as the countdown showed 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 his schedule was more than four years late – 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 the orbital grid to guard our rear, we have an opportunity to take the fight to the enemy.”

“If we cross their T like you no doubt plan, Lord Admiral,” his chief of staff said 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 well. And as long as the shield is active, we don’t have to stay like sitting ducks in high orbit to provide counter-missile fire.”

It was too much reacting to the heretics’ plan for his taste, but unfortunately it didn’t chance 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 simply to 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 twenty additional 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 in 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 in 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 the 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 on the bridge of the Barge of the Stormhawk, and thus illuminate this bland place of 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 power. 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 hull 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 by a neo-fusion of several quantum principles, the enemy intend to resonate these particles with a yet-unknown discovered 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 able. “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 to, I have forty-five Battleships, supported by ninety Harvest 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 ship is better than ten of them, and that’s a very generous estimation on my part!”

“I...Rising Light, Blade of Szarekh...we have entered the particle field, I conjure 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 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 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 Rear-Guard 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 explain what the best method was to destroy the reserve Necron fleet guarding the Ymga Monolith.

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

Contingencies after contingencies had been prepared, elegant combinations of diversions and new weapons had been memories 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 out of words, clearly. “Were the Necron auspexes malfunctioning? I mean they clearly decelerated at first...”

“I think there is a simpler explanation.” Gavreel said sardonically.

“And this explanation is?” her Flesh Tearer Champion asked.

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

“Unfortunately, we probably will never know for sure,” the Forgefather of the Salamanders said 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 hoped 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, ‘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 yes, Taylor saw the result.

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

“That’s going to make a massive hole in their order of battle, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” Archmagos Sagami said. “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 them 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 go back to work. The enemy has suffered a large defeat, but this system is hardly empty of enemies! Let’s get back to work, shall we? 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 strikes of whip, the men returned to giving back their undivided attention at the bridge’s stations, and the same scenes were repeated across the bridges.

“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 rhythm 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.

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

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

“My compliments to Lord Admiral Müller, and politely request that unless the Necron 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 this 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 in him?

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

“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 full power can make it combat-capable again.”

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

No, no he wouldn’t think about this imbecile again.

“Royal Warden, heed my words.”

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

“From this moment, 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 this is their choice. I won’t blame them if they don’t.”

“Yes, my Mighty Overlord.”

“Now speak of the current military operations.”

“The green vermin is attacking in a suicidal onslaught Overlord Thakmatar. His Assault Fleet is winning slowly but surely, despite some impossible teleportation breakthrough 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.”

“And I do 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 hadn’t the time anymore 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 rear-guard 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 if far from I wanted, but we are going to need a new fleet.”

Again, he didn’t say, but he wouldn’t rage aloud for now. He was the Dust-Maker, and his vengeance would set new times of terror in 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 fleet? 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, the Throne was undamaged. The shields were intact. No enemy had touched the sacred living metal the Silent King had ordered him to protect him 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 to fix 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 before feeling his anger soar as 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 of 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 who had chosen to place themselves under his command.

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

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

“This is a big problem,” recognised Second Captain Remian Sakart, trying to scratch continuously 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 eyes were 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 in our flanks!”

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

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

“We are going to descend on Cadia,” Drecarth commanded. “Our Chaos Auxilia and our 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 were sharing the same outlook about life than 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 spear tips to tear the mortals and whatever dogs they have managed to gather around them. 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 make a mountain of skulls of the mortals who dare marching against us.”

Drecarth pointed at a second point on the representation of the world their enemies had taken to name 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 take uncontested orbital supremacy. It will be your job, Second Captain, to raze their walls and protect the Mechanicum Priests until they can properly transform 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 their 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 legitimate 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 multiple 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 for the former, I disagree completely for the latter,” Warmaster Ender Trevayne said 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 an assault directly against Kasr Tyrok. The Warmaster had refused to garrison Space Marines near it, but the forces present had immense fortifications and siege weapons to protect themselves.

“What 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 pronounce 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 interesting information I was able to discover was their fixation on the decisive surgical assaults targeting the enemy leadership.”

“This 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 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 when I was a mere Lieutenant, one 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 with this Acolyte on a walk, and I never saw him 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 the moment they were speaking...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 on theatre said politely. “While they appear to be very tactically flexible, these heretics have been physically and mentally trained into locating the heart of the enemy command structure and to tear it open as fast 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 must adopt their strategy in consequence. The Traitor Astartes we see there 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 disposed a lot of secret assets Andreas didn’t know.

“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, conquer 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 the three prongs of their assault,” the Warmaster nodded. “They should have sent more, especially where the siege-specialists are concerned.”

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

“They have advanced far enough. Now let’s get give them a proper welcoming committee. 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 middle-sized holes which were created in his personal Kharybdis Assault Claw mere seconds before ground impact.

The second clue happened not before he had made three steps outside of his transport: one of the Lucaris murder-machine lost its ion shielding before eating two or three rockets in its metallic ‘head’. The Chaos-blessed Knight was not out of the battle yet – these walker’s suits were tough beasts – but all sanity was lost and it began to rampage at 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 THIS ARTILLERY SERVANTS BUTCHERED!” The First Captain screamed in 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 under their blades.

After a few seconds though, Lan began to feel something was really wrong. Most of those mortals didn’t even manage to shoot in his direction, even with 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 vision to nothing ahead of them.

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 had to reach the second trench, as draconic shape came back and set aflame the space between the two trenches, before releasing more rockets and other long-range projectiles against House Lucaris’ forces.

“Since when does the False Imperials have Heldrakes?” angrily barked one of his Lieutenants.

“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 the 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 weapon 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 Graia. Meaning they had just landed on 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, “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 again.

The Warlord Titan fired.

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

Then another one smashed him several metres away on his back.

It took him several seconds to stand up, and more to feel confident he wasn’t going to collapse. As he looked on the bloodied battlefield, a ruined pole 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 were 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 run 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 hadn’t to be pretty for a Space Marine to forgot his training and hesitate. “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 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 in 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 is true for Necrons, they must have someone very competent to compensate for the abyssal 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 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 put 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 coming on their flanks, destroying the last survivors of their outer defences. They can’t afford losing 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 upon our hands. Not even an idiot could miss the point 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 are going to have a lot of options,” Jeremiah Isley unhappily admitted. “Maybe this Forge is able 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 tempted to answer by a no. And even if it was, we would have to switch off our jammers, resulting in the Necrons pouring thousands of their assault forces for the few seconds of opportunity we would grant 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 more manoeuvrable captured hull in creation.”

“I know.” Isley confessed. “But at least that way we have a chance. The Doom Scythes won’t be risked by the thousands with the dangers of this new battlefield, and the more time 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 of 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 this Replicator Forge!”

“The secessionists are depriving us of the time necessary,” the older Sautekh Overlord. “And you know the old proverb, Szarekhan Overlord, you can rebuild armies and fleets, erase the damage of ten thousand invasions, but you can conquer time again.”

“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 exciting pursuit 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 it is not exactly a preordained fate. The foe has certainly proved cunning against Simut.”

“Do not utter this name anymore in my presence!” The Dust-Maker barked. “And there is nothing to learn from this debacle, save that certain nobles are unworthy to claim 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 rapidly 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.”

“This 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 say the minefields Overlord Zahndrekh supposed the existence of have been located. And there are a lot of objects spread over 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 Cryptek nearby. It took him a long time and more self-control he wished to use in this critical moment.

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

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

“You lack the numbers the Rear-Guard Fleet had. Your enemy is going to have a significant superiority in capital ships.”

“You Szarekhans always make the same 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 began, “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 sorry at all.

“What are your suggestions?” They had better be good, for he was tempted to kill 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 rear-guard 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.”

“Disappear from my sight. Now!”

**Falchion-class Battleship *Hornet***

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

This was Dragon’s first true military campaign in 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 told her ‘boss’ who was given a very good human-sized hololithic representation on her bridge. “We knew the Necrons considered the Replicator Forges the prime jewels of their Dynasty. It was to be expected they would oppose 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 fell into our first trap eyes closed and got his entire fleet destroyed, something which cost him *forty-five* fifteen kilometres-long Battleship, 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. Even staying impartial, these two opponents aren’t playing in the same league.”

“I am not saying this isn’t the case.” 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 worlds. A tolerable failure may do them some good and force them to reform their doctrine and goals.”

The same could be true about 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 a stone-cold expression. “I can only hope your assessment 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 this 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 take your point.” The Lady General grimaced. “I would have preferred the first failure of the Heracles Wardens to be 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 it could be imagined 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.

“What is the most important is ensuring the lesson had been learned and to correct our assumption about the Necron’s 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’s gloves the first time around,” the still glowing parahuman – and how was it possible in a null-zone Dragon didn’t know – commented politely.

“With due respect, you did,” Dragon said bluntly. “We should have placed all the specialists against Alpha, and sent the Flesh Tearers on 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.

“It is going to cause considerable damage to the Monolith itself.”

“They don’t look exactly like they are willing to lay down their arms and negotiate...we received once again their ‘Surrender and Die’ message, five seconds ago....and like you said, it isn’t the time to go into this battle with kid’s 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 term 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 of this 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 upon 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 ever seen the heretic since, and no one ever would, if the God-Emperor was with them. 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 purge, 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 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 noble had pleaded between two protestations of loyalty to be chosen for a transfer to one of the rare regiments which were transferred for an 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 with 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 the request...which was then the heretics and the 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 in the vox-caster. “WE HAVE A TRAITOR TITAN THERE HAMMERING US!”

The staff officer at the other end promised a lamentable excuse 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 smoke 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 said fatally, a mantra he repeated a hundred times per day. “We’re going to have a problem, though. The 180th said there’s a horde of beastmen streaming out from this 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 the supplies 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...and 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 Marv V helmet, the Mark VI 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 where now were 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.

“That’s why the God-Emperor gave us lasguns,” 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 that 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 too - 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 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 go with me.”

“They have brought these 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 destination.

“I know I should have asked that girl in marriage last year,” one of the longest-serving guardsmen serving in the 8th Company boasted.

“Maverick, I don’t think the Arch-Enemy cares very much about your marital ambitions...” 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!”

The climbed up the trench and immediately had to fire a volley to kill a mass of mutants which had hoped to crawl 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 very 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 selling the contrary view, 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 thousands of 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 highly-valuable landing zones.”

“Right,” the Lord Admiral grimaced again. “But even if they’re bluffing, their ships remain extremely dangerous. They have thousands of cultists, and each time a boarding operation was launched, they are cutting their own throats to summon the 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, by their fault, they had small armies of mutants and heretics running everywhere, “maintaining orbital superiority is the 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 said after giving him an expression which was neither joyous nor enthusiastic, “as long as the gigantic fleet of the heretic continues towards Saint Josmane’s Hope, we can deal with the spawns 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 of my Battleships is intact, and at least one-third are going to need more than a month in the yards when it is over.”

“Then fight this battle, Lord Admiral. I leave the fight over your heads to you.”

The lithocast was switched off, and the different visages 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 listened to 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 away a lot of resources, both in Traitor Astartes and mutants at us.”

“I choose poorly my words,” the Warmaster apologised, “I should have said the destruction of Cadia isn’t their principal 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 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 have dictated they used their largest capital ships to sweep aside Battlefleet Cadia Primus and 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 be already 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 said whimsically. “Without hesitating. 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 Son 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 an entire book of their global 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 missing there, 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 commander 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 to 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 sliced the throat of one of his slaves, before throwing his still screaming corpse in the nearest mirror.

The surface stopped showing a maze of razorwire, exploded ordnance, and brutal trench-to-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 said 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 afire the entrails of this whippersnapper.

“Perhaps I was not clear enough,” the senior Dark Apostle said coldly. “They are suffering incredibly heavy losses while inflicting not 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 on their landing zones, the Cadian defence is still too high!”

“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 the 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 rejoicing about what was happening to the ‘betrayers’.

Much like the punishment the Sons’ fleet endured against the battle-line of Cadia, the land battles were a long grinding nightmare where the unbeliever 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 defending position.

A proper count of the casualties suffered by Drecarth’s host was properly 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 maintain the pressure on the Cadians, he was forced to throw into the inferno hundreds of thousands more per hour, just to keep the pressure and ensure the Great Plan wasn’t derailed.

“Why is it so taking them so much time to reach Saint Josmane’s Hope?”

“That’s why I am trying to discover, 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 repartee.

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 limbs shaking.

Not when a massive cloud of darkness coalesced into a 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 back a Neverborn 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 somehow it appeared on the Primarch’s right...somehow. His ritual chambers were shrouded in shadows now, and those weren’t those of the Pantheon.

“Quor Karmain. If you want to live, cut the red string.”

And the Lord of the Raven Guard transformed again 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 rat’s traps in Sicarus’ catacombs, and the glowing sickly green’s stone pulsing and throwing green sparkles was definitely an explosive device if there ever was one.

And it was connected to over a thousand strings.

All of them were red-painted.

“MOTHERLESS BASTARD!” The Dark Apostle erupted.

Damn it! Damn it! He couldn’t let this blew up here. The damage of these unstable stones was bad enough, but 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 string...red string...maybe this one?

An enormous pulse of energy not belonging to the Three slammed into him and Quor didn’t know anyone to 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 when the servants of the Gods waited.

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

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

**8.196.310M35**

**Super-Mekboy Brukk X-Brukk**

“Ramming is da bestz taktik!” Brukk laughed as he got out of his super-ramming torpedo. “Kill the Necroz! WAAGH!”

“WAAAAAAGGHHH!”

“WE ARE NECRONS. SURRENDER AND DIE!”

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

“What’s zat word?”

“Mek-boss?”

“The metal boyz lovez to banter with ‘surrenderez or diez’,” Brukk shot wildly in the ranks of the Necroz. “Diez I understand. But ‘surrenderez’? Is dat a Dakka-Dakka thinga?”

“Nah, Mek-boss.” The smaller Nob nodded wisely. “Dakka is dakka, even humiez knowez that. Dakka is dat life. Dakka is da best thing to make big WAAGH! Dakka can’t be ‘nother thingie. ‘Surenderez’ must be a capit...cuvul...ah, one of dat cultural thingies of the Necroz.”

“Makez sense,” Brukk approved. “Dakka forever! Hey! Wherez da rest of the boyz?”

“Levelz lowers, Boss!” another Mekboy shouted. “Their ram-ships weren’t as fasta and siniestz as yourz!”

“Urk, urk,” the survivor of the big battles chuckled. “In dat case, we’re going to throw a big parties here and fight our way to the bridgez! When we takez the bridge for ourz, everyone will know we are da best! WAA-“

“Boss! Boss! Warboss Arrgard sending shouters Boss!”

“What is he sayingz?”

“Reinforcementz Boss! Plenty of shiniest new ram-ship 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 WIZ ME! WE GOING TAKEZ THIS BATTLEKROOZER, AND DEN WE ARE GOING TO TAKE DA NECROZ FLEET! WAAAAAGH!”

“WAAAAAAAAGGGHHH!”

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

“Wolfgang?”

“Yes, my Lady?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Taylor said thoughtfully, “but isn’t it impossible for anyone to send Astropathic messages in a null-zone?”

“Yes, yes it is,” replied the blonde-haired Rogue Trader.

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

“We have.”

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

“In that case, where the hell these Ork reinforcements are 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 confessed. “It is...err...completely unprecedented.”

“As always with the Orks...” someone grumbled anonymously.

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 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 arrive to create their ugly creations.

And when you had removed everything but the impossible, as the old quote said, all that remained had to be the truth.

“Faith.”

“My Lady?”

“It’s faith which has led the greenskins there. If I have to guess, their faith 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 even that work?” Archmagos Thayer Sagami asked in disbelief. Taylor raised an eyebrow and furled and unfurled her wings a couple of times.

“I can’t exactly explain the intricacies of it,” the insect-mistress sighed, “but it has to be that.”

“It is ridiculous,” Kratos commented.

“Perhaps, but the Orks’ presence is impossible to deny,” Gamaliel shrugged. “And to be honest, the Orks have done some more ridiculous things in the last millennia. The War of the Beast comes to mind.”

“At least the Orks are, if anything, simplifying our strategic situation,” Nikolai Rokossovsky declared, caressing his large beard. “Our concerns 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 said 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, they 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 bear bad news, but he didn’t flinch as she observed him.

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

It was enticing. Very enticing. Too enticing.

“No,” the golden-winged parahuman said at last. “While I know we have made contingencies for it, involving a second Battle Group right now will make sure the Ymga Monolith will try to leave this Quarantine Zone if it has the technological capabilities to do so.”

“We have a nice trap prepared for them.”

“Assuming everything goes according to the plan, and given what happened since this battle began, I’m far less confident about it.” 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**

“Do we have thrown all the traitors through the airlocks?”

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

“For all the good it is going to make,” Quintus whispered between his teeth. The Penal Legions of Saint Josmane’s Hope had already been an instrument which inspired him little confidence – to not say none – but now that its officers were proved 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 intact, 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 don’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 was too good to be true, it generally was. This ‘miraculous’ lack of casualties was not natural...and if he was tempted for one second to believe the contrary, the massive number of Inquisitors surrounding the Angels of Death would have strongly incited him not to. “Deploy Battle Group Nemesis in formation Eta-Three, Avenger variant.”

“Admiral? You intend to leave high orbit?”

“These treasons and wave 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 all our communications with the other planets, I’m ready to bet a century of pay that the Arch-Enemy will try to destroy us while we’re still reeling-“

“Enemy contact! Enemy contact! Ten, not 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 of Captain said before eating their laspistols.”

“You have a point. But this time, I was more 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 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 duo of long-ranged Lance batteries and Macro-cannons. Three of them would largely be able to deal with his Battlecruiser. Two Battleships, especially these eight kilometres-long monsters, would largely be able to contest three planetary assault-purposed Battle-Barges.

Sixteen Battleships? It was way over any realistic his Task Force and Space Marine allies could support.

“Send a priority message to the Lord Inquisitor, Hans. Tell him that unless I receive a counter-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 on 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 of traitors and defeatists.

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

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

“I know. But it isn’t like it’s important. We don’t have the time to evacuate them anyway.” The massive heretical fleet surging to attack him was pushing its engines hard. He had maybe one hour to leave. It was sufficient to save his Task Force, especially since he had been on high alert when treason had struck. It wasn’t to make 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. Message general 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 a penal facility, the most aggressive heretics were providing protection for those who came behind.

And they 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 take 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 parts.

“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 the closure 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 too much, we would have shared their fate,” Eric Fane, now acting-commander of the Cadian 3005th, retorted. “These men were lost, they wouldn’t have caught up with us before the prisoners and the heretics which are pushing them against us.”

Not that they needed much encouragement from the Arch-Enemy, the Cadian suspected. You didn’t get send to be brutalised by Saint Josmane’s gaolers because you were a bit too slow during a lasgun’s 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 were that the facilities had been conceived to stop any attacker dead in his tracks. It was large and packed with plenty of positions a capable company could decimate insurgents and other enemies.

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 DEARLY THEIR LIFE 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 impact on its surface, in fact.

“It’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 run on the massive gate, and somehow, the temperature rose accordingly after 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 has such a good 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 Cadia’s society.

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

The polite answer was: it wasn’t good. Eric Fane had fought 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 reigned 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’s vids, there was nothing else 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 long time 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 between their tails, or the Inquisitors have abandoned us. We have sworn that the Arch-Enemy 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 name 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 in the ranks of the 4th Company, reducing them to ashes before anything could be done.

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

“CADIA STANDS!”

“**CADIA DIES TODAY! DELENDA CADIA 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 hundreds of Space Marines whose presence he couldn’t felt 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, or the stupid and 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 in the void, their warships and forces had survived nearly intact. It was like the attacks of the Seventeenth Legion were phasing 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 risk.

And when the mortal’s 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 his guard. That the fools worshipping the False Emperor were retreating did not mean it was going to stay that way for days. Therefore he had urged caution to his captains and less host commanders.

Many had not listened to.

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 distant are we from Saint Josmane’s Hope?”

“Two hundred and seventy thousand kilometres, Lord Apostle.”

“Then all is well. We won’t be caught in the collateral damage.”

“The collateral damage?”

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

“Yes, the 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 of 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 to not show it externally. Twenty Hades Heavy Cruisers had decided to disregard his command and descend into low orbit to support as best as they could the slaughter of the Cadians and the gaolers.

Instead, they had been rewarded with a fiery and quick 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 in 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 was too evident for their enemies’ brains, as mortal and blind as they were. And as long as they hadn’t 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 it wasn’t what the Words Bearers were after.

“Reform the fleet into a proper formation. Summon the Escort reserves. The enemy’s fleet is running to Vigilantum, it is vital 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 from the planet’s death.”

“If they aren’t able to stay in our formation, then there are of no utility anymore to the Black Crusade. 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 will 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 are variants of the previous vermin-intruders. While the apex of the Szarekhan firepower show 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 the hyper-transfer acceleration to assault their rear-guard. 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 no more, the core of their fleet ravaged and as cold as the Throne, and our Scythes and warships cutting them from escape, they won’t be able to escape, and they don’t have anything susceptible 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 were lucky with the Incompetent One, but this was merely one of our fleets. Now they face the might of the Throne of Oblivion Itself, and against this firepower, their survival odds are a clear and uncompromising zero. They have lasted a bit longer than the Aeldari and other belligerent lifeforms, but vermin is vermin, in the end. 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 high most inferior creatures mistook them for mountains when they looked at them, emerged into 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 colour of the Reaper batteries.

Only something was wrong. No target was reported to be destroyed...and then the familiar and dreaded sounds of 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 survived it. They had ground to dust countless legions of the Old One’s servants during the latest stages of the War in Heaven 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 his. “Analysis...Analysis...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 hasn’t been able to challenge Necron mastery!”

“Hem, hem, hem. This isn’t exact. 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 a few hours, Sneferka wouldn’t be in the 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! COUNTER-MEASURES! COUNTER-MEASURES NOW!”

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

**Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller**

“They opened fire exactly at 2 150 151 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 imaginative Necron commander against us.”

“I don’t really 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 is 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 solutions by now: either we are facing a schizophrenic Necron, something sadly we 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 of them. 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 shipyards it can rally, seventy-eight Fury Interceptors, and twenty-one Starhawk Bombers,” the Admiral of Bakka admitted. “It was mainly a coordination problem on the Cobra second 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 manifested an ability to appear in a flash – the Tech-Priests confirmed the Ymga Monolith had the equivalent of catapult launcher 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 like it, since we’ve yet to build a single Warrior-class Destroyer.”

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

“Anyway, the Necrons have now lost seven thousand of their Doom Scythe-class starfighter, not counting the ones caught in the middle of the Ork’s rampage. I think, and the simulations conclude, 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 lowest we get in the ranks, the worst the effects are. We can endure it for a bit, but with how many of our men and women are not performing to our standards, it’s going to get a major problem if we don’t act.”

“We always knew it was going to be a problem,” that and the ability of the Necrons to teleport everywhere, but fortunately the jammers performed flawlessly, ensuring the Necrons were spiralling somewhere into the void right now. “But now it is our time to show them we aren’t afraid of equalling 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.

“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 repairs when this battle was over.

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

Knowing the Inquisition had prepared contingencies to ensure the Arch-Enemy 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 Arch-Enemy wanted them to know this act of self-destruction hadn’t been enough to stop them.

They wanted to fill their hearts with despair and fear. 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 thought this would work on the other side 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 Imperial Navy extreme Lance’s range.

“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. Those are Hades?”

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

“In that case, there aren’t likely to come 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 duties to oversee the mothball fleets of Obscurus.”

John von Bismarck knew no human body 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 somewhere else.

“I agree, Lord Admiral,” his chief of staff coughed. “It is an astronomical 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 these 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 had not as much success as it had against its previous opponents. These heretic starfighters were fiendishly swift and fast, and comparatively few explosions managed to lock upon them.

“They aren’t trying to bleed us, Lord Admiral. They’re trying to reinforce their friends upon Cadia.”

“That would mean these starfighters can also play the role of air superiority atmospheric fighters,” the Rear-Admiral in charge of the Aeronautica operations said 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 the 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 little engaged; the fight against Space Hulks wasn’t something 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 our Light Cruisers in 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 very reassuring 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 that 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, it is not guaranteed to last.”

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

“Is it wise?” asked 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 eyes of Inquisitors to watch 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 *that*.”

One new ‘chaotic innovation’ would have been bad enough, but the heretics had unleashed *three* in the last 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 everything able to shoot down an aircraft to minimise casualties...and of course this put the promethium and atomic facilities of Korolis in large 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 has miserably failed, ensuring we retain our tactical awareness in melee and other operations while the betrayers do not.”

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

“I admit 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 in 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 twelfth-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 soul and mind to the aircraft’s machine-spirit. In all my years of service, I had 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 presence in this region.

“Well said, 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 thing. They tied several human beating hearts to the engines and regularly zap them with the sparks out of the heretekal devices.”

Each time Aramphael believed he had seen the worst thing the Traitors could do, each time they strove to prove him wrong in the next 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.

It was inexact. It was a *planet-sized* pyramid – though it was smaller than Nocturne – and it disposed of an offensive and defensive armament capable to deter the assaults of multiple unprepared Battlefleets.

But from an outward perspective, it looked indeed like a pyramid. Except structure like this were in general unable to present a perfectly smooth surface of green-black metal on thousands of 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 at 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 anti-Warp Necron-prepared Noctilith.

“The Lord Admiral has given his permission to begin Saturn when we wants.” 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 regenerate.” 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 rebuild one 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 an inhabited human 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 wants.”

“Let’s hope so,” Ta’Phor Hezonn smiled. “Mars isn’t exactly next door to resupply.”

Nor would the Fabricator-General relinquish easily such weapons if the Salamanders asked of him twice. As it was, integrating the fire-control, the cogitators, and the other advanced systems along as the rest of the automated torpedoes’ 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 cannon. Despite the blue streak it left in its wake, the Salamander Astartes was rather sure it wasn’t a plasma-based torpedo or some modified Nova ammunition...but something altogether more lethal and ancient.

After all the chrono-weapon 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 commands 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 wasn’t there, 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 after, 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, it was 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 will only extent to the Monolith’s shields. Plan Saturn was successful.”

“As per the directives of Lady Weaver, keep an active watch upon inimical psychic attacks now,” the Chapter Maser 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 intervene.”

“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 was 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, this just meant they were bidding their time before the strike.

“Shift back to the standard ammunition. It is time to make sure the Ymga Monolith’s shields have more holes in them than the 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 just didn’t see it,” 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 moved his Staff of Light in 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-Makers and his chief executors are proportional to the damage caused. The...enemy...is bombarding assiduously the shields, and while two-thirds of it is completely undamaged, several shots are regularly scoring marks.”

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 abandoned entirely the initiative to their opponents.

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 distance as their acceleration permits from the Replicator Forge.”

“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 the irreplaceable core of the Forge before it ended as abruptly as it began.

“Because,” Zahndrekh said conversationally, as if a priceless asset had not been mangled and transformed into a large amount of Necrodermis good for the recycling yards, “the secessionist leader so far tries to kill the maximum of young Sobekhotep’s most powerful advantages in a minimum 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?”

An instant Obyron had hoped that the Overlord would have recognised no secessionist of the First Wars ever had the ability to wield psychic energy...this was after all a major problem they’d never had found a solution to – 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 change rapidly of 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 cause they didn’t, their first attack would have targeted our entire fleet. The Replicator Forge was not distant 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 they were attacks on all Sautekh worlds as they fought here.

“I hope you will disagree with my words, my suzerain,” Obyron said 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 evident; the options varied between ‘not a chance in the Fifteen Hells’ and ‘when the Szarekhan nobles will learn humility’.

The Dust-Maker’s ego and strict 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 fast 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 destruction of the Replicator Forge and the destruction of all outer defences and help mean our counter-attack is delayed.”

Obyron didn’t show any sign of contrariety, 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 said, 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 brand-new 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 perfectly-timed psychic attack. It seems that whatever happens now, the Replicator Forges aren’t a factor anymore in this battle.”

“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 approached slowly her command seat.

“By pure curiosity...” the Rogue Trader cleared his throat. “Which member of your Guard had the idea in the first place?”

“You don’t believe I can’t imagine this tactic on my own?” The legitimate owner of the Enterprise attempted a – not very credible – 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 to 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 in a click of 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 of this problematic Necron commander?”

“Unfortunately, while I realise this attack may not have been particularly impressive to your sensors,” Taylor feign to 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 hours...and it was also possible the contrary was true. There was simply no way to know.

“You are right 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 pleasure of throwing himself into the first trap we create 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 dubitative 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 making a massacre 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! This 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 this 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 my respect, we must engage with the fixed defences in the next seconds! The enemy outnumbers us so badly that!”

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 guarantee against the sorcery they just deployed-“

“Cruiser *Victor of Centauri* destroyed! Two Frigates destroyed! Light damage on 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 made.

“If we left you to your devices, there wouldn’t be an Imperial Fleet tomorrow!” The Space Marine barked in a tone that broke no counter-argument. “Divert all power to your engines and use Kasr Holn’s as cover to prepare a counter-attack!”

“They have-“

“If the next words I hear aren’t ‘we will obey your orders, Captain’ I will come in person to your flagship and I will use this bolter,” the massive weapon was raised with one hand like it weighed nothing for him, “to blow your brains 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 are perfectly clear. We obey your strategy.”

Humiliation of all humiliations, he saw that at least two-thirds of Battlefleet Solar Decimus was already in movement. This bastard of Marcellinus had already gone beyond his back and contacted dozens of officers behind his back!

“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 never would the Adeptus Astartes 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 the 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 chaos, and not the one the plan called for. Mortals – the non-enslaved kind – were running for their lives. Other mortals were also fighting for their lives 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 crucify personally 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 for 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 severing 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 like 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 in 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 of his command had really 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, walking 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 in a cold-furious tone 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 escaped by this hole was not a motive for optimism, but Kol had to ask.

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

Disaster. No, it was too weak a word. 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 much 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 a sufficient air, “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. Did this moron of Acolyte was unable to grasp the easiest military realities?

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

“And it’s getting worse...”

“This is only a lone Thunderhawk.”

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

“This 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-worshipper bastards upon Kasr Holn. If they followed their Ultramarine-blind doctrine, they would have easily 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 antiquities and slow tanks of the Volscani Cataphracts and the Vandal slave-dogs sacrificed to plunge Kasr Holn into unending war. This spaceport’s fortifications were already half-way 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 out 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 hurl new orders at his bodyguards and his 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 of the secret digging sites?”

**Cadia**

**Kasr Tyrok**

**8.201.310M35**

**Governor Primus Andreas von Waldersee**

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

Andreas could have disagreed for several more hours, but it wouldn’t do any good to the armies of Cadia 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 remained so far unknown to us. The Mechanicus had 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 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’ research. 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 asked in a low voice a question to one of his personal assistants before grimacing. “Well, it seems the situation has simplified itself somewhat. Judging on 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 evil 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 little 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 sure 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 bleeding their most expendable forces in our defences. Whatever they intend to do, it is going to require the Cadian System being torn by war.”

“Saint Josmane’s Hope 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 meet a fierce approval. “If the Space Marines hadn’t intervened, the situation at Kasr Holn would be 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 of their loss...and they were still 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’s 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,” 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 one 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 engage directly our largest and most dangerous Battlefleets. And their Warp Miasma, for all the problems it cause 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 look at.”

The Warmaster looked a last time at the largest war raging on all planets, 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 starship 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/Ymga Monolith**

**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 God-Engine was undamaged.

“Legio Astorum, report.”

“*Meritus Catigatio*, we are ready to teach the xenos the errors of their way.”

“*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 write our exploits in 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 this case, a glorious day await.” This might be his last operation before they plunged him into an amniotic tank, but the pain and the 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 their anti-air defence. The rest of their military commands 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 the honour demanded, the Volcano Cannon of *Terribilis Vindicta* was the firstto 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 Reavers 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 was extremely fortified. They were barely at the surface of the Ymga Monolith, and Darius Sobek had seen Fortress Worlds which hadn’t a third of these massive macro-cannons to defend themselves. 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 weaponry art, 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 signify 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 openings to reflect the military circumstances,” his first Moderati joked. “We have destroyed twenty medium-sized shield generators in that 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 arrived 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 first the firing position.”

“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 threaten again 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, who towered over the other Dynasties with their overinflated sense of arrogance, were unable to stop them...or even to 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 the C’Tan to happen since she had woken up from the Great Sleep. The only ways things could have gone better would have been if she was able to kill Simut on her own...but since the Szarekhan tyrant had gotten himself killed *and* humiliated, one couldn’t ask 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 it was nothing to the devastating fit of rage the Dust-Maker was voicing now.

“WHY HAVE YOU FAILED TO STOP THEM? YOU ARE A DISGRACE TO YOUR RANK, NEMESOR!”

A molecular-disintegrating ray removed the ‘defeatist’ noble from the throne room...and this 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 engaging the enemy!”

“THEN USE THE ANNIHILATION ARKS AND THE INFANTRY IN A COORDINNATED 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 counter-attack, 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 understand 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 of 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 FORWARDS IF YOU WANT TO DEFEND THIS IDEA!”

Predictably no one 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 increasingly...Ah-hotep couldn’t describe it properly.

But for the first time, Sobekhotep appeared to realise the peril his rule was approaching. This wasn’t a mutiny against the Szarekhan Dynasty, far from it. But it was the closest thing to disobedience which 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 had lasted long enough!”

Ah-hotep continued to play the role of the dutiful Cryptek, and this 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 it took to say it...well, she obeyed the orders of her superiors, no?

Still, as the words of the defunct Nemesor were 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 pieces like the Star-eater Drive.

But the enemy, these humans – the previous battle against them had given a small trove of information – were well-prepared. So they had to know that.

What was...ah, there she saw. 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 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 of praying every day.”

When she had joined the Templar Sororitas, Alice had not thought debating her time schedule and the theology lessons with a giant spider would be involved. But here it 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 who had went through the process to become a mechanical spider, protested. “And we didn’t pester the Webmistress.”

Claire next to her whispered something in the vox, and unavoidably the proud arachnid caught it.

“What was that?”

“I was saying, oh noble Ilmarina,” Claire said in a hurry, “that sending ten thousand messages to Her Celestial Highness sounds a bit...invasive.”

The Adjutant-Spider made a series of rattle 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 engagements 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 the move, for the arachnid was entirely built in 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 *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 one second there, it wasn’t the second after. Massive constructions which had to be annihilation guns disappeared from view, either by 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 strength.”

“Agreed. Which series of stairs is the good one?”

“The right one. We are going to take the servants’ tunnels. It’s highly likely they changed the passwords and the 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 at 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 Azkaellon Stadium on Nyx would be able to hold entirely within its limits.

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 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 in pure Noctilith?

“I think they refined it first in the anti-Warp substance the Nyxian analysts officially labelled as ‘Sepulcrand’, Alice,” that the large arachnid called her by her first name, a widely out-of-character behaviour her, betrayed how she was nervous. “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’s cores...one of the two theoretical reasons why those haven’t gone mad and tried to unleash a new Cybernetic War.”

“This is the first reason. What is the second reason?”

“Don’t tell the Tech-Priests that, but...we humans aren’t that good at programming AIs...compared to the Necrons anyway.”

They continued running as they spoke. The distance was so huge 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 xenos golden 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 for hours Battle Group Volga deliver terrible retribution upon the Necron space fleets and defences trying to kill them.

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 widely illuminated.

It wasn’t the light of the God-Emperor, however. It was more the kind of a terrible beauty found on Ice Worlds of the Imperium, the kind of spectacle you could only appreciate with 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 somewhat, the temperature was dropping.

The blue energy rose in intensity until it became utterly blinding for her armour’s protections.

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 blue shades, 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 tolerate 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 of 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 little understand**.”

“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 great desire to destroy this battlestation-pyramid 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 do 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.”

“**Tempting**,” Hsiagn’la admitted. “**But it won’t be enough. The Szarekhans have too many counter-measures 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 really vulnerable**.”

“Does that mean-“

“**I will accept, your alliance, little spider**,” the C’Tan said. “**But if you want it to last more than my first escape, your Webmistress, claimant to the Endless Swarm’s Throne, must come to negotiate in person with me**.”

“This might prove...difficult.” The Adjutant-Spider answered.

“**It will happen. I see it. The time streams have changed, and the light of this galaxy rose once last time...but for Oblivion or Salvation**?”

“Your words do not frighten me,” Ilmarina said, 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 was definitely malicious if this humanoid thing could have one. “**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 MANIFESTED A TENDENCY TO OPERATE UNDER 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 ship entered the auspex range of the *Anarchy’s Heart*.

“Look at that,” the Alpha Legionnaire said ironically. “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 brio,” his specialist in fleet operations added his grain of salt. “They have traced a perfect course to pass at fifty thousand kilometres behind the slowest supply ships. That way, they will avoid the fleet of Sota-Nul and the 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 is of ten capital ships, all at least having a Cruiser tonnage. Is that a Bellerophon Assault Cruiser? I didn’t know the Imperial Navy even had a couple of those in service.”

“The Imperial Navy don’t,” Arkos replied thoughtfully, before reminiscing about the top-secret record he had seen once 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 still can correctly read a hololith’s information, the warband of the Daggerfangs is placed exactly where they are to intercept a raid like this one. I’m not saying there aren’t two or three ships which will manage to break through his defensive formation, but I think it’s going to cost them heavily 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, these 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 principal objectives take utmost priority, if you have the opportunity to decrease further 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 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 they must be a *status quo* and *rules*.” The warlord wasn’t speaking in 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 pass 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 delicately a last time...before breaking it deliberately in 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 of 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 former brothers 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 life 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 stand against 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 this 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, Guts wasn’t going to deny. The technology was still trying to distinguish what was warship and what was supply ship, but over four million of kilometres, there were truly more than 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 that case this enemy has given us a priceless opportunity. We have the opportunity 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 blonde 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 disaster. If someone wondered why promethium super-tankers and ammunition ships had no place anywhere near the frontlines, the 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, unleashed bright explosions wherever they hit something particularly inflammable. Many transports, ordered to ferry the debris of Sicarus’ industry, were meeting an ignominious end there, as their 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 it wasn’t the case. The aggressive space commander may be only avoiding some collisions by mere hundreds of kilometres, 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 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 in the resulting conflagration. Another made small but precise attacks on the rear of the hulls, demolishing the engines and the critical sections of the Enginarium, ensuring these crippled targets would never leave Cadia without hundreds of hours in a true shipyard.

“Sota-Nul has not feigned to consider your offers, my Lord.”

“I wish the contrary 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 choices. 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 to the disappointing conclusion the attackers were going to arrive at 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 Bearer’s 1st Great Host, and it was unlikely even a reckless commander would charge straight-on 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 breaking 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 in person stepped through on the *Anarchy’s Heart*.

“Ah, but 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 soul and body 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 dumb-founded.

“The time has come for the hydra to rise up and reveal its true scales.”

“**Then you will be annihilated**.”

A psychic telekinetic grip seized him and began to crush his bones and his organs. For all the resistance the Chaos Lord had received from a lifetime of betrayals and unholy pacts, this was above what he could regenerate from.

“**Any last words to say, 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.” This was a lie, but it wasn’t exactly the Daemon Primarch would be able to prove the contrary. “Corax sends his regards.”

Arkos had barely to see the expression of utter fury on his executor’s daemonic face before a ray of darkness erased him from this galaxy’s reality.