**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 something 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 Gehr-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 be promoted to 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 the 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 KNOWN AS 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 eyes, 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 accept them.”

“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 fleets? I will make them rue this day for the rest of eternity.”

New determination filled his metallic body. Yes, the battle was far from lost. For all the humiliation, 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 Speartips to tear the mortals and whatever dogs they have managed to gather around them apart. First, we need to decapitate their forces, since the Seventeenth was unable to do a proper job once again. Makeddon, this will be your duty. Kill the False Warmaster they have. Bathe in the blood of the Cadian Generals. I want Kasr Tyrok in ruins before the next sunset.”

“It will burn, Legion Master. Our slaves will 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 purposed-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 is a process Space Marines can survive. Given how radioactive the Enginarium and every major Replicator section 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 replied. “And you know the old proverb, Szarekhan Overlord, you can rebuild armies and fleets, erase the damage of ten thousand invasions, but you can’t conquer time.”

“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 of victory I see for us. 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 purges, beginning several skirmishes with the gangs of Kasr Kraf, and killing three of his men who were on their way to mutate into abominations uglier than the ugliest sins.

Eugen was maybe only twenty, but he had seen 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 launch a Black Crusade and 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 of range. 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 heretics 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 painted in red.

“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 eagerly awaited to feast upon it.