

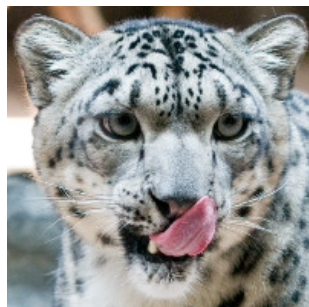


## A Horus Heresy Audio Drama

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*'You cannot conquer a galaxy by the sword, not in many lifetimes... But draw the sword at the right place and at the correct time and you can conquer the universe with a single stroke.'*

– attributed to the Emperor, after the First Battle for Luna

## **The Court of the Governor of the Gilded Worlds**

'Hail, Desigus, Lord of the Gilded Worlds, and Warden of the Aventian Gulf.'

Argonis walks towards the throne. His measured steps echo on the long stone floor. Eyes turn to follow him.

'Who are you that comes to us out of the night?' asks the man on the throne. Hard eyes glitter in a gaunt face. Scars crawl over the man's throat above the gold braiding of his uniform.

'I am named Argonis, and I speak in the name of Horus, Warmaster of Mankind.'

'Why do you come here, emissary?'

Argonis halts before the throne.

'I come for your fealty.'

'Fealty? Truly, you call it that?'

'What other word would you give it?'

'Treachery,' snarls Desigus. 'That is what I call it, and that is what it is.'

Argonis does not reply for a moment, but stares at the man for a long heartbeat.

'You are a brave man,' he says.

'And you are—'

'You fought on Tallisan, and were in the Halo Margins from the beginning to the end. You led the conquest of a star cluster, and cast down the idols of Mesunnar. This system is yours to command because you bled for the right.'

'Your lips turn such flattery into poison.'

‘Flattery?’ replies Argonis. ‘No. Honesty. I know you, Desigus, though this is the first time we have met. I know your strengths, and your weaknesses. I know that you only let my ship through your defences, and me into your presence, so that you could look me in the eye and call me traitor. I know that you intend me to carry your defiance back to the Warmaster with tongue to speak it, but without eyes to see, or hands to grasp a weapon. All this I know.’

Desigus gives a cold smile.

‘Then what is about to happen will not be a surprise.’

‘And I know that you are a man who never makes a choice lightly,’ says Argonis.

‘I have made my choice. I stand against you. Your promises are false gold.’

‘Promises? I have made no promise. But I will now. Bend your knee. Speak the words of loyalty to your Warmaster. Give him all that is yours to command, and you will live.’

‘Live?’ asks Desigus. ‘That is your promise?’

‘No, my promise is that if you do not then this system will not last a single orbit of its star.’

‘That is—’

‘It is what will happen if I leave here with anything other than your oath of compliance.’

‘No. Even he would not, the resources, the people...’

‘Would he not?’ asks Argonis. ‘Could he not?’

‘The cost in blood, in lives...’

‘It can be done, and it will be done. All your realms, all your warriors, all the billions who you protect – all will be ashes. And you have the power to save them.’

‘You lie.’

Argonis chuckles. ‘I like you, Desigus. So I will give you a gift, one warrior to another.’

‘I spit on your gift!’

‘The gift is this. I will give you understanding so that you can make your choice knowing what you have chosen.’ Argonis pauses. ‘Have you heard of the Accazzar-Beta?’

‘Why?’

‘Because its story is one I would tell you...’

Accazzar-Beta

The emissary stared at Kadith, eyes hard in a blunt face. The sea-green of the emissary’s armour was almost black in the forge light. The banner in his hand was a sheet of woven iron-thread. A golden eye stared from its centre, and a row of rubies hung at its hem. Behind the emissary thirty warriors stood in loose ranks, weapons held low but ready.

‘What is your answer?’ asked the emissary.

Kadith heard the question. Tonal sifters mounted on his audio sensors parsed the words, and projected percentages of arrogance and confidence at the edge of Kadith’s sight. There was no fear in the emissary’s voice, of course. That was the problem with the *Legiones Astartes*: they were not pure enough to be machines, but like machines they had shed many of humanity’s imperfections. Had they gone the whole way, and shed the rest of their weaknesses, the Imperium would not be at war with itself. But that probably would have made them less effective. And effective they undoubtedly were.

‘Myrmidax Kadith,’ growled the emissary. ‘I will grant you a final opportunity. What is your answer?’

Kadith nodded slowly, and his halo of weapon mechadendrites rippled softly. He glanced from the emissary to where molten metal fell in from apertures in the temple roof. Iron columns rose from the floor amongst the glowing cascades. A figure stood atop each column, the height indicating the rank of the magos who stood on them. Some wore robes, others were hunched figures of plasteel and brass. Automata stood guard at the base of each column, their armour glazed red by the furnace light.

Information buzzed in the air. Had Kadith not shunted his entire noosphere interface into a dead part of his consciousness, the data flow

would have been overwhelming. It was irrelevant though. No new data, theory or analysis could change the outcome of this audience.

‘My answer...’ began Kadith, his voice clicking and whirring. ‘My answer as construct representative of Accazzar-Beta, domain of the Ommissiah, is this...’

He watched a small muscle twitch next to the emissary’s eye. The buzz of data transfer had quieted across the chamber. One by one the machines and lesser initiates went silent. All would hear what Kadith said next.

‘Kill protocol.’

The automata exploded into motion.

Bolt-rounds hammered from the legionaries’ guns. The smallest automata were a blur of pistons and armour plates. Explosions burst across them. Kadith watched as a pair of scout-class automata ran on even as their carapaces became shreds of plasteel. He could feel the emissary’s vox signal trying to break free of the temple.

Siege automata stamped forwards from the shadows. One by one they locked into place. The weapons on their shoulders rose up and unfolded like the heads of chrome flowers.

Kadith heard the whine as the weapons built charge.

‘We...’ gasped the emissary into his vox. ‘We... are betrayed!’

The siege automata fired as one. Spheres of plasma thudded through the air and splashed down amongst the ring of warriors. Other automata were still charging forwards, heedless of the fire they ran into. A ragged wave of shots sprayed from the few warriors who had survived the plasma storm. Energised blades snapped out from the automata’s forearms as they struck.

The silence was total and sudden.

‘Warden protocol,’ spoke Kadith.

The automata clanked into a perfect circle around the still cooling remains of Horus’ emissary. Kadith stepped off his pillar, and the thrusters built into his frame caught his descent. He floated down, crimson-and-white robes billowing around him. When he touched the floor, he could still sense the heat from the plasma. He looked down at

the heap of armour and flesh at his feet, and then looked up at the eyes of the magi on their pillars.

<Make the final preparations,> said Kadith across the noosphere, speaking in the pure language of the machine. <Horus will be coming.> He saw something amongst the blackened slurry, and pulled it free with the claw of a mechadendrite. A scrap of a banner woven with gold hung from the metal tentacle. <He has no choice now.>

The throne room was silent as Maloghurst approached his master. The banners and trophies hanging from the high ceiling shifted with the vibration of the Vengeful Spirit as it slid through the void. The Warmaster sat on his throne, his hand resting on the pommel of Worldbreaker, his eyes fixed on a distance only he could see. He had sat like that for the past two and a half hours, thoughts wrapped in silence.

Maloghurst limped to the foot of the throne and stopped. Horus gave no sign of having sensed his adjutant's presence. He had of course. Nothing escaped the Warmaster's notice, and none of his actions were without purpose. Maloghurst had learnt both truths many times over.

'Sire?' Maloghurst bowed his head and waited for a response. None came. 'There is no word from your emissary to Myrmidax Kadith on Accazzar-Beta. It has been ten hours now.'

Horus' eyes shifted from one point of the star field to another, but his face remained as though carved from stone.

'What is your will, sire?' asked Maloghurst. 'Should the fleet begin bombardment of the outer system defences? There is the possibility that other factions on Accazzar-Beta may be turned to our cause if approached. They might even deal with Myrmidax Kadith and his allies themselves, if motivated.'

'In the earliest days of the crusade, the Seventeenth Legion would send heralds to speak to those who would not accept my father's truth,' said Horus. 'They would go clad in black, and with a skull as a mask.'

'They were infected with foolishness, even then.'

'Yes,' said Horus. 'But they had a point too, do you not you think, Mal?'

'That a herald ill received was likely to die?'

‘Yes... perhaps,’ said Horus. ‘But they always have had a flair for symbolism. They realised what their heralds truly were, and what they carried in their wake.’

Maloghurst chuckled. ‘The hypocrisy of the Imperial Truth, if memory serves.’

Horus shook his head once.

‘Death, Mal. Death followed them whether the herald lived or died. Sometimes you need victory.’ Horus raised his left hand. The blades of his fingers glinted as he stared at them. ‘And sometimes you need a symbol. Find Argonis.’

‘Sire, I must caution against that. He is a wayward creature. He has atoned for his failures, but can a broken sword ever be made truly whole?’

‘I know you do not like him, Mal, but he is a rare breed amongst warriors. His blood runs with ruthlessness and defiance, but he also wishes to be accepted, honoured even. I have need of those qualities.’

‘As you will it, sire,’ said Maloghurst, and began to turn away.

‘And bring all the fleet to full battle readiness.’

‘You have decided then?’ Maloghurst paused. ‘Accazzar-Beta dies?’

‘No.’ Horus let his hand fall, and shook his head slowly. ‘No. It will live forever.’

‘Reaver Wing launched and running free.’

‘Scythe Claw launched and running free.’

‘Lupus Wing launched and running free.’

Galdron’s strike fighter dropped into the void on the dark side of the moon. Behind it, wings of gunships and bombers slid from the launch bays of the two cruisers that had carried them to the launch point.

‘All squadrons, come into spear formation, on my mark,’ said Galdron into the vox. ‘Mark.’

His fighter looped around, and he felt the tug of G-force pull his flesh. He blinked, and a view from the tail of his interceptor filled his helmet display. He could see thrusters flare as the hundred and eight warcraft of his group pulled into a narrow arrowhead.

'Looks very pretty, does it not?' came Scarrix's voice over the vox. 'Like a poem of blood written in the night.'

'Get off this channel, Scarrix,' snarled Galdron.

'You have no soul for this kind of murder, Cthonian.'

'There is no such thing as a soul, you Nostraman gutter discharge.'

'Is that all the teeth the one-time Luna Wolves now have?' laughed Scarrix.

Galdron ignored the question and cut the link. His eyes flicked to where a squadron of midnight-clad craft coasted at the edge of the group. Lightning bolts of inlaid silver crawled over their wings. He fancied for a second he could see the kill markings dotting their flanks.

'They send jackals to run with wolves,' he muttered.

His lip curled, and he blinked the rear view away. The moon was growing large in front of him. Its surface was a black disc, edged by a thin crescent of red. Behind him, the fast cruisers flipped over and began their burn back to the system's edge.

'Approaching drift belt,' he said into the vox. 'Cut engines. Directional control only. Sensor baffles to maximum.'

Galdron shut off his main engines. Inside his helm, runes blipped between colours as his strike fighter became nigh invisible.

Proximity warnings chimed in the quiet as the asteroid drift swallowed his strike fighter. A vast chunk of grey rock and ice spun past him. He let his mind fall into a slow pattern of anticipation and action. Hours of this dance lay ahead.

Argonis waited, head bowed as the doors of the throne room sealed. Behind him, he was aware of the lingering presence of Maloghurst standing in the shadows. Around him the emptiness echoed. Only minutes before it had been filled with captains, shipmasters, and commanders of every part of the Warmaster's forces. Now it was as though they had never been.

'You are wondering why I summoned you, Argonis?'

Horus turned from a viewport, through which he had been watching the blackness and stars beyond. The starlight was weak, and gave more shadows to his face than illumination. The beast pelt draped

across his shoulders seemed marked by frost, and the gold and black of his armour was a sketch in the gloom.

The Warmaster's right hand seemed to be holding something small and so black that the light did not touch it. He reached out and dropped the small, dark shape onto the top of a pillar set before the viewport. It looked like a red pearl. Whatever it was, it hit the black iron of the pillar's top with a deep note that hung in the air. Argonis tasted blood on his lips, and for a moment he wanted to shout with rage at the turn of fate that had led him to where he was standing and what he was. Then his eyes moved from the red pearl, and both feeling and taste vanished.

Horus was looking at him, eyes dark and unblinking.

'Great events are only great because they are witnessed,' said the Warmaster, 'and today, Argonis, I have chosen you as my witness.'

'By your will, my lord.'

'So meek? I remember you with more fire in your spit, Argonis, or did your penance rob you of that quality?'

'I will never fail you again, my lord.'

'No. You will not.' The shadows seemed to crawl across Horus' face for an instant. Argonis felt his muscles and gut tense, as though for a blow. 'But you served me well at Tallarn, and you will do so again on other worlds, all the way from here to the Gates of Terra.'

'You honour me, my lord.'

'Honour?' said Horus coldly. 'No, I do not honour you, Argonis. I use you. You are a weapon, and a valuable one, but a weapon nonetheless. And weapons are only as useful as what they can help destroy.'

Argonis remained silent. The lights of warships came into sight beyond the viewport. Farther out, dozens of other vessels were already burning hard to reach their positions.

'You have questions as to this campaign,' said Horus. 'I could see them on your face during the war council.'

'I know your orders. I have nothing that requires an answer, my lord.'

‘But you still would like answers, would you not? Questions are like that – they make one unsatisfied until they are replaced by fact. Come, ask what you will.’

‘Why did you send an emissary to Accazzar-Beta? The scout and intelligence reports were already clear that Myrmidax Kadith and his magi would not comply. Why make the demand of fealty at all?’

‘Because I needed a reason for ships to enter the system and then seem to leave. Because I had to give Myrmidax Kadith something to focus on while other wheels turned around him.’

Argonis saw it then, opening in his mind like the fingers of a reaching hand.

‘The emissary was never going to succeed, or survive.’

‘As I said, Argonis, weapons are only as useful as what they can help destroy.’

Horus smiled for the first time. Argonis felt ice run down his spine. The Warmaster placed his hand on Argonis’ shoulder and gestured to the dark before the throne.

Cones of hololithic light unfolded in the air. Maps of a star system, battle pict-feeds and tactical projections spun into being in front of Argonis’ eyes.

‘Come, my son,’ said Horus. ‘Watch, and listen.’

Myrmidax Kadith sat alone in the forge temple. Not that he was ever truly alone. A web of noospheric data connected him to each of the other lords magos who were scattered across the planet’s surface, and through them to every machine and subsystem controlled by them. He also maintained vox and data-links to the seneschals of each of the three Knight houses who came under his control. Through this lattice of interface, he commanded rings of defence platforms and system defence craft spread between Accazzar-Beta and its three moons. On the surface, hundreds of Knights, thousands of automata and millions of skitarii moved to his will.

To another being it might have seemed as though he wielded the power of a god, but Kadith had been born on Mars, and seen the true majesty of what knowledge and machine could encompass. He was still just a component, no matter how high he sat in the hierarchy of the

Mechanicum. And his function in the situation that faced him was as a creator of destruction.

<Ships detected approaching from system edge,> intoned a servitor across the noosphere.

<Confirm formation strength,> demanded Kadith.

<Estimate from full data spectrum,> the servitor replied. <Sixty-seven battle-configured vessels.>

<Recalculate,> sent Kadith, <and compare against previous long-range sensor information and marginal strength estimates.>

<Eighty point two-five per cent probability that approaching enemy force are not complete enemy strength. Truth is the Machine. The Machine is truth.>

Kadith contemplated the calculation. The orbital defences were already prepared. The system ships held close to the planet to counter Horus' forces if they broke through. The balance of probability was that the assault would fail.

Accazzar-Beta was not a forge world, but for the purposes of facing down an invader it was perhaps an even harder prospect for conquest. It was a Mechanicum staging world, a grand warehouse for materiel destined for other parts of the Imperium. It had more military resource than most star clusters, and its defences were enough to turn back a crusade fleet. With it readied for battle, Kadith had the statistical advantage. He just needed to ensure that he missed no relevant factors.

<All surface units,> he sent, widening the data transfer to the planet's wider noosphere, <potential enemy planetfall within two hundred and five minutes. Probability margin twenty-nine point seven-five per cent.>

'What do you see?' asked Horus.

Argonis stood at the centre of the shifting hololiths.

'Battle Group Castus in position...'

'Come about to six by three by twenty-four...'

'Readying batteries...'

'Primary targets locked...'

'Full assault readiness confirmed...'

Voices came out of the dark at him, snatches of vox chatter, orders from ship captain to ordnance officers, the muttered oaths of Legion warriors as they waited in the bellies of gunships.

In front of him he saw the planet and its moons flicker at the heart of the holo projections. Beside it was the pict-feed from the nose of a drop-ship as it slid from a launch bay into the void. It changed as he tried to focus on it, skipping to the view within a gunnery chamber, then to a magnified view of Accazzar-Beta's largest moon.

'I see...' began Argonis. 'I am not sure what I see.'

'Yes,' said Horus. 'It is a lot to take in. The temptation is to pull out, to sort it into neat levels of importance. But that is a mistake. Look again.'

'I see...' said Argonis, his mind trying to find a pattern in the deluge of data even as he fought to stop it.

'What you are looking at is the beginning of a spiral of cause and effect.'

Horus gestured, and an image of the space around Accazzar-Beta grew in size before them. Glowing lines and dots picked out where mines and stellar debris clogged the planet's orbits. Two clear channels cut through the drifts. Great star fortresses marked the openings of both channels. Within the enclosure formed by the drifts of mines, more space stations turned above the surface of the planet. Squadrons of system defence ships held position around the stations.

'Formidable, is it not? And, from a certain point of view, impossible to take without a long siege, and the loss of vast resources.'

'Not to you, my lord.'

'True,' said Horus, 'but that is not what you want to say, is it?'

'Why are you doing this?' asked Argonis.

'The right question, but still not what you wanted to say.' Horus glanced at him, a smile forming in the shadows of his face. 'Go on, my son. Ask.'

'How can it be done, my lord?'

Horus nodded, pride bright in his eyes, though if it were for his son or himself was not clear.

'Let me show you.'

A gesture and the hololiths reconfigured. The clatter of data transmissions and the rasping voice of intercepted communications boomed out from hidden vox-speakers.

‘Course correction...’

‘Time estimated to outer sensor range...’

‘Coming to full burn in...’

Above them a sphere of projected light filled the dark. Red lines painted moons, cold blues the planet, and pinpricks of light the position of ships and defences.

‘Their defences are ready,’ said Horus. ‘Thanks to my emissary, they know we are coming. Myrmidax Kadith commands them, and he is a priest of war in the cult of the Machine-God. He is experienced, intelligent and ruthless. He does not make mistakes. In this battle he stands on the other side of these events, and what is about to happen exists between him and me alone. If destruction is a child, we are its parents.’

The ship trembled beneath Argonis’ feet. On the projection he saw a swarm of green ship runes thrust towards an opening in a cloud of red defence markers.

‘Enemy defences arming,’ called a bridge officer into the vox.

A sheet of imagery opened beside the battle projection. Weapons platforms loomed above Argonis and the Warmaster. Gun barrels the size of Titans pivoted to find their targets. Missile batteries unfolded like seed pods.

‘Their outer defences see the bulk of our fleet coming fast at the sunward channel,’ said Horus.

‘Enemy defences are ready to fire.’

The image of the defence guns flickered. Weapon barrels glowed red, then yellow, then white. Gas vented from cooling towers. Horus was watching it all, his eyes bright.

‘And a chain of simple consequence begins...’

‘Enemy defences firing!’

The image of the turrets blanked to white and then vanished. Another took its place. Argonis saw a lattice of light reaching across the

dark towards the ships strung out before it. Shields flared and collapsed. Armour ripped from hulls. Gas and fire bled into the black.

The fleet fired back. Macro-cannon rounds slammed into weapons platforms and tore them to fragments. Turbo-lasers sliced through defence ships as they thrust forwards. Spheres of wreckage and fire bubbled across the void.

‘But the most important reaction begins within the enemy’s mind...’

On the battle projection the idents of ships and defences began to flash. Data spiralled around the dead and the dying. Markers and runes blinked out.

‘As the first shots are fired, a spiral of questions starts to form in Myrmidax Kadith’s thoughts...’

Horus stepped closer to the holo, eyes fixed on the battle projection. The display zoomed closer. The markers of ships became projections of their hulls, all wrapped with tactical data. The view closed, sweeping past the fleet and down the channel in the defences.

‘Kadith begins with the obvious question – what is really happening?’

The view spun, and now they were looking from behind the red lattice of the defences. The second channel lay to their right, the glitter of the unfolding engagement to their left. Above, one of Accazzar-Beta’s moons rolled through its orbit.

‘He looks further...’

The view dived down the open channel, the images of star forts and defence ships blinking past.

‘He looks deeper...’

The sheet of empty space opened before them. Argonis had the sensation of floating even though he was standing still.

‘And he finds an answer...’

‘Secondary fleet entering enemy sensor range,’ called the bridge officer.

Luminous shapes came out of the dark. First one, then another, and another, until the Warmaster’s second fleet filled the space. They fired as they came on. The defences around the second channel began to blink out.

Horus nodded to himself.

‘That answer prompts another question to Kadith...’

The projection snapped and zoomed out so that the planet, its defences, its moons and the two attacking fleets filled the cone of light.

‘What is the real threat? he asks...’

The explosions ringed the second fleet as it cut towards the planet.

‘But the simple answer does not satisfy him...’

The view swung again, and the fleet closing on the first channel was now all around them, its ships looming large.

‘What if the attack by the second fleet is not the true threat?’

The first of the Warmaster’s fleets was almost in the mouth of the channel now. The guns of the star fortress guarding its throat began to speak. The explosions churned the vacuum. Values of damage and loss began to glow orange amongst the green ships.

‘What if there is more than brute firepower and the roar of guns to take account of?’

The view spiralled through the fleet, flitting from ship to ship.

‘He knows that I am here...’

The view found a single ship and locked on to it.

‘He knows that I will be anticipating him...’

The projected image swelled into being before them. It was the Vengeful Spirit.

‘So he focuses on the first direction of attack, and wonders what I am thinking and doing. But he is running out of time...’

‘Fleets entering sunward and edgeward channels,’ called an officer.

The shapes of weapons platforms loomed large in the pict views. The fire grew, white and orange beating against Argonis’ eyes.

‘So a choice becomes a necessity...’

‘Enemy reserve fleet moving from high orbit to sunward channel.’

The view snapped to dozens of ships breaking from their position above the planet. They shot towards the engagement in the mouth of the sunward channel.

‘And now true battle is joined.’

Orange and red blurred the projection, faster even than Argonis’ eyes or mind could follow. Ships fired, and dissolved in holo-smoke as they died. The deck was vibrating beneath his feet, and he could hear the Vengeful Spirit adding her voice to the roar of battle.

‘Taking direct fire,’ shouted an engineer from across the bridge. ‘Void shields are holding.’

Sparks fell from the ceiling above. The images of battle were a blur of movement, and the blink of thousands dying in the gap between heartbeats.

‘Kadith is good,’ said Horus. ‘He has stopped thinking about his choice, stopped thinking about whether it was right. He is committed, and so he focuses only on the reality of the battle...’

‘Breaching party advancing...’

‘Heavy resistance!’

‘Taking fire!’

‘Reactor output falling...’

‘There are too many!’

‘But he has already made two mistakes...’ said Horus.

Argonis saw the runes on the display blink to warning amber as the Warmaster’s main fleet entered optimal firing range of the enemy star fortress.

‘From the moment Kadith began to ask his first question,’ said Horus, ‘he lost the initiative. He and all his forces are reacting to what I do. He knows this failure. Though he does not realise it is not his first error, but his second...’

The vast star fortress at the inner gate of the defences began to shed motes of red light.

‘But he can still undo the damage.’

A cloud of sparks spilled towards their fleet, and Argonis realised that each one was an assault craft.

‘Kadith is a warrior of point and edge, as much as calculation...’

The cloud of assault craft swarmed over the green-marked ships as they tried to turn.

‘He knows that even Legion forces can be channelled...’ said Horus, as the voices of a hundred battles erupted from the vox-speakers.

‘Hull integrity failing...’

‘Cut them down!’

‘Falling back to breach point...’

Dozens of separate pict images sprang into being. Warriors in sea-green armour ran down a corridor as one of the walls exploded inwards. Blank-faced figures of chrome and brass broke through the flames.

‘Can anyone hear—’

‘Casualties—’

‘Cut off—’

‘We can be battered down,’ continued Horus.

The face of a warrior rose through the projection. Blood streaked the front of his helm. A crack ran from shattered eyepiece to jaw.

‘We can be bloodied to the point that the tide of control turns...’

The warrior roared his defiance and raised a sword an instant before a beam of energy blasted him to ash.

The lesser hololiths collapsed. The ship was shuddering around Argonis, and he could feel her taking damage. The main projection of the battle was alone now, turning in silence. The two green fleets were bright with damage data. The red of the defences seemed clamped around the fleets like jaws, chewing them, grinding them to fire and dust.

‘Kadith is winning. But then his first mistake comes to undo his effort...’

The sphere of Accazzar-Beta’s moon rolled across the image.

‘The moment he saw our forces he began to question – what was real and what was a feint? What had I anticipated? What was I doing?’

Horus stepped amongst the turning image, projections of ships and star fortresses scanned across his features.

‘That is the problem with questions – if you receive an answer, the mind tends to think that there is nothing more. You focus on the answer...’ Argonis followed the Warmaster’s gaze, and looked at the

projection of the moon in time to see a hundred tiny green markers flash into being. 'And you forget the question.'

'Weapons free. All squadrons full burn.'

Galdron ignited his main engine as he came out of the shadow of the moon. His muscles slammed against the back of his armour as the engines screamed. The strait between the moon and Accazzar-Beta sparkled with detonations and weapons fire. Clouds of burning gas marked the largest ships. As he watched, a Nova shell detonation shattered into being close to the planet. It was peaceful in a way, distant, separate.

Targeting warnings filled his ears.

'They see us!' came Scarrix's voice across the vox.

'All wings, launch torpedoes,' said Galdron.

Torpedoes cut past him as the bombers loosed their payloads. His strike fighter shook as it burned to keep pace with them. Behind him the bombers were peeling away, breaking for the open void, their work done. Locked into the targeting spirit of each torpedo was a specific component of the planet's defences. Layers of redundancy were built into the targeting and launch pattern. Even if the defenders shot half of them out of the void, the remainder would be enough. More than enough.

And Galdron had no intention of letting the defenders do even that much damage.

Explosions burst close by, their fire stealing the dark of the void. He saw a glitter as squadrons of enemy fighters launched to meet them.

He opened the vox to Scarrix, and gave his order.

'Nostraman, your time is now.'

'As the Warmaster wills.'

Scarrix's wing dropped and thrust forwards, engines running raw and white. The lead Night Lords craft were strike fighters, all engine power and weapon payload. Behind them were the gunships, their guts heavy with squads of midnight-clad warriors. Their purpose was not precision, or domination; it was anarchy and terror. In the old, murdered age of the Great Crusade they had a reputation that followed them like

a muttered curse. Now, in this new war, their skill had earned them a place at the Warmaster's side.

Galdron cut the broad vox-pickup an instant before it began to scream. Static and corrosive code flooded into the signal manifold as Scarrix's wing shrieked towards their prey. All order vanished as each squadron chose its own target and bore down on it. Galdron watched as the defenders' craft split to meet the Night Lords.

Turrets on ships and platforms turned, and hammered the blackness with threads of cannon fire. The Night Lords spun through the fire, bombs and rockets scattering for them as they skimmed the skins of warships. Gunships landed in wounds blasted in cliffs of armour plating, and the murder-terror squads poured in. Screams filled Galdron's ears as the Night Lords channelled the sounds of slaughter across the vox-net. He switched frequencies.

Scarrix's delight in massacre was wasteful, but was serving its purpose: all but a few elements of the defence had switched to countering the Night Lords' onslaught. Galdron and the rest of his flight were free, and the torpedoes they guarded were running true to their targets. They just had a little further to go.

'Incoming fighters,' said Galdron into the vox. 'All squadrons engage.'

His helm was suddenly a swarm of threat markers and target runes. A warning rang in his ears, and he spun sideways an instant before las-fire tore through the space where he had been. A quad-winged craft of chrome and crimson screamed by, tumbling as it skidded past. Galdron's hands moved before the impulse to kill reached his awareness. His lascannons fired once, and the red-and-chrome craft became a splash of fire. He glanced at his auspex. Lines and runes tangled across the screen. Secondary data pulsed in his helmet display. He assimilated it all in a heartbeat. The torpedoes were running ahead, rockets burning brighter as they sped through the last seconds of their lives.

But even as he watched, a squall of fire reached out from a weapons platform, and touched one of the warheads.

There was a brief, agonising jump in time. Then reality shrieked. A hole opened in space, darker than the void. The sheet of stars and light spun around it. Galdron's eyes clamped shut an instant later. His hearts

were racing, head spinning, throat and mouth filled with the taste of acid and blood. Sound drained from his ears. He was floating, feeling the tug and kick of the interceptor as it corkscrewed on...

And at the back of his thoughts he could hear voices shouting, pleading, crying...

His eyes snapped open. A hole in existence roared in the void where the torpedo had detonated. Beside it the light of battle seemed dim, almost serene in its fury. He pulled his eyes to his sensor displays. The remaining vortex torpedoes were still loose and alive. But not for long. Battery fire poured out from star forts and ships, as the defenders realised what they were facing. Every enemy craft pulled out of their engagements. And bore down on the remaining torpedoes.

‘All squadrons,’ said Galdron. ‘Pull in.’

He was spinning and firing without thinking now. The machine-spirit of his strike fighter began to count down the distance until the torpedoes impacted.

‘Five hundred...’ The sound of his strike fighter’s targeting system filled his ears.

‘Four hundred...’

A fighter exploded in front of him. Debris rang against his canopy as he thrust through the fire cloud.

‘Three hundred...’

Something struck his wing, and suddenly he was rolling over and over, stars and gunfire a blur across his eyes.

‘Two hundred...’

A fuel line exploded, and he felt his tail and wing shear off. The sensor data was still clear in his eyes.

‘One hundred...’

The last thing Galdron saw was a frozen image of stars washed with the fire of dying war-ships and spinning fighters...

Then the first torpedo struck the largest star fort and detonated.

Argonis stared at the battle projection. Where the enemy defences had been there was... a wound. The Warmaster’s twin fleets were through the channels and the defences were blinking out one by one.

Horus turned his gaze from the projection to Argonis.

‘Do you see now?’ asked the Warmaster.

‘How many vortex torpedoes did those squadrons carry?’ asked Argonis, trying to keep the shock from his voice.

‘Sixteen. Thirteen struck their targets.’

‘Galdron’s wings, the fighter craft and gunships...’

‘You know war, Argonis, and you know what is required to do what others claim is impossible.’

Argonis paused, feeling blood pulse cold in his hearts.

‘Sacrifice,’ he said.

‘Correct,’ said the Warmaster, ‘but that is only a beginning.’

<Orbital defence sphere collapse,> transmitted the lexmechanics into Kadith’s data stream. <Enemy void domination estimated at ninety-eight point eight-seven per cent. The Machine is the summation of understanding.>

Kadith parsed the meaning of the data, but he already knew the truth. The cogitated assessment was just the final confirmation.

<All surface units,> he intoned, <prepare for global enemy planetfall.>

Even as he finished he heard the temple structure begin to shake, as the batteries on its roof and spires began to hammer the atmosphere. The lights of the cogitator stacks dimmed as power surged to keep the void shields in place. And all across the planet, machines would be striding out to do war beneath the dome of the burning sky. The doors of forges would be opening to pour hundreds and thousands of tech-thralls onto the rad plains. The Knights would be walking, and the blessed ordinatus would be rolling from caverns beneath the surface.

<Project likely outcome of ground warfare,> he commanded. <Single most probable outcome.>

<Cogitating...>

Kadith waited. He knew the answer. His biological and mechanical components were capable of tactical calculations to the fiftieth order of complexity. But information of a higher fidelity was a blessing of the

Omnissiah, and so he waited while the temple's systems confirmed his doom.

<Cogitation complete. Most probable outcome of ground warfare – defeat following prolonged conflict. Duration two to six months. Enemy forces degraded by seventy point eight-seven per cent by close of conflict. Projection has a probability rating of seventy-one point four-three per cent. The loss of knowledge is true sorrow.>

Kadith was silent for a second. It was as he had calculated, though his own probabilities ran slightly higher, and the time it would take Horus to subdue the planet slightly longer. He wondered, as he had before, if that was the influence of the meat of his brain leeching into his logic. No matter, the next step he had to take was the same. He had to make the Warmaster pay as high a cost as possible for taking his world.

<Tagmata manifold activate,> he transmitted, as he stepped from the top of his pillar. The suspensors built into his body caught him as he began to fall, and he floated down to the floor.

Automata marched from the shadows of pillars, and unfolded from niches in the walls. His myrmidons came with them, robes swirling after them as they stalked forwards. They fell in around him, their ranks forming perfect diamonds, squares and circles. The buzz of their charging weapons hummed beside the clatter of code commands. Before them the doors of the temple began to grind open.

<War protocol initiated,> he transmitted and then switched to the audio simulator built into his throat. 'The Machine is god. God is the Machine,' he said to himself.

The Warmaster looked down on the world. Fire bubbled across its face, crawling in pinprick denotations beneath a shroud of smoke. Space above it crowded with ships and the glowing dots of descending landers and drop pods. The Vengeful Spirit sat over the unfolding destruction like an enthroned queen. Her guns spoke without cease. The flash of their firing blinked across Horus' face.

'Almost, but not enough,' said the Warmaster. 'Not yet.'

'My lord?' asked Argonis.

Horus turned his face from the viewport. The battle projections hung in the air behind them, muted and unnoticed now, their glimpses of battle discarded.

‘I will go to the surface. You will accompany me, Argonis.’

Argonis swallowed, and found his throat dry. The Warmaster was staring at him, his eyes holes in an unmoving face. Shadows and silence had crept over him as the battle had progressed, and the first forces had landed on the surface. Horus had watched and listened to a feed of the first drop pod landing. The sound of the first shots had rung through the throne room, booming and echoing like a gong struck in an empty temple. The blood of the first to die had flicked through the holo-light, bright and clear.

Horus had watched it all, but then turned away and gone to the viewport and said not a word, and beside him Argonis had felt as though something were growing around and beyond him. Something he could not see, but could sense. As though he were feeling heat bleed from behind a furnace door.

‘I commanded you to speak your thoughts,’ said Horus.

‘The battle has only just begun,’ said Argonis, forcing the words to come from his mouth, ‘and you have already said that you will not lead a spear strike against the defenders’ command. If that is so, then why—’

‘I am not going down to this world to kill its rulers. I am going down to destroy it utterly.’

Argonis turned at the buzz of active armour. Figures in black stood around them as though they had stepped from the dark. He saw Maloghurst amongst them, his twisted frame seeming small beside the Justaerin Terminators. Horus did not look at them, but reached out and picked up the red pearl, which had lain on its iron dais since Argonis had entered the chamber. The light around it curdled, and it flickered, its size and shape for a moment impossible to process. Horus closed his fingers around it, and strode towards the throne room’s doors.

‘Follow,’ said the Warmaster.

Myrmidax Kadith stepped from his temple into a burning world. The sky above was a dome of grey streaked with fire. Black smoke hid the distance. Void shields crackled and snapped above the spires of data-shrines and bastions.

Two and a half kilometres away, twelve Knights of the House of Kratogen stood atop the ruins of a bastion wall. Their guns fired without cease, the spirits of their machines calling out as their power drained.

Five thousand and fifty kilometres to the west, three thousand skitarii met the first waves of enemy with a wall of perfectly timed fire.

On the other side of the planet, Magos Hekot-Sul sent a last command to his forge reactors as he died. The explosions swallowed thousands of attackers in an instant.

Kadith knew all this, and knew that his own battle would come.

<Lock positions,> transmitted Kadith, and his personal cohort locked into formation, fields of fire overlapping many times. Above them the canopy of void shields glittered in layers. Defence lasers spat at targets beyond sight.

Horus would come for him. That was the way of the Warmaster, a trait that echoed through the records of his battles in the Great Crusade. He would come to remove Kadith in person, and so end a battle. Kadith would die. But that did not matter. Command would pass down the hierarchy of control, and the next command node would become the will of the Machine-God on Accazzar-Beta. Horus was going to have to take every inch of the planet by blood. And flesh was weaker than iron.

The black-and-gold Stormbird howled as it cut through Accazzar-Beta's atmosphere. Five interceptors peeled away and began to circle.

Two smaller gunships dropped faster, their guns rotating to lace the ruins around a circle of open ground. Their hatches slid open. Armoured figures leapt into the air, jump packs igniting as they fell. They landed in the ruins an instant before the gunships stopped firing. Creatures clinging to life in the wreckage died.

The Stormbird banked and rocked in the air, hanging on the downdraught of its thrusters. Skins of energy crackled around it as the wind blew cinders into its void shields.

Within its compartment, Argonis checked his weapons for a last time. Horus stood before the assault ramp, unhelmed, Worldbreaker in one hand, the talon blades of the other wrapped around the red pearl.

From this close, the presence of the Warmaster and the pearl were like a hammer beating against the inside of Argonis' skull. His muscles were vibrating, and he had to swallow the urge to howl. He willed the hatch to open, so that he could see the burning land beyond, and feel blood on his hands...

‘Steady, my sons,’ said Horus, as though hearing Argonis’ thoughts, and spared a glance behind him as the Stormbird dropped lower.

The hatch began to open. Light reached in through the broadening crack, and then a vista of iron spires and glowing fires filled Argonis’ eyes. The Stormbird settled to the ground. Dust billowed into the air. Horus paused for an instant, and then stepped down the ramp, and onto the surface of Accazzar-Beta. The Justaerin charged out, and encircled the Stormbird. Argonis followed them.

It was almost silent, the sounds of battle distant. No gunfire reached from the ruins, and no enemy charged to greet them. Argonis checked his stride.

‘Where is the enemy, my lord?’ asked Argonis.

‘The nearest living enemy is twenty kilometres away,’ replied the Warmaster. ‘This location holds no strategic importance. It is insignificant in every way. Until now.’

The Warmaster extended his taloned hand out in front of him. Red light pulsed between the blades. The air began to spiral. Argonis shivered. Beside him the Justaerin stepped back, turning to look around them, weapons searching for targets. Ghost voices rose on the wind. Argonis felt liquid on his lips, tasted iron on his tongue. Ashes and dust were rising from the ground, and spinning into the air in smears of black and red. The light of the distant explosions grew brighter. Shadows spread across the ground. Argonis felt himself shiver; he felt weak, hunted. The voice of the wind beat down on him. He watched as the Justaerin twitched, their muscles spasming.

Only the Warmaster remained still. Red light was crawling from between his fingers, and reaching into the air. His face was an impression pressed into shadow.

‘Come from the dark, Doombreed. I call you to my side. I give you this world. Come, take it from my hand. Feed.’

Horus opened his hand, and the red pearl fell.

Stillness rushed inwards. High above, the light of orbital battles shone brighter than stars. The red of distant fires swallowed other colours. Shadows became smoke. A reek of burning sugar and raw meat flooded Argonis’ mouth. A shape was rising from the ground

before him, forming as it grew. Ash clotted into a vast hound's skull. Darkness folded into matted fur. The light of fires congealed into muscle. Wings scattered blood as they folded, and beat against the gale. Open jaws tilted upwards, and roared at the sky.

Horus looked up at the daemon, his face unchanging. The daemon's roar ended, and it looked down at Horus. Fire burned in the holes that were its eyes. Molten iron and blood dripped from its jaws and the head of its axe. Argonis could feel his muscles bunching, and blood running from his eyes and mouth. Horus tilted his head and flicked a finger at the horizon.

'Go,' said the Warmaster, 'and do my will.'

The creature called Doombreed snarled, and it took to the air, wings pulling the gale with it. Cracks opened in its wake. Shapes writhed and tumbled from the wounds, their arms and bodies slick with gore. A thunderhead spread across the sky, its sides flashing with red lightning.

Argonis found that he was stepping forwards, that his hands were twitching on his bolter. He wanted to run after the winged creature, wanted to see the slaughter to come. He wanted to... He would...

'Come, Argonis,' said Horus. 'It is done. We must be gone from here.' And the Warmaster walked to his Stormbird as the first drops of red rain began to fall on the fires of Accazzar-Beta. 'Order all our forces back to the fleet. There is nothing left here for those who would live.'

Myrmidax Kadith watched as the storm spread across the horizon. Thunder rattled the cables against his chrome skin. Worms of static were playing across the bodies of the automata.

<All under the dominion of the Omnissiah,> transmitted Kadith.  
<Respond with disposition data.>

Only static and null-code answered.

<By the majesty of the machine, you will process my command.>

Above him the void shields sparked and pulsed as a black rain began to fall. In the distance the clouds were pulsing red. He could feel the links to those under his command vanishing just as the storm clouds blew closer. The world felt as though it were shrinking, its data erased. He reflected on the possibilities: an atmospheric weapon of some kind, possibly combined with a rare variety of data-phage.

The bolt of lightning struck the void shield above. The world flashed white as a layer of energy collapsed. The storm was on them now, racing across the sky to swallow the daylight. He and his cohorts were alone in the gloom.

Another lightning bolt struck the void shields, and then another, and another, like a hammer striking down from the sky. The domes of energy shattered.

Kadith braced for weapons fire, for the scream of gunships and the coming of the Warmaster.

The rain continued to fall. The carapaces of the automata chimed as the drops struck. Kadith looked at the liquid running off them, and across the ground. It was not black as he had first thought. It was red. Thick, wet, red.

The figures came from the storm front in a rush. Kadith had seconds to catch sight of teeth and stretched bodies of flayed muscle as the howling tide broke.

‘Kill protocol!’ shouted Kadith in his false true voice.

The automata and myrmidons fired. Bodies exploded into clouds of red slime. Plasma turned hides of brass into molten spray. Beams of light sliced through packs of skinless hounds. Kadith’s senses were filled with static and distortion.

But the horde kept coming. Red liquid coated the ground and every figure. The world was crimson and burning. To his right, a creature with spider legs and a torso of brass and muscle shrieked, and charged towards a siege automaton. Flesh and machine met. Pistons rammed forwards. Claws of bone shattered armour plates. Corrupted data battered across Kadith’s senses. Half his mind was trying to correlate the patterns of battle, trying to coordinate movement and fire.

A figure plunged from the storm clouds. Fire roared from its mouth, and smoke spilled from its wings. It landed before Kadith, the ground shattering beneath its hooves. It whirled as it rose, wings and axe and jaws scything through Kadith’s guard.

Rounds rang off the creature’s hide. Kadith took a step backwards, stabilised his frame and aimed his weapons. The power built in the charge chambers as the creature loomed above him, blood and flame scattering from it as it took a slow step towards him. The charge in his

weapons reached maximum. His vision was a fog of static, but somehow he could still see the creature, as though he were not seeing it with his eyes. Its jaws lolled open. A dog's smile of teeth and hunger.

Kadith fired, and the creature leapt forwards, its wings a canopy spread against the storm, its axe a red edge cutting down.

Storms swallowed the sphere of Accazzar-Beta. Argonis watched them spread across the planet as it turned beneath the Vengeful Spirit. It had been only an hour since the Warmaster had returned from the planet's surface, and in that time the planet had changed.

Red streaks ran through the clouds, growing brighter and broader. Vast webs of lightning branched across the storms, running on and on and then suddenly fading. The light lingered in Argonis' eyes, and he thought that he heard a shriek of thunder even though kilometres of vacuum separated him from the storms.

'Beautiful, is it not?' said Horus. 'At least, after a fashion.'

Horus stepped up to the viewport. Argonis felt his skin prickle. He did not want to look up from the dying world before him, though. He did not want to look at the Warmaster.

'You asked a question when this began, my son,' said Horus. 'Do you still wish an answer?'

'Why are you doing this?'

'Because I can. Because I must.'

'And what do you wish me to do with that knowledge, my lord?'

Horus turned from the viewport as lightning clawed the surface of the red clouds.

'I wish you to carry its truth with you.'

### The Court of the Governor of the Gilded Worlds

'And now, Desigus, Lord of the Gilded Worlds, and Warden of the Aventian Gulf, you have heard my words, and must now choose what fate you wish for the world you guard.'

Desigus stares at Argonis, his already pale face leached of colour.

'It... it is not possible... It cannot be...'

'I am not here to convince you,' says Argonis, with the smallest of shrugs. 'I am here only to ask if you comply with the will of the Warmaster.' He pauses, then asks the question he bears like a drawn sword. 'What is your answer?'

