
WARHAMMER
40,000
GATHERING STORM
FALL OF CADIA



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FALL OF CADIA

BOOK ONE OF THE GATHERING STORM

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DEFENDERS OF CADIA

Lord Castellan Creed
Colour Sergeant Kell
Cadian 8th

Archmagos Dominus
Belisarius Cawl
Tech-Priest of Mars

Saint Celestine
The Living Saint

Canoness Eleanor
Canoness Genevieve
Geminae Superia

Katarinya Greyfax
Inquisitor, Ordo Hereticus

Baroness Vardus
House Raven

Marius Amalrich
Marshal, Black Templars, Cruxis Crusade

Korahael
Company Master, Dark Angels 4th Company

Tor Garadon
Captain, Imperial Fists 3rd Company

Orven Highfell
Wolf Lord, Ironwolves

Sven Bloodhowl
Wolf Lord, Firehowlers

THIRTEENTH BLACK CRUSADE

Abaddon the Despoiler
Warmaster of Chaos

Bringers of Despair
Chosen of Abaddon

Legio Vulcanum
Traitor Titan Legion

Urkanthos
Daemon Prince, Commander of the Black Fleet

Hounds of Abaddon
Black Legion

XENOS AGENTS

Sylandri Veilwalker
Harlequin Shadowseer

Trazyn the Infinite
Necron Overlord

PRODUCED BY GAMES WORKSHOP IN NOTTINGHAM

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The dreamer awakens in the world that is no world. Vibrant colours swirl around her like wind-blown mist. Even in the dream, she feels their caress. They are the embers of emotion, neither hot nor cold, gathered by ageless hands to stoke a blaze beyond the stars.

The dreamer recalls a time when she was at the mercy of emotion, of mortal frailty. A time before the dream, before her true purpose was revealed; before she was chosen, and she was still a vessel of flesh and blood. She pities the self-that-was for its weakness, its infirmity. And yet…

And yet…

The colours part before a gleam of silver. A sword. *Her* sword. No. It is too soon. She is still weary. The scars of yesterday have yet to heal.

Golden light pierces the mists. Images spill across the dreamer's thoughts. The dead. The dying. A world drowned in blood and fire, and the galaxy torn asunder amidst dark laughter. There are no words. None are needed. The dreamer knows what is asked of her. She knows the price she will pay. Each time she journeys from the world that is no world, she does so diminished, a piece of her lost forever in the cackling void, a feast for the damned. One day she will sally forth, and she will not return.

A part of her – that last remnant of mortality – wishes the burden would pass to another. That the peace she earned long ago might at last be hers. But if she does not shoulder this responsibility, then who will? The dreamer knows there is no other. She is alone; the first and last of a grand design never realised. The fading fragment of a dream that will never be. She knows better than any that the only failure worse than defeat is not to fight at all.

The golden light enfolds her. The dreamer's hand closes around the sword. Elusive memory returns, and her strength with it. Her weariness recedes, washed away by renewed purpose.

The mists billow and ebb. The dreamer lingers upon the threshold of the world that is no world. Already its colours have grown muted and drab. Part of her fades alongside. The price of duty. The price of faith. But it no longer matters. The decision is made. There can never be rest for one such as she. If this is to be her last battlefield, then the dreamer will face it unflinching.

With a final whispered prayer, the dreamer hurls herself from the void, and into the crucible of war.





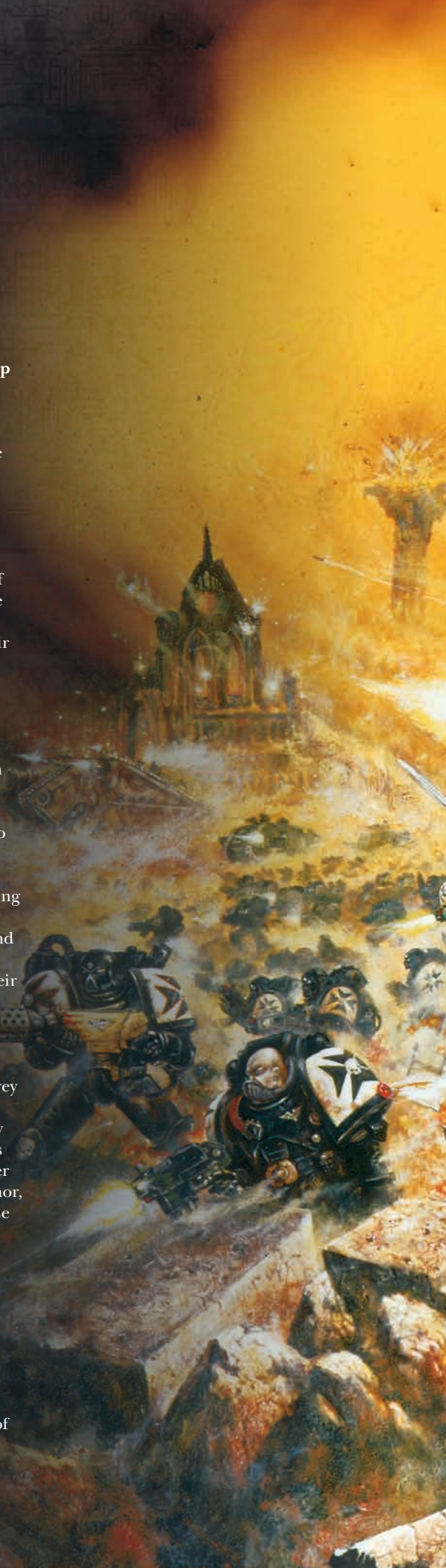
AN AGE OF DARKNESS

It seems that the end of days must surely be nigh. Traitors, mutants and heretics rebel in unprecedented numbers. The curse of the psyker runs rampant through Humanity's collective soul. The hellish energies of the Warp press close against the veil of reality, and every day brings inevitable doom a little closer…

To dwell within the Imperium of Man is to inhabit a dystopian nightmare. The faceless masses of Humanity are little more than grist for the mill of survival, an ever-abundant fuel source that keeps the bloody wheels turning. Endless billions labour in the fire-lit confines of factory worlds, entire generations living and dying without ever seeing the sky. Hive cities groan with the weight of unimaginably vast human populations, whose existences are naught but toil and sorrow. From the bellies of leviathan warships to the mindless drudgery of city-sized scriptorums, from the crowded warrens of lightless underhives to the frozen misery of perilous asteroid mines, every day is filled with hardship for the common folk of the Emperor's realm. It is well that it is so. Those with their heads bowed by exhaustion cannot look up to see the horrors pressing close from the darkness above.

The same cannot be said for Humanity's leaders. To them falls the burden of knowledge, and the terrible weight of responsibility. Many times throughout its history, the Imperium has known great danger, yet rarely have matters been as bleak as this. The barbarous Orks multiply and spread in every corner of the galaxy, bringing mindless devastation to all in their path. The deathless legions of the Necrons rise from their tomb worlds and ply the stars, seeking to exterminate the human vermin infesting their empire of old. On the Eastern Fringe, the Imperium faces the growing threat of the technologically superior Tau Empire, while from the outer darkness beyond the galaxy come the questing tendrils of the Tyranid hive fleets, devouring every world they overrun. Yet all of these pale beside the most insidious threat of all, that of Chaos. From beyond the veil of reality, the Ruinous Powers exhort their mortal followers to ever greater acts of diabolic cruelty and destruction, while daemonic legions rip their way through the skin of realspace in terrifying numbers.

The defenders of the Imperium stand firm against these nightmarish threats. The teeming ranks of the Astra Militarum and Adeptus Mechanicus fight alongside the elite warriors of the Space Marines, the Adepta Sororitas and Grey Knights. For all their efforts, more worlds are lost every year, even supposedly impregnable strongholds such as Enceladus and Minisotira being swallowed by anarchy. Dark omens and dread portents run rife. The Oracle of Ulandros has spoken for the first time in ten generations, prophesying death on a scale never seen before. The famed Silver Saints of Callistos II weep tears of blood and ichor, and will not stop. Seers and mystics across the Imperium are beset by grandiose visions of mighty angels and monstrous devils doing battle in a firmament lit by ghostly fires. Even as much of Segmentum Pacificus falls ominously silent, astropathic choirs throughout Segmentum Solar have been overwhelmed by floods of psychic cries issuing from every other corner of the galaxy. Around the Eye of Terror, Abaddon's Thirteenth Black Crusade hammers against the Cadian Gate. In the Fenris System, brother fights brother as Magnus the Red wreaks a terrible vengeance upon those who wronged him. War is everywhere, from one end of the Imperium to the other, and yet those with the curse of foresight whisper of worse to come. Darkness looms upon the horizon, they warn. A Stygian tidal wave rushes closer with every passing hour to drown all of Humanity beneath its icy waters.









THE SHADOW DESCENDS

CHAPTER 1

The Omnissiah filled the galaxy with mysteries so that we might learn from them, coming step by step closer to his perfect being. To ignore them, even in the face of war, is heresy.

- Archmagos Belisarius Cawl

IN THE GRIP OF WAR

For ten thousand years, the bleak nether-wastes of the Eye of Terror gnawed at the fabric of the galaxy, spewing their horrors into the Imperium of Man. And for every one of those ten thousand years, Cadia stood firm, an adamantium bastion given strength and purpose by the flesh, blood and bone of the faithful. There are no records of how many valiant souls have fallen defending the fortress-worlds of the Cadian Gate. But by their sacrifice, the tide of traitors, heretics and Daemons is stemmed. By their example, a thousand worlds have known what little peace can be sought in this bleakest of epochs.

But as the darkness grew ever darker, and the blaze of the astronomicon guttered like a wind-blown candle, the Eye of Terror pulsed, its baleful energies spiralling outwards. Abaddon the Despoiler, heir to the cursed mantle of the arch-traitor Horus, at last unleashed the full might of his Thirteenth Black Crusade. With a shriek that echoed through nightmares from Medusa to Ultramar, the Despoiler's fleet slipped its moorings. Eternally vigilant Cadia, lynchpin of the Imperium's defences, was the target.



Cadia stood ready. Abaddon's campaign had long been foreseen by mystics and strategists alike, and the fortresses of the Gate prepared for its coming. The leviathan warships of Imperial battlefleets prowled the icy currents of deep space. From the radiation-torn wastes of Prosan to the ice-ridged plains of Solar Mariatus, slab-sided Kasr-bastions were expanded. Their already-formidable garrisons of Shock Troopers were reinforced by forces from across the Imperium. The splendoured colours of knightly households flew alongside the proud sigils of the Adeptus Astartes; the scuttling war engines of the Adeptus Mechanicus mustered alongside gleaming ranks of the Adepta Sororitas. And everywhere, the warriors of Cadia itself, drilled and trained for this moment, and this moment alone, awaited the battle that would define the galaxy for thousands of years to come.

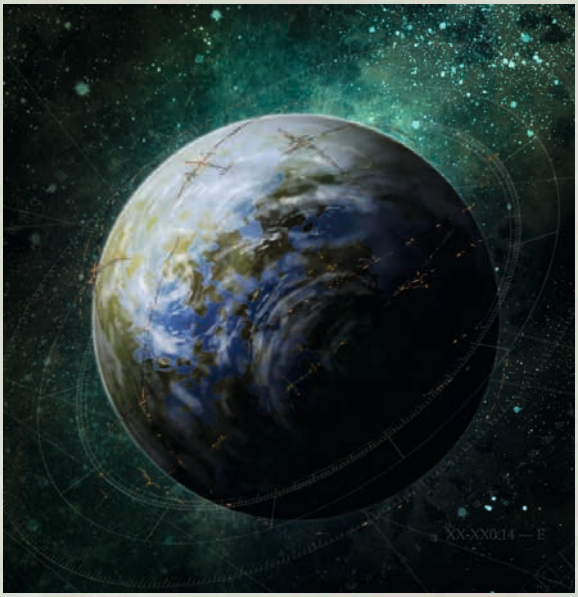
Millions perished in the opening assault, and millions more in the inexorable slaughter that followed. Worlds burned. Warriors uncounted bled their last for scraps of worthless, ravaged ground. Graveyards of twisted wreckage twitched in the solar winds, marking the demise of fleets whose firepower could have unmade whole systems. There was no time for mourning, for despair. Cadia's defenders battled on until all strength left them, and then went again into the fight, for there was no respite from the onslaught.

THE CADIAN PYLONS

In a galaxy replete with mysteries, the Cadian pylons are amongst the most enduring. There are over five thousand such edifices scattered across the surface of Cadia, each one standing some five hundred yards above the surface, and reaching two hundred and fifty yards below. Reports differ, but it is understood that there could be anywhere between two and three thousand more concealed below ground as the result of tectonic movement down the ages.

Despite millennia of study, the Adeptus Mechanicus have yet to discover the purpose of the pylons. Servitors sent within invariably cease to function or suffer circuit overload; all attempts to breach the structures' gleaming surfaces have met with failure. Any recovered data is fragmentary at best, and contradictory at worst. Even the identity of the pylons' creators is shrouded in mystery. Some amongst the Cult Mechanicus believe the spires to be the work of the Necrons, or their mortal antecedents, but then there are those on Mars equally convinced that the pylons were constructed by the Old Ones for the sole purpose of destroying the Necrons and the C'tan.

The one thing all investigators agree upon is that the pylons are responsible for the stable Warp-corridor known as the Cadian Gate. Adepts conjecture that they emit a becalming signal, taming the roiling energies of the Immaterium. Why this should be so, or even to what wider purpose this could be pressed, remains a mystery.





Had this been a simple contest of arms, the Imperium might have had confidence in Cadia's defences. But Abaddon's weapons were not limited to mortal means. The blessings of the Dark Gods were upon him, and their talents his to command. Plague devoured fortresses before a shot could be fired. Madness claimed the devout and the profane alike. And betrayal – the false promises whispered by prophets of damnation – this was the mightiest card in the Despoiler's hand. As heresy spread, brother fought brother. Regiments were torn apart from within, or purged with fire. Bastions, though secure from invaders, collapsed into infighting as the righteous vied with the corrupt.

Yet it was from one such betrayal that hope blossomed anew. When a cataclysmic act of treachery saw the slaughter of the Cadian High Command at Tyrok Fields, Ursarkar Creed – commander of the famed Cadian 8th – took up the role of Lord Castellan, and shouldered the burden of directing Cadia's embattled forces. Creed's rise altered the course of the conflict. His cold, calculating demeanour commanded the respect of common-born soldiers, the war-tempered brotherhoods of the Adeptus Astartes and even, it is said, of the xenos forces rumoured to have played some part in Cadia's defence.

Through Creed's efforts, and through those of unsung heroes too numerous to tally, the Chaos incursion slowed and was finally repulsed. In its wake, it left a planetary system on the edge of collapse, and warriors too weary for celebration. Cadia's defenders had no way of contacting the system's outer worlds – comms relays and choir beacons had been shattered. Those Astropaths who risked setting their minds adrift on the tides of the Warp suffered seizures, or else were consumed by the ravenous entities lurking beyond reality's veil. As artificers laboured to restore the humbled defences, and sporadic battles raged with those invaders still present on Cadian soil, Creed contacted the remnant of the Imperial Navy still in orbit. At his request, those few vessels capable of moving under their own power departed to perform a reconnaissance of the outer system.

In their absence, Creed grew ever more convinced that another assault was on its way. In all the long months of fighting, there had been no reports of Abaddon himself making planetfall. Would the Despoiler, mortal foe of everything the Imperium stood for, yield his conquest without so much as lifting a blade in its cause? Creed's instincts told him otherwise, and he was too old a soldier not to trust them.



Creed knew there was nothing he could do to prevent the Despoiler's fleet from making passage through the Cadian Gate. What vessels of the Imperial Navy yet remained in orbit were little more than listing wrecks. The one exception was the Space Wolves Battle Barge *Firemane's Fang*, coaxed from the brink of reactor overload by the ministrations of its Iron Priests. It alone could fight as a warship should. The others would roar like dragons should the foe come within range, but they could not pursue an enemy clawing hard for deep space.

On the other hand, Creed suspected that pursuit would not be called for. Cadia was a symbol of the Imperium's resilience, and Abaddon's repeated failure. Pride would surely not let him bypass Cadia. Though they would perhaps perish in the process, the armies of Cadia could fulfil one last, vital function. Every day they endured – every hour – was time in which reinforcements could arrive and cast Abaddon's forces back into the Warp – and this time, for good. Thus Creed set his mind to issuing a challenge the Despoiler could not ignore.

Only one of Cadia's chief fortresses had survived the invasion. Kasr Kraf lay on the edge of the Elysion Fields – a great expanse on Cadia Secundus, dominated by the famously unfathomable Cadian pylons. Creed withdrew his command behind Kasr Kraf's walls, and set about what preparations he could to ready the fortress for what he increasingly regarded as an inevitable battle. Under Creed's basilisk gaze, archeologists' tunnel networks and caverns were expanded and made ready for a last-ditch defence. Adepts of the Cult Mechanicus laboured night and day, stripping components from shattered bastions to coax new life into reparable aegis defences and weapons emplacements.

All across Cadia Secundus, the tale was the same. Regiment upon regiment of Shock Troopers laboured to restore defences savaged by bombardment and invasion. They did not strive alone. Savaged Adeptus Astartes Battle Companies – sometimes reduced to little more than a handful of squads – took their place in the defences, their colours and heraldry bright against the drab Cadian fatigues. North of Kasr Kraf, Orven Highfell garrisoned his battle-brothers in the ruins of Kasr Jark. However, the Fenris-born Great Company was seldom to be found within the walls, electing instead to scour the cratered plains for the Daemons who had roamed there only days before. Though still haunted by the cost of recent campaigns, the Space Wolves were determined to bring honour to both their new Wolf Lord, and their old: the slain Egil Ironwolf, whose icons and name the company still bore until the stain of his death could be washed away.

Further north still, the Dark Angels' 4th Company reinforced the ruined superstructure of their own crashed Strike Cruiser, *Sword of Defiance*, enough of whose armaments had survived the crash to render the downed battleship a formidable fortress in its own right. Guttural prayers echoed across the broken bastion-lines to the south of Kasr

Kraf, each syllable in the thick sanctum-cant of the Black Templars. Even now, Marshal Marius Amalrich had little faith that the Cadian guardsmen would hold, and had divided the warriors of his Cruxis Crusade amongst them to thicken their ardour.

Across the valley from Creed's fortress, the Sisters of Our Martyred Lady garrisoned the sprawling shrine of Saint Morrican. Whenever the wind blew from the east, it carried gusts of incense across Kasr Kraf's walls. Creed was glad to see the determination the pungent fumes instilled in his troops, but felt little stirring in his own heart. He had long since placed his faith in the roar of bombardment and the fighting spirit of the Cadian soldier. To his mind, there was no sense wishing for miracles unless you were prepared to forge them yourself. And so he did.

In the days that followed, Creed drilled his soldiers hard, leaving them so weary they had no energy for doubt, or even for fear. For the first time, the massed regiments of Cadia understood the harsh tutelage that had made Creed's own command, the Cadian 8th, the formidable instrument of war it had become. As for the 8th themselves, they took perverse pride in the hardships meted out onto their comrades. The veterans amongst their ranks knew exactly why Creed acted as he did – they even welcomed his tirades, knowing they would temper others as they themselves had been tempered.

But Creed's preparations were not restrained to the reforging of flesh and blood. He salvaged the remains of the choir beacon from ruined Kasr Luten and had it installed in Kasr Kraf. The beacon's bonded Astropaths were long since dead, and so Creed requisitioned whatever psykers remained to him on Cadia, and ordered them inducted into the jury-rigged beacon. Very few were Astropaths – most were sanctioned psykers of the Scholastica Psykana. But Creed gambled that their raw power would help the true Astropaths punch through the psychic turbulence that had severed Cadia, and bring him some badly needed reinforcements.

This strategy met with objections within Creed's own command. A few viewed it as the squandering of a finite resource, and most feared that untrained minds would draw Warp-born horrors directly onto Cadia itself. Creed had already resolved to press ahead when a defence monitor – the sole survivor of the reconnaissance fleet – limped into outer orbit.

The *Pyrax Orchades*' starboard flank was a ruin of scored and seared metal. Two-thirds of its crew were dead, and the rest would perish from rad-poisoning before the day was out. The sole remaining officer gave a garbled account of what he'd seen, but the sensor readings allowed no ambiguity. Abaddon's Black Fleet was inbound for Cadia – an angry swarm of warships, Daemon vessels and space hulks so massive it eclipsed the stars. Worse, at its core sat the malevolent planet-killing bulk of a Blackstone Fortress.

Creed's fears had come to pass. Abaddon's Thirteenth Black Crusade hadn't ended. Indeed, it had barely begun.

The metallic tang of oil and unguent rankled at Creed's nostrils. Lights flickered fitfully on access panels. Data streams scuttled across monitor displays, their meaning as shrouded in mystery as the robed figure who stood silent watch over them.

'Is it ready?'

Magos Klarn broke his vigil to stare at Creed. He was more human than most of those the Lord Castellan had dealt with over the years – at least, on the surface – but still there was something arachnid about the jerky precision of his movements. A spider at the heart of his web.

'It will serve.' Klarn's words had a metallic edge. 'It is not without risk.'

Creed let his gaze fall across the ten-score capsules, arranged about the chamber in three concentric rings. Each held a psyker, wired body and soul into the mechanisms of the choral beacon. Bundled cables spiralled away between one capsule and the next, the strands of Klarn's web, binding its prey together. On the central dais, a lone Astropath hung suspended from a forest of cables and datalines. The beacon needed a focus – one who would shape the distress hymnal and give it purpose. And maybe, just maybe, punch through the roiling Warp tides that had enveloped Cadia.

Creed approached the dais and stared up into the Astropath's empty eye sockets. 'You understand what is required?'

Pallid flesh twitched, the Astropath's rictus of pain giving way to a moment of stillness. 'I do.'

Creed nodded. What more was there to say? Turning his back on the Astropath, he focussed his attention on the magos. 'Begin.'

The magos hunched over the console, mechadendrites working in concert with gauntleted hands. Creed felt the pressure wave build. Every nightmare he'd ever had – every fear he'd ever admitted – clawed at the back of his brain, called forth by a hundred wailing voices. Capsules sparked, their vis-plates cracking and falling dark. The Astropath threw back his head and issued a tremulous, pitiful scream. The pressure in Creed's mind burst. The Astropath slumped lifeless against the cables, black fluid trickling from his empty eyes.

'Mortality rate at ninety-two percent,' grated the magos. 'Within anticipated projections.'

Creed swallowed, banishing his nightmares back to their cage. 'Did it work?'

'Data is inconclusive.' The magos offered a shrug, his mechadendrites mimicking the hunching of his shoulders. 'What next?'

'Next?' Creed snorted. Reinforcements would come, or they would not. Either way, the answer was the same. 'We fight. Cadia stands.'





BURIED SECRETS

Far from Cadia, amidst the dust-blown wastes of Eriad VI, a fifty-year labour teetered on the brink of disaster.

For thousands of years, the Eriad System had been considered worthless. Bathed in the radioactive grip of an angry star, its planets had little in the way of resources to make colonisation worthwhile. Strategically, it had been judged expendable. In early M32, the Imperial Navy established an orbital outpost at Eriad VI. For a time, the world was used as a staging area, only to be abandoned when Abaddon the Despoiler's Fourth Black Crusade swept through Eriad in M34. With the great citadel of Kromarch under threat from Abaddon's forces, naval high command had no desire to squander limited resources on an outpost with so little value. The defence of Eriad VI ended almost with the first salvo, and Abaddon's crusade swept onwards.

Eriad went unremarked upon by the scribes of the Administratum for nearly six millennia, until Warp Storm Storael forced the explorator vessel *Wayward Eye* to make an emergency re-entry into realspace. Locked within Eriad by the vagaries of Storael, the *Wayward Eye*'s captain took it upon himself to perform a detailed survey of the system. In the process, he discovered that the surface of Eriad IV had been subjected to massive bombardments in the distant past. Subsequent investigations revealed technological fragments of unknown origin scattered across the northern continent, with the suggestion of further secrets sealed deeper beneath the surface. It was unclear how such treasures could have gone unnoticed during the Imperium's presence in the system, but the *Wayward Eye*'s captain surmised that the bombardment itself must have revealed Eriad VI's secrets.

Before the captain could complete his investigations, the Warp storm at last cleared. Long overdue, the *Wayward Eye* submitted a report of its findings and left the Eriad System behind, as uninhabited as the day the explorator ship had arrived. It would not remain so for long.

In the years that followed, two fleets arrived at Eriad. The first was the Conclave Acquisitorius of Archmagos Belisarius Cawl. Having received the *Wayward Eye*'s report en route to his original destination, Cawl waylaid the fleet's mission to make orbit, hungry to learn the secrets hidden beneath Eriad's cratered skin. The ancient Tech-Priest had spent the better part of ten millennia engaged in his repetitive labours on Mars, and the temptation of new discoveries was too strong to deny. Establishing a compound in the artefact-rich fields of the northern continent, Cawl began the delicate business of retrieval and investigation. The recovered artefacts varied massively in size. Some were no larger than a servo-skull, while others dwarfed the Kataphrons who stood silent sentry upon the dig site's perimeter. All were fused and cracked, giving few clues to their original purpose. But the mysteries tantalised Cawl, and he resolved to bore deeper into Eriad's crust to find his answers.

It was then that the second fleet arrived in the system.

Cawl's ships had been drawn to Eriad by the lure of hidden knowledge. The newcomers – an Ork fleet under the brutish dominion of Big Mek Gangrek – were drawn by the engine-signatures of Cawl's own vessels. Gangrek had visions of seizing the Mechanicus ships, swelling his own fleet to match his ambitions. In this, his reach badly exceeded his grasp. Gangrek's ramshackle vessels were obliterated in a savage near-orbit battle, his crews escaping fiery demise only through a last minute tellyporta evacuation. Cawl, satisfied that the victory had fallen well within calculated parameters, returned his attention to his excavations.

Gangrek's boyz quickly adapted to Eriad VI's high-rad environment – more than that, they thrived. Spared the fury of orbital bombardment by roiling dust storms, they harried Cawl's compound. Each raid garnered wrecks and stolen technology to be pressed into service alongside the Kill Kroozer debris still raining down upon the Eriadan badlands.

Cawl's adepts saw only the sporadic nature of the raids, and did not recognise the larger plan – chiefly because Gangrek had no fixed goal. The Mek was unpredictable even by Ork standards. This was anathema to the rigorous, methodical warriors of the Omnissiah – what they could not anticipate they could not defeat. Time and again, Skitarii patrols found themselves ambushed and overrun. Ironstriders braved the dust storms to close in on Gangrek's outposts, only to discover that the lean-to buildings had been mined, and that their own staging bastions were under fire.

Finally, Cawl ripped his attention from his studies, taking direct command of the incipient disaster. Recognising the need to set Gangrek an irresistible lure, he ordered the next supply drop to occur on the very edge of the compound. The Mek's hunger for looted materiel had been the only constant in his inconstant war, and Cawl was determined to take whatever advantage he could.

Thus, when Gangrek's boyz stormed the landing fields, they discovered transport craft not bursting with supplies, but with waiting Skitarii. The ensuing battle lasted well into the frozen Eriadan night, shoota-fire and bellowed battle cries vying with the methodical volleys of Skitarii rifles and the machine-argot of Electro-Priests.

Under Cawl's direct leadership, the warriors of the Adeptus Mechanicus won their first real victory since the greenskins had come to Eriad VI. The Mechanicus compound held, though only by the slimmest of measures. The turning point came with Gangrek's fiery demise in the rays of Cawl's Solar Atomiser. But though the Orks withdrew, thousands more remained beyond the arc-fences. It was clear to the Archmagos that his hold on Eriad VI was slipping. Weighing the probabilities, he regretfully decided to abandon his studies and return to the original mission that had brought him from Mars. He had indulged his curiosities for too long, imperilled the valuable cargo aboard his ship and forgotten his obligations. Giving the evacuation order, Cawl descended into the tunnels one last time.



Cawl ran a hand across the smooth, black shard. If only he had more time! The deeper they delved into Eriad VI, the more complete were the fragments. Discovery could be mere days – hours – away.

'No.' Impatience would gain him nothing. Whatever treasures this planet held, they could wait. He could not risk leaving the relic aboard his Ark Mechanicus any longer. 'I will return.'

Now they would collapse the tunnels, seal the greenskins away from their prize. And on that glorious day of return, the Orks would quail before the Omnissiah's fury.

Cawl turned to leave, but halted, uncertain. He swept his gaze around the cavern, eye lenses clicking and whirring as they scoured the shadows. He was alone. And yet, instinct told him otherwise. More than instinct. Was that the ghost of laughter?

'Reveal yourself.'

A shadow shifted. Cawl had the sense of a hooded woman, a featureless mask swirling like smoke.

The recalibration came without conscious direction. Implants slid smoothly into war mode. Power flooded the circuits of the Atomiser, the sensation like blood-flow returning to a numbed limb. Binharic data flooded the empty tiers of Cawl's mind, divine algorithms seeking out the intruder's weaknesses.

The intruder leaned closer. 'Do you not remember me, Belisarius?'

Cawl scoured the jumbled bibelots archived in his third consciousness. Fragments of memory, and a name. Veilwalker.

A data-burst suddenly lit up his mind. She had come to him in his forge on Mars, where he had laboured so long at his sacred task. She had compelled him to venture forth, to take his precious cargo to its long-intended destination. The time is now, *she had whispered, and he had been unable to resist. How strange that, until now, he had forgotten that meeting.*

The Shadowseer's mask settled, forming a countenance that Cawl hadn't seen for millennia. The likeness lingered for a moment, then dissolved into a vortex of dancing light.

'If you are here to remind me once again of old promises, xenos, then you have come too late. My ships are already preparing to depart as we speak,' Cawl said.

Veilwalker laughed. 'The music of destiny is changing. The dancers must learn new steps, or perish in the fading notes.'

Cawl stared at her blankly.

'I am here to tell you to keep digging,' said Sylandri Veilwalker. Then, in a flicker of light, she was gone.





A DOLOROUS WARNING

The first alarm came from the Bell of Saint Gerstahl. For thousands upon thousands of years, it had sat in silence upon its pedestal, content to while away eternity in the vast collection of artefacts possessed by Trazyn the Infinite. Then, on a day seemingly little different to any other in the unchanging hallways of Solemnace, the bell began chiming with ever greater force – in full and inexplicable defiance of the stasis vault housing it.

The first doleful note it chimed split the vaulted ceiling of the bell's stasis chamber, unleashing a flood of coolant that instantly dissolved the last examples of Ooliac sand-sculpture in existence. The second note triggered a logic cascade within the circuits of Solemnace's master program, causing it to wrongly command each and every one of the tomb world's warrior legions to return to stasis-sleep. By the time the Bell of Saint Gerstahl sounded its third chime, the reverberations had grown sufficiently destructive that even the composite alloys of Necron 'flesh' could not withstand its onslaught. Trazyn lost five surrogate bodies in his increasingly desperate attempts to bring about silence. After the thirteenth chime – and just as the collateral damage finally outpaced Solemnace's Canoptek custodians' ability to contain it – the Bell of Saint Gerstahl finally fell silent.

Pausing only to cast the contraption into the depths of the webway – where he profoundly hoped it would bedevil the Eldar as much as it had lately inconvenienced him – the Lord of Solemnace pondered the meaning of it all.

Departing Solemnace, Trazyn made for Thanatos, crownworld of the Oruscar Dynasty and home to the wonders of the Celestial Orrery. His welcome in those halls was less than effusive – in part due to a misunderstanding over the Oruscar Glyph of Dominance, which had gone missing during a prior visit. However, after bargains were struck and promises made, Trazyn was finally permitted access to the orrery itself – if under the watchful gaze of Oruscar Lychguards.

As he stepped into the whirling sphere of living metal and holographic light, Trazyn realised something was amiss. The intricate webs that formed the links of the orrery were under-lit by a crimson stain. It pulsed beneath the weave of worlds like an infection, forcing its way to the surface. Something was coming. Something that would change the shape of the galaxy. Thus far, it had gone unnoticed, but there was no hiding anything from the Celestial Orrery, for it was not merely a representation of the galaxy, but a perfect reflection of it.

Trazyn realised the Oruscar had known about the rising corruption for centuries – perhaps even millennia – but had made no move to combat it. They could not, for inaction was the price of custodianship. But Trazyn had no such restraint – indeed, he acknowledged no master save his own amusement. He could act, if he chose. After untold millennia, there was some appeal in playing at selflessness… But where to begin? Where was the cause of the corruption?



Trazyn lost track of time studying the orrery's pathways, searching for the wellspring of the galaxy's woes – the source of the blight worming its way through the galaxy's heart. At last he found it, far to the galactic north-west, bordering the Eye of Terror. In the orrery, that world was catalogued as a string of trinary data, whose details Trazyn deliberately forgot. To the Imperium, it was known as Cadia. Trazyn couldn't recall setting foot there, not in all his travels. To his understanding, it was a drab, grey world, of interest only to the bellicose. On the other hand, if the role of saviour grew tiring, Cadia would surely offer opportunities to expand his collection…

The door shuddered, then hissed open. Water crystals formed on the pock-marked metal of Trazyn's body. He didn't even need to examine the status panel to know that Phalanxes ZX/48 through ZX/128 wouldn't marshal for battle any time soon. They were frozen solid. Just like all the others.

'Why did I ever bring that wretched bell here?' Trazyn muttered, even though he knew precisely why he'd done so.

The shrine world's guardians had been just as desperate to keep the Bell of Saint Gerstahl as the Black Legion had been to destroy it. Thousands of lives, cast into oblivion in pursuit of one singular artefact. And all for nothing, as events had transpired. That story alone made it worth preservation – or so Trazyn had originally thought. Now, with half his stasis vaults collapsed or ankle-deep in coolant, and his legions frozen at the command of Solemnace's damaged master program…

Trazyn keyed the release. The door jerked closed. He could hardly make the journey undefended. Cadia was a near-permanent war zone, and he'd not survived the endless aeons since biotransference by taking unnecessary risks.

Perhaps one of his peers would lend him a phalanx or two. Imotekh of the Sautekh, perhaps? No… Not after Somonor. In fact, now Trazyn came to consider it, he didn't have any peers left who wouldn't turn him down outright, or else use the opportunity to assassinate him.

Then perhaps one of his contacts within the Imperium itself? No. They were too parochial. There had been that one Inquisitor… A shame what had happened to her, but humans took such great delight in killing one another. No, sadly Valeria would be of no assistance, but maybe she held the key – or at least invited a certain sardonic justice. His spirits restored, Trazyn headed deeper in the catacombs, searching for one particular vault…



THE FATE OF PHALANX

As the tides of the Thirteenth Black Crusade washed across the Cadian Gate, jealous eyes sought advantage elsewhere.

The Iron Warriors Warsmith Shon'tu and the Daemon Prince Be'lakor thought to upstage Abaddon's latest crusade by striking directly at Terra. Emerging from a Warp rift at the heart of the battle-fortress *Phalanx*, they sought to seize command of the mighty vessel and turn its unparalleled weaponry on the Emperor's Palace itself.

Victory seemed assured. Five companies of the Imperial Fists had already departed upon the Crusade of Vengeance, unleashing the righteous fury of Dorn against the fortresses of Medrengard. Three others were scattered across the Segmentum Obscurus on missions of vital import. That left some thirty battle-brothers of the 1st Company, alongside the newly reconstituted and unblooded 3rd, to repel the assault on their beloved sanctum.



Captain Tor Garadon, master of the 3rd, took command, rallying the bond-serfs of *Phalanx*'s crew alongside his battle-brothers. Though badly outnumbered, the defenders of the venerable battle-fortress knew every hall and chamber of their home, and used that knowledge to bloody effect. Ground was yielded only to draw the snarling Daemons into the jaws of ambush. The armoured castellum – fortresses within the fortress – kept firing until their ammunition was spent and their positions overrun by the Iron Warriors' clanking war engines.

It was not enough. Assaulted by the insidiousness of the Dark Gods and the machine viruses of Shon'tu's Warpsmiths, the very flesh of *Phalanx* rebelled. Automated defences turned on their creators. Rad-baffles cut out, flooding hallways with reactor waste. Grav and life support failed across the entire forward superstructure. Hangars vented without warning. And wherever the Iron Warriors advanced, elegant stonework and golden panelling that had endured since the time of Dorn writhed and twisted, screaming faces distending the surfaces from within. Soon, whole decks resembled nothing so much as the nightmare bastions of Medrengard.

The Imperial Fists held their ground with a tenacity worthy of their long-dead Primarch, but with every passing moment, more of the fortress ship succumbed to the infestation. Already the machine spirits of its dorsal batteries eroded beneath the Warpsmiths' insidious designs. Garadon knew that a planetary bombardment would soon follow. The last testament of Dorn's great prize would be one of failure – worse, it would be one of treachery.

Faced with the unthinkable, Garadon took the only course open to him. This was a foe that could not be bested by bolter and chainsword, nor even through the unswerving valour of the Adeptus Astartes. Withdrawing his forces from the infected sections, he ordered *Phalanx*'s weaponry turned inward. With them, he would cut away the disease as would a

chirurgeon. Garadon felt each strike of the fusion beamers as if upon his own flesh, but the necessity of the hour allowed for no compromise.

Fully one-tenth of *Phalanx*'s mass was lost to that scouring, either obliterated by the strike of its own weaponry, or cut free by the same to suffer a fiery demise in Terra's atmosphere. But the sacrifice had been worth it. As Holy Terra consumed *Phalanx*'s ravaged flesh, the machine virus' hold was shattered. Seizing the opportunity, Garadon set *Phalanx* onto a blind heading, hurling the fortress adrift into the tides of the Immaterium. Whatever the fortress' fate, it would not be wielded as a weapon by the Ruinous Powers. With the worst of all fates cheated, Garadon rallied what remained of his battle-brothers and set forth to scour the last of Shon'tu's presence from *Phalanx*.

Alas, Garadon had underestimated his foes. Though the bulk of the Iron Warriors had perished during the excision of *Phalanx*'s corruption, the fury and resolve of Be'lakor's Daemons had heightened the moment the fortress plunged into the Immaterium. Thus, though Shon'tu's death beneath the vengeful power fists of Terminator Squad Furan did much to restore lost honour, it did little to alter *Phalanx*'s fate. His forces weary and diminished, Garadon elected to make his stand in the Chamber of Storms, beneath the granite gaze of Chapter Masters long-dead – witnesses to their inheritors' valour. As the golden cloth of the 3rd Company's banner defiantly unfurled, Be'lakor's mocking laughter echoed around the chamber.

The defenders of *Phalanx* gave no ground that day. The roar of boltguns vied with the screams of dying Daemons and the blasphemous curses of the damned. Hellfire blackened the walls, and shrivelled the souls of the fallen. Be'lakor spent his forces carelessly, hurling them into oblivion with the surety of a general on the brink of victory. Malice and disappointment doubtless played their part also, for with *Phalanx*'s departure from Terra, Be'lakor's quest to overmatch Abaddon's glories had met with rank failure. Once again, the first-damned had slipped into the shadow of a mortal champion. Thus Be'lakor spent the coin of his thralls' lives carelessly, confident that the tides of the Warp would replenish his ranks where those of *Phalanx*'s defenders would only diminish.

But not all forces within the unpredictable Immaterium bend their knee to the dark designs of Chaos. As Be'lakor at last deigned to join the battle, one such faction drew nigh. Hellfire found itself contested by the flames of sacrifice as the spectral battle-brothers of the Legion of the Damned entered the fray. Daemons withered in the spirit-fires, and no matter how Be'lakor railed and pleaded with his dark masters, his ranks were not renewed.



Caught between the Sons of Dorn and the sepulchral warriors of the Legion, the Daemons' grip upon *Phalanx* slackened. The Chamber of Storms, no longer the site of a last stand, now became the stage upon which a great victory played out. By the time Be'lakor, his undying flesh rent and pummelled by the grasp of Garadon's power fist, cast himself into the nothingness beyond *Phalanx*'s Gellar field, the outcome was no longer in doubt. *Phalanx* had been saved.

As *Phalanx*'s crew wrestled to bring the mighty fortress under control, Garadon took stock of his losses. The price of victory had been steep. A tenth of *Phalanx*'s structure had been lost to save the remainder. The ravaged whole was marred by altogether too many wrecked weapons emplacements, launch bays and shield projectors, and manned by a crew little above half strength. Of Garadon's 3rd Company, the Sentinels of Terra, only forty-eight battle-brothers would fight again. Of Sergeant Furan's demi-company of the 1st, a mere fifteen survived. As seemed ever the case, a great victory for the Sons of Dorn had come at an equally great cost.

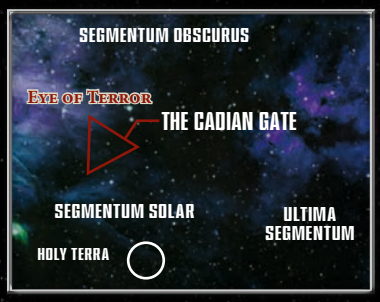
Oddly, the Legion of the Damned had not vanished at battle's close, as was usually their wont. Instead, they stood silent vigil in the Chamber of Storms, unmoving and unspeaking. Save for Garadon himself, all avoided that hallowed place, discomforted by the grim spectres whose presence seemed to chill the air even as fire crackled across their armour. But not even Garadon could bring himself to question the cadaverous sergeant who stood at the Legion's head. That they were waiting for something seemed obvious, but what?

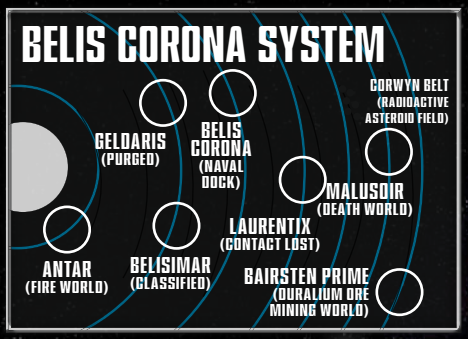
Commodore Trevaux, *Phalanx*'s senior surviving officer, recommended that the battle-fortress set return course for Terra, or else make full speed for the great shipyards of Mars to commence much-needed repairs. Garadon was minded to agree, but couldn't shake the feeling that fate had other plans for venerable *Phalanx*.

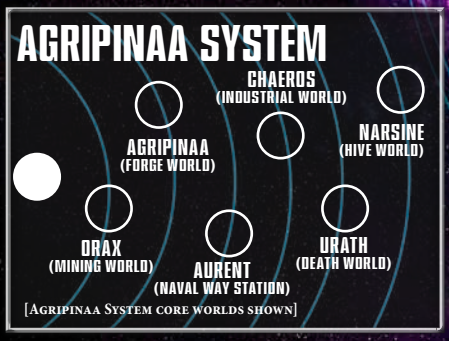
No sooner had *Phalanx*'s heading altered towards Terra once more than Librarians intercepted a garbled and desperately brief distress hymnal. Cadia called for aid. Trevaux and Furan argued that neither *Phalanx* nor its crew were in any condition to respond, but Garadon overruled all objections. A sword sheathed, he argued, served no one. *Phalanx*'s first duty was not to itself, but to the Imperium, and all present knew Cadia's importance. The decision made, *Phalanx*'s aged plasma drives fired anew, ploughing a new furrow through the Immaterium. Only when the tremors of stressed metal faded away did Garadon's eye fall across a shadowed corner of the fortress' command sanctum. Fire flickered in the darkness, and the Legion's sergeant offered what might have been a brief nod, or might equally have belonged entirely to Garadon's imagination.

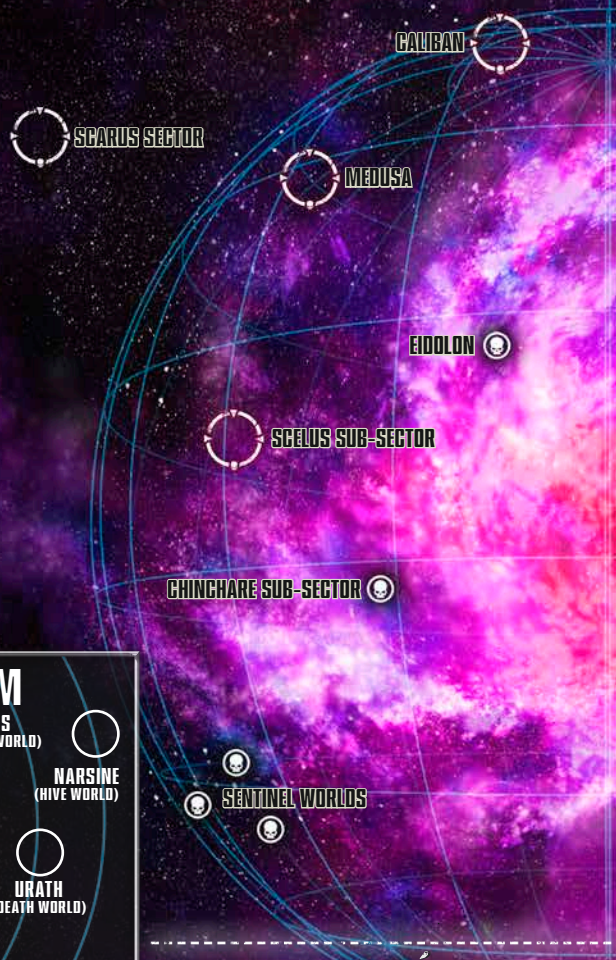












THE MIGHT OF THE DESPOILER

In the interplanetary void of the Cadian System, Abaddon's true assault gathered pace. Like a spear cast from the depths of the Eye of Terror, the Black Fleet flew true for Cadia, the chief bastion of resistance remaining within the Gate.

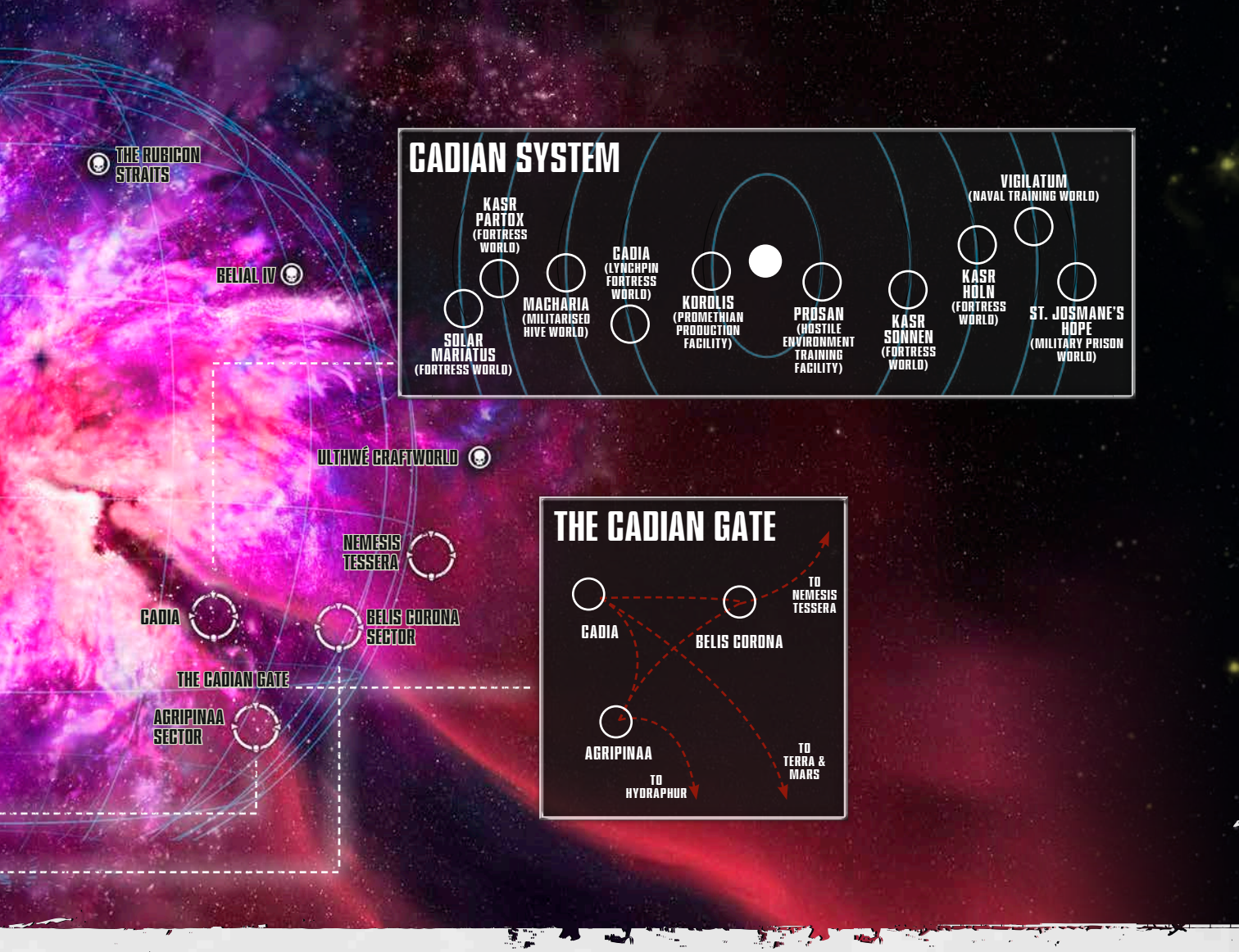
The Black Fleet's outriders were but fodder to shield the grim-prowed warships that came behind. Interplanetary haulers and cargo-hulks, they were barely armed, but their crews possessed all the fiery zeal of recent converts to the way of unbelief. Beyond this swarm came score upon score of blasphemous war vessels: the ebon cruisers of the Despoiler's own court; plagueships, their lumpen hulls belching vile fluids into the void with every course correction; the cabal-ships of the Thousand Sons; and the blood-red leviathans of the World Eaters. And amongst them, vessels of malefic legend, the virulent *Terminus Est*, the *Fortress of Agony* and the ominous bulk of the *Will of Eternity* – last known survivor of the Blackstone Fortresses.

Few under Abaddon's command knew his true purpose in grinding Cadia beneath his heel. Most gave it little thought. For the dark prophets of the Word Bearers and their teeming disciples, this was destiny, foretold by the Chaos Gods long ago. For the Night Lords and their ilk, this was the hour in which terror would reign. For the Alpha Legion, this was but another stage in a many-faceted and eternal design, no more or less vital than a dozen other strands. Other warlords came to spread the blessings of their gods, to forge their own legends or to slake ten thousand years of hatred in the blood of the Imperium's defenders. Others still had no lucid motivation. The madness of war was upon them, and they would fight until its fury was spent.

All who sought to stall that onslaught's passage paid with their lives and their souls. The remnants of Battlefleets Corona and Scarus, themselves bloodied during the first wave of the Thirteenth Crusade, met the outliers of the Despoiler's fleet in the outer orbit of Vigilatum. Their crews fought to the last, mantras of faith upon their lips even as the atomic fire of breached plasma reactors consumed them.

Still Abaddon's Fleet swept on.

As the first Chaos cruisers entered the Iron Graveyard – the drifting remains of a Cadian Sector fleet lost during the very first Black Crusade – their rimward flank evaporated beneath



sustained nova cannon fire. Admiral Dostov had concealed the surviving Victory-class battleships of his battlegroup amidst the lifeless wrecks, and they now sought retribution for their comrades lost at Vigilatum. Had valour alone been enough to light the forges of triumph, Dostov would have smithed a mighty blade in that hour. But Abaddon could have suffered tenfold the losses Dostov inflicted before it even sparked his notice. Fresh bones littered the Iron Graveyard, and still Abaddon's fleet swept on.



THE WILL OF ETERNITY

The colossal Blackstone Fortresses represented a pinnacle of technology never since equalled by Mankind. Six such artefacts were discovered scattered across the Gothic Sector, and it was there that the Imperium pressed them into service. Though the Adeptus Mechanicus only unlocked a fraction of the Blackstones' potential, that fraction was more than sufficient to see them employed as naval fortifications of frightening power.

During Abaddon's Twelfth Black Crusade, four of the six Blackstones were destroyed, but not before the Imperium suffered first-hand the effects of the fortresses' innate Warp-fuelled weaponry. A single Blackstone had the power to obliterate a planet; three working in concert possessed the raw might to destroy a star. Thus perished the Taranis System, its defenders slaughtered just as surely as if by a blow from the Dark Gods themselves.

The two remaining Blackstones were seized by the Despoiler and twisted to fulfil his own objectives. Indeed, surviving reports indicate that the Blackstone that appeared in the Cadian System during the initial phase of the Thirteenth Black Crusade was inhabited and controlled by a daemonic presence of a magnitude far greater than anything yet encountered. Unreliable accounts state that Blackstone Fortress was destroyed, perhaps rendering the *Will of Eternity* the last such vessel in existence.

On Cadia, the revelation that Abaddon yet had a Blackstone Fortress at his command threw Creed and his fellow commanders into a flurry of activity. The Blackstone alone possessed sufficient firepower to cleave Cadia's crippled orbital defences, and then scour all traces of life from the world itself.

One hope remained. From the very moment Abaddon had revealed the Blackstones' true potential back in the days of the Gothic War, the Cult Mechanicus had laboured to counter the Warp-beam's fury. Conventional defences alone were of little use – neither shield nor armour could abate the raw, unmaking energies of the Immaterium itself. Necessity being the whip-crack behind invention, a partial solution was found. By amalgamating the sciences of the void shield and Gellar field, it was possible to emit an energy canopy to destabilise and dissipate the Warp-beam. Cadia's null-array had been completed shortly before the first onset of the Thirteenth Black Crusade. Unfortunately, none of the projection emplacements had survived the siege intact.

Thus far, Creed had focussed his reconstruction efforts on restoring the defences necessary to fight a conventional war. With word of the *Will of Eternity*'s approach, this now changed. Every adept of the Machine God on Cadia was tasked with breathing new life into the null-array. Bastions and emplacements painstakingly restored to function were stripped anew. Tech-Priests and Enginseers laboured without rest, passing far beyond natural tolerances as they strove to achieve the impossible.

By the time Abaddon's fleet was within a day of orbit, it was clear that those efforts would not be enough. Cadia was rich in flesh and bone, in faith, and even in determination. But time? Time had run out. Magos Klarn dourly reported that even at best projections, Kasr Kraf's null-array could not be coaxed even to partial effectiveness. More time was needed, and there was none.

It was then that Sven Bloodhowl of the Space Wolves proposed a solution – or at least the hope of one. His Battle Barge, the *Firemane's Fang*, was the sole motive vessel left in orbit around Cadia. His Firehowlers would take the ship into the heart of Abaddon's fleet, board the *Will of Eternity*, and do what they could to slow its progress.

Such was the counsel of desperation, but in dark times desperation must be embraced, and transmuted into strength. Thus Bloodhowl's Great Company did not undertake this mission alone. All told, near two hundred battle-brothers of the Adeptus Astartes embarked the *Firemane's Fang*. Only fifty-eight hailed from Sven's own brotherhood. Others came from companies that had been torn asunder during the invasion, lone battle-brothers and shattered squads determined to strike one last blow against the Despoiler's forces and claim revenge for their fallen brothers. So too went the survivors of the Cadian 13th, accompanied by a full maniple of Martian Skitarii.



The garrison of Kasr Kraf cheered as the bright star of the *Firemane's Fang* broke orbit, but contact was lost almost at once, and the cheers faded soon after. Creed's mantra of 'Cadia stands' echoed along the redoubts and bastions of Cadia. Few embraced it at first, though all dissenters were careful to avoid voicing their doubts. Cadia had already severed Abaddon's left hand; perhaps the right could be similarly crushed, but even valour needed firm ground on which to stand, and the *Will of Eternity* had the power to strip that away.



Creed knew the mood of his soldiers, for their doubts were his also. Inactivity gnawed at him, so he combated it with action. As the projected hour grew steadily closer, Creed remained on the move, touring the defences of Cadia Secundus, greeting his officers with firm handshakes and clear eyes, addressing the assembled ranks of veterans and initiates alike with confidence that could have moved mountains, had he only set it to that purpose. That confidence billowed in all who heard his words, holding back the fears each man and woman felt. Cadia stands. The words took on new meaning in Creed's wake. Cadia would stand for the Emperor, but it would also stand for Creed.

None could have guessed that Creed's fears were every ounce as heavy as their own. Perhaps more so, for with each passing hour, he grew ever more convinced that the light of the Emperor no longer touched upon the Cadian Gate, that the father of Mankind had abandoned them all to the darkness. Creed chided himself for his doubts, reminded himself that such thoughts were those of the apostate, the heretic. Yet still the doubts remained, hidden from all. Or almost so. Though the two never spoke of it, Jarran Kell knew the darkness gathering in Creed's mind, but he kept that secret, as he had kept many others over the years.

The vanguard of Abaddon's fleet arrived at dawn, greeted by a salvo of fire and defiance. The crippled warships in orbit levelled their last fury against the Black Fleet, joined in wrath by the planetary batteries Creed had worked so hard to restore. Plasma drives flamed and went dark, delivering traitor vessels into the merciless embrace of Cadia's gravity well. The sky blazed with pinpricks of fire, each marking the creation of another martyr or a heretic's long overdue demise.

But this was merely the forerunner, the prologue. As the last of Cadia's hobbled fleet blazed into darkness, a new moon appeared in the sky, an eight-pointed star of abyssal stone, broken only by the angry red glare of a single, cyclopean eye.

All of Cadia held its breath. The *Will of Eternity* had come at the appointed hour. Bloodhowl had failed. His sacrifice, and that of his battle-brothers, had been for nothing.

The eye blazed. A beam of searing light leapt planetward, and dispersed amongst the clouds.

Cheers erupted across Kasr Kraf, none more heartfelt than those of its Lord Castellan. Only Magos Klarn remained silent. He'd personally inspected the Kasr Kraf's projection grid less than an hour before, only to find his adepts slain, and alien technology interwoven with the array's circuits – technology that goaded the troubled machine spirits to trebled efficiency, making that one array capable of shielding all of Cadia. The mystery rankled at Klarn, who even without the deaths of his acolytes would have distrusted any binharic miracle that did not arise from his own hand. But as the cheers faded and the skies blackened with traitor drop-ships, he tore his attention back to the breaking storm. The mystery would wait.

The Siege of Cadia Secundus had begun.

<Report X049/4000>

Sent: St Josmane's Hope Penal Hive

Received: Hextus Gamma listening post

Sender: Governor-Adept Richelieu

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My Lords,

It is with utmost regret that I must declare St Josmane's Hope quarantined until further notice.

Three rotations ago, widespread uprisings began across the primary facility, spearheaded by the Correction Rehabilitation Movement (CRM). As previous reports will show, I have harboured concerns about this organisation for some time — concerns that went unrecognised by Cadian High Command.

At first, we believed this merely a riot — initial unrest began with the condemned in Omega Block. However, with the subsequent lapse of all communication with Cadia, and the arrival of a traitor fleet in near orbit, I have no choice but to recognise a darker hand at work. I now believe the CRM, for all their talk of compassion and servitude, were nothing but a front, laying the foundations for invasion.

At time of transmission, some 87% of my Adeptus Arbites have been slain, and the Cadian Shock Troopers assigned as auxiliary guard have either fled or joined with the insurrectionists. Let the record show that Governor-Lieutenant Vashon did his duty to the last, holding the Sanctum Judicium long enough to allow my retreat to the Citadel Ordinalis. We will hold as long as we can, but I fear the fires of Exterminatus may be the only lasting cure for that which plagues St Josmane's Hope.

The Emperor Protects.

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THE SIEGE OF CADIA SECUNDUS

At an unseen signal, bright sparks marred the brooding silhouettes of the Black Fleet. With a thunderous roar, the first bombardment wave hammered past the descending drop-ships – heralds of death for the slaughter to come.

The bedrock of Cadia Secundus, already battered from the first invasion, churned anew beneath a storm of macro-cannons, melta torpedoes and hellfire. Void shields buckled under the implacable storm, skyshields crackled. Some held, others collapsed in bursts of brilliant light, secondary explosions coming close behind as the barrage swept the stones behind clean of life.

Outbound fire blazed from the bastions of Kasr Kraf, the fortress' defence lasers and skyfire batteries scouring the heavens for incoming drop-ships. Most fired blind, but accuracy mattered little – the Despoiler's forces swarmed like flies come to a feast.

West of Kasr Kraf, the macro batteries of Kasr Stark roared one last time, the bellow of the guns consumed by a deafening thunder-crack as a melta torpedo pierced the subterranean magazine. To the north, the wreck of the *Sword of Defiance* roared a broadside into the skies, the spread of cannon-fire destroying a skull-prowed drop-ship and sending its Heldrake escorts pinwheeling away. Valkyrie gunships of Clavin Strekka's Howling 119th screamed into pre-arranged clear-fire corridors between salvoes, then broke away across the furious skies, braving fire and counter-fire as they hunted their prey. Across the redoubts of Cadia Secundus, anxious hearts prayed that the foe's nerve would break, that the siege would be won in the skies and not upon the walls of Kasr Kraf and its outliers.

Such was a vain hope. The drop-ships were too many, and the defences too few. The southernmost spur of Kasr Kraf's Martyr's Rampart shattered as its void shields failed. Fresh salvoes crashed home to exploit the weakness, unseating guns the size of hab-blocks and burying hundreds beneath charred rubble. Creed saw the destruction, and sent orders for the survivors to withdraw. Kasr Kraf yet had three unbreached and thinly-defended curtain walls about its central keep. There was no sense in losing lives in a wasteland when fortifications cried out for defenders.

At once, the Cadian defenders abandoned the Martyr's Rampart, risking the bombardment's fury to reach the comparative shelter of Kasr Kraf. Fortune abandoned hundreds in that hour. Soon the churned field between the southern rampart and first curtain wall was a field of smouldering wrecks and scorched corpses. But for every stalwart soul who perished, another four reached the outer curtain. Officers bellowed instructions, and the survivors rallied to fresh defences. Only the Black Templars made no move to retreat. Marshal Amalrich spat on Creed's orders. He had chosen his ground, and would defend it to the last.



As the drop-ships closed for final approach, their Heldrake escorts peeled away, strafing the ramparts of Kasr Kraf and the makeshift redoubts of the Shrine of Saint Morrican. A new sound filled the air – a shrill wail like sinners burning in the fires of damnation, but multiplied ten thousand times over. Seconds later, the first Dreadclaw slammed onto the walls of Kasr Kraf. Ramps crashed down, disgorging warriors of the Word Bearers and the Alpha Legion into the heart of Creed's defences. At first, the massed volleys of the Astra Militarum drove the invaders back. But then blasphemous icons rose high into air choked with smoke and dying screams. The fabric of reality cracked, and howling Daemons joined the fray.

Everywhere the tale was the same, the roar of traitors' boltguns joined by the bellowed battle-cries of blood-slicked Daemonkin. Gun emplacements fell from within even as they traded fire with the foe, their defenders torn apart by hellblade and claw. Some platoons, stricken with terror, threw down their arms and fled. Most fought and died to the last, urged on by the fiery sermons of their Ministorum Priests, their resolve stiffened by the certainty that there was no escape in this hour. In that bloody charnel, a soldier's only freedom was to choose how he died; most clutched their weapons tight, and met their doom with defiance.

Nowhere in that initial onslaught was the fighting harder than the Shrine of Saint Morrican. The tang of the Battle Sisters' faith was both irresistible and anathema to the rampant Daemons, and the lure of it goaded them time and again onto that ground. But alone perhaps of those who fought that day, the Order of Our Martyred Lady never wavered, never took a backward step. Under the twin gazes of Canonesses Genevieve and Eleanor, they met the yowling horde with boltgun and holy flame, driving all taint from the walls of the shrine. For those who watched the embattled walls of Kasr Kraf, it seemed that the smoke-spume of war found no purchase on the Shrine of Saint Morrican, driven back by the golden light dancing about its spires.

To the east, the first landing craft touched down in the cratered valleys. Daemon-possessed war engines rumbled across the broken ground, driving hard for Kasr Kraf's eastern curtain walls. Battle cannons roared from concealed emplacements as the tanks of the Cadian 252nd opened fire. The Black Legion spearhead disintegrated in a tangled mass of metal and corrupted flesh, but theirs was a tide without end. Chaos Baneblades rumbled on, their treads crushing the wreckage of their forerunners, their shells hammering at the curtain wall. With a mighty rumble, the eastern outer wall partially collapsed, the rubble crushing three squadrons of Leman Russ tanks. Their growling engines drowning out the roars of victory, a swarm of skull-bedecked Rhinos broke cover from behind the mighty Baneblades and drove hard for the newly-formed breach.

Far to the north, the patchwork defences of Kasr Jark shuddered beneath the shell-fire of an Iron Warriors siege battery upon the Kolarak Plains. Unwilling to wallow behind the walls, Orven Highfell ordered his brothers to their transports. Warsmith Krom Gat had come prepared for a counter-assault, having fortified his position with drop-bastions and lines of cursed aegis designed to slow any attacker long enough to bring the big guns to bear. But caution had never been Highfell's way, and no spawn of the Daemon-forges would stay the fury of the Fenris-born. Sweeping aside all in their path, the Ironwolves descended into Krom Gat's citadel, using its own trenches and bastions as cover against the raging artillery.

Hours passed. Days. Still the battle raged. Some defenders seized what snatches of sleep they could in the fighting's sparse lulls and the hush that fell between the bombardments. Most remained awake, pushing health and sanity to their limits with whatever chems they could scrounge, rather than suffer the nightmares blowing like the wind over Cadia Secundus.

The walls of Kasr Kraf were swept clear, only to come under fresh assault from the horrors of the Warp. Kasr Jark, so lately saved from Krom Gat's bombardment, perished at the infernal sorceries of Elek Stane's Cyclopia Cabal. Three times did the blood-mad Berzerkers of the World Eaters hurl themselves at the *Sword of Defiance*'s wreck. Three times did Master Korahael rally the battle-brothers of the Dark Angel's 4th Company. Three times were the scions of Khorne hurled bloodily back, only for their feral chant to rise again in the darkness beyond the cruiser's crumpled hull.

Despite the intercession of the Knights of House Raven, the breach in the outermost eastern curtain wall was torn wider. Raptors and Night Lords terror-packs were swift to take advantage, screaming into the space between the walls in search of prey. To their honour, the defenders retreated in good order, one regiment laying down covering fire long enough for another to withdraw. But the Raptors were too swift, too hungry for slaughter. They overtook the stragglers, and then the rearguard.

Creed ordered the gates of the second curtain closed, sacrificing thousands to save ten times their number. Eight of the mighty portals slammed shut, severing the line of retreat. Hundreds perished at their bases, desperate souls howling pleas for deliverance at the comrades atop the gothic barbicans, the stoic readying their weapons for one last stand. But two of the gates remained open.



'The gates are sealed, Lord Castellan.'

Creed waved the lieutenant away from the topographic holo-grid – the only source of light in the gloomy bunker. He didn't know the man's name. He didn't expect either of them would live long enough for it to be worth the effort. Six months, that had always been the joke of the 8th. If you survived sixth months under his command, then General Creed would trouble himself to learn your name.

The siege went poorly, and yet as well as could be expected at the same time. In his pride, Abaddon sought to humble Cadia once and for all, even though it would cost him dearly. But were the two of them so different, in that regard? Pride would not allow Abaddon to pass on by, just as it had prevented Creed from yielding Cadia in the face of insuperable odds.

And then there was the matter of the null-array, buried beneath the command bastion. Whoever had stabilised it had brought Cadia these precious days. But who, and why? Magos Klarn either didn't know, or wasn't saying. Kasrkin search parties had scoured the tunnels, but to no result. Creed supposed he should be grateful, but the knowledge that some outside force had free reign of his fortress made his skin crawl. Faith of any kind no longer came easily to the Lord Castellan. Kell understood, of course. But the others?

No matter. Hope was a self-sustaining fire. Maintain the illusion long enough, and it would become the truth. And maybe, just maybe, Cadia would defy the Despoiler just one more time…

Creed turned his back on the holo-grid. 'Lieutenant? Your name, what is it?'

The young man's brow wrinkled in surprise. Surprise, and perhaps a little worry. 'Kormachen, sir. Of the 88th.'

Creed nodded. 'Walk with me, Kormachen. It's past time I saw this battle with my own eyes.'

In the east, the barbican's commander held the gate too long, so desperate was he to preserve each and every soul who clamoured for the safety of his fortifications. As the gates at last rumbled closed, Helbrutes hurled themselves forward, holding the passage open through the strength of their Daemon-forged sinew. Desperate fire rained down from the barbican's crest. The Helbrutes roared and fell, power scourges thrashing as vile life left them, but their sacrifice had bought time for a vast warband of Possessed to slip beyond the gates. Who knows what the cursed warriors would have wrought if not for the joint sacrifice of the Novamarines' 2nd Company and the Cadian 403rd, who held that daemonic onslaught in the shadow of the Jorus Redoubt long enough for the massed battle tanks of the Cadian 185th to pound the traitors to bloody ruin. Scarce a hundred Conscripts of the 403rd survived, and the last Novamarine succumbed to his wounds before the echoes of battle cannon fire faded away.

In the west, the gate mechanisms failed, eaten away by a decay that sprang from no earthly cause. The barbican's commander ordered the 113th Death's Heads Baneblade company to plug the gap with their armoured bulk, but he was an age too late. A swarm of Cultists, inured to pain by their heresy, hurled themselves into the flesh-shredding storm. And they kept coming, by the hundreds – by the thousands. Heavy bolters overheated, autocannons ran dry, the weapons of war unable to keep pace with a horde uncaring of blood and pain. Only when the last cultist perished did the Black Legion advance amidst the carnage, a tide of hatred far beyond the weary defenders' ability to stem. The west gate fell, and with it the second curtain wall was lost.

The seventh day opened with the roar of a new bombardment. Too long had the *Sword of Defiance* stood vigil over Kasr Kraf's northern flank, and now the invaders took steps to silence its guns once and for all. Shell after shell rained down, pulverising the downed cruiser and unseating its few remaining guns. Even then, Korahael would have held firm, for no Scion of Caliban yields his ground willingly. But this was no ordinary bombardment – it hailed from the diseased bulk of the *Terminus Est*, flagship of Typhus. Each shell that burst amidst the *Sword*'s hallowed halls brought with it unspeakable contagion – diseases potent enough to take root even in the augmented flesh of the Adeptus Astartes. With his brothers liquefying inside their armour, Korahael had no choice but to abandon the *Sword of Defiance*. Alas, the plains still teemed with World Eaters, hungry to spill the Lion's blood.



Faith yet burned bright at the Shrine of Saint Morrican, but mortal might grew ever shorter in supply. That outpost alone had seen unremitting assault since the opening days of the siege, and all inside were bone-weary. The basilica had cowed assaults it had never been intended to face, but even for blessed redoubts there comes a breaking point. For the Shrine of Saint Morrican, that breaking point took the form of three Lords of Skulls, unleashed from the heart of Abaddon's own Daemon-forges to overcome the shining beacon of faith. Warp-crafted cannons belched and roared, drowning the stones of the sainted basilica in boiling blood. Scores of Battle Sisters boiled alive in their armour, dozens more were swept away. Still the Daemon Engines ground on, bones and rubble alike crunched to dust beneath their leviathan tracks.

Her sword raised high, Canoness Genevieve led the counter-assault, the fury of her Seraphim cleaving aside Daemons so that the massed fire of Retributors could fell the rumbling behemoths. Melta-beams converged, cutting out the lead war

engine's black heart. With a yawning thunderclap, the Lord of Skulls' reactor went critical, its fiery demise consuming one of its dark brothers, and the entire north-eastern corner of the shrine. The basilica's walls could take no more. Inch by inch, the stones spilt apart, arches that had withstood millennia falling away into ruin. As the wounded Genevieve was borne away to the Hospitallers, Canoness Eleanor made preparations to retreat.

On the Kolarak Plains, the Space Wolves at last won their mighty victory against Krom Gat. After days of brutal trench warfare, the Warsmith was torn apart, and his body cast into the fires of his once-proud citadel. The price had been high. Fully half of the Ironwolves lay dead, and the Land Raider *Ironfist* would never see another battlefield. Yet even as the Sons of Fenris roared their victory, their scouts sighted new foes advancing from the Gehennis Ridge: the Titans of the Legio Vulcanum. Highfell burned to test himself against the newfound enemy, but the wisdom of his trusted Wolf Guard, Olaf Ironhide, prevailed. Recovering their fallen, the Ironwolves took once more to their transports and fell back towards Kasr Kraf.

One by one, Kasr Kraf's outposts had fallen, but far to the south defiance yet burned. Marshal Amalrich's Black Templars had sworn to defend the Martyr's Rampart, and defend it they did, with every iota of the zeal and fury for which their Chapter was known. Though the walls were little more than rubble, they fought on – an island of stalwart steel amidst the shifting tides of Chaos. Black Legion, Word Bearers and more sought to overwhelm Amalrich's outnumbered band with chainsword and hellfire. Battle-brothers perished in ones and twos, and their Crusade banner many times toppled from the crest. But the living found fresh strength in the sacrifice of the dead, and each time the banner fell it was raised higher than before.

They came again as night fell, a pack of howling beasts in blood-red ceramite across the eastern rise. The survivors of the 4th no longer needed Master Korahael's instruction. Forty battle-brothers halted, forming a double ring about the tattered company standard. Bolters roared defiance. The searing hiss of plasma crackled through still air.

'Blood for the Blood God!'

The first wave never reached the 4th, their broken bodies hurled back into the darkness by the disciplined Sons of the Lion. The fate of all traitors. The second wave, lost to madness, surged over the bodies of the slain.

'For the Lion, and for the Emperor!'

Korahael levelled his plasma pistol. The shot took a snarling Berzerker in the chest. The brute took two more steps, then dropped, limbs twitching. The first flamers fired, gouting bright promethium into the night. Fresh notes of pain sounded amongst the fury.

An incensed Berzerker, his armour ablaze, launched himself at Korahael. The chainaxe hacked down. Sparks flew from the power sword's amethyst blade as Korahael swept aside its strike. The Berzerker roared a wordless challenge, one mad eye blazing hatefully from a ruined ceramite helm.

Letting go his pistol, Korahael set a second hand to his sword's hilt, and slammed his shoulder into the Berzerker's chest. The traitor stumbled back, then fell into sudden silence as Korahael's sword swept his head from his shoulders.

Korahael glanced around for another foe, but the attack had ended as swiftly as it had begun, its prosecutors now dead upon the wind-blown plains. A twitch of white robes drew Korahael's eye. Apothecary Caraphon, moving with customary solemnity, recovering the gene-seed from the slain.

Korahael gazed down at the headless Berzerker, just one corpse amongst dozens. Even after two hundred years of service, he could not fathom why such warriors abandoned discipline as readily as they'd cast aside their loyalty. Discipline won battles. Discipline, and duty. But then, indiscipline was a plague all of its own. There were plenty amongst the Adeptus Astartes who bore its curse, who took trophies to assuage their pride, who rejoiced in tallying those they had slain.

Korahael retrieved his pistol and triggered his comms. 'Report condition.'

His sergeants sent in their casualty reports, Korahael's mood darkening with each one. Another three battle-brothers slain. It was little consolation that the 4th had reaped a far greater tally than it had suffered. They were being bled to death by traitors without number. Fifty battle-brothers had set out from the wreck of the Sword. *Now fewer than forty remained, and they had covered barely a third of the distance to the walls of Kasr Kraf. But what choice was there? The 4th would march on to its last if need be.*

'Brother Caraphon, is your duty done?' asked Korahael.

'They are with me.'

Korahael approved of Caraphon's choice of words. No brother was truly lost if their precious gene-seed was recovered. 'Then we keep–'

There was a wail of tortured metal and the thunder of cannon-fire. Autocannon shells stitched a furrow in the dirt towards Korahael, further mangling the bodies of the slain. He threw himself aside, shoulder crunching against rock as he rolled clear, fragments of red-hot stone pattering off his armour.

Above, the Heldrake pulled out of its near-vertical dive and climbed away in preparation for another run.

'Bring it down!' Korahael bellowed. 'Bring it down!'

His brothers knew their duty. Plumes of white smoke gouted from missile tubes as Squad Klarion's Devastators engaged the new threat. One missile lost lock almost immediately and spiralled away into the night. The second detonated against the Daemon Engine's port-side wing in a spray of fire and ichor. As the Heldrake reached apogee, the wing tore away. Its climb became a cacophonous dive, ending in a thunderous crump amidst the distant hills.

But Korahael found no cause for celebration. Brother Caraphon lay motionless in the dirt, his armour rent and his reductor a bloody, mangled mess. The slain of the 4th were now truly lost, and the Chapter forever diminished.

'Traitor contacts to the north!'

Korahael dragged his gaze northwards at Sergeant Aramael's shout. The canyon mouth to the north was no longer empty, but choked with the dust trails of black-liveried bikers. And behind them, the dark silhouettes of Predator battle tanks. So it had come to this. 'Reform the line! The Lion stands with us!'

A storm of bolter fire heralded the bikers' approach. Korahael's armour shuddered; his left pauldron cracked, but the ceramite held. His plasma pistol shrieked in reply, sending bolt after bolt into the mass of bellowing engines.

Bikers crashed from their saddles, their corpses hurled into bone-crunching cartwheels across the plains. Plasma-fire reduced the lead Predator to fused scrap. Sergeant Baphon threw his hands to his neck, fingers clawing at the spiked chain around his throat. Then an engine roared, and he was dragged into the night, bellowing defiance. Brother Traesal fell, his severed hand still clutching the company standard.

Korahael seized the fallen colours and hoisted them high. A Predator's las-fire blazed past him, searing Brother Malacas in half. The ceramite redoubt shrank inwards, the growl of engines growing ever louder. Korahael gripped the sacred standard tight. The enemy would take it only with his death.

The growl of engines became a roar. The traitor Predator exploded in a blinding flare of light. A thunderclap tore through the mass of bikers, then another, and another. To a chorus of jubilant howls, a spearhead of slate-grey battle tanks crested the eastern rise. Wolf-tail talismans streaming from trophy poles, they surged into the fray.

Korahael knew the markings. The Great Company of Orven Highfell. Undisciplined, like all Sons of Fenris. Seekers of Glory. Everything Korahael despised in a warrior. But just this once, he was glad to have them at his side.

By the dawning of the eighth day, the walls of Kasr Kraf came under direct bombardment from the wastelands, and its defenders' valour ebbed. Too many had witnessed the fate of the far-flung outposts, or else had heard rumours of the slaughter upon the curtain walls. None truly knew the scope of the onslaught, and that ignorance fanned fears to a bright and hungry flame. Neither priest nor Commissar could still the whispers, no matter how loudly they chanted the canticles of faith, or how brutally they suppressed dissent. Too swiftly, the belief spread. Cadia had endured too much. It could endure no more.

But for Creed, the fortress might have fallen. The Lord Castellan knew well that the only way to combat unseen horror was not by speech, or by threat, but by example. Thus Creed forsook his command bunker and joined his soldiers upon the walls. He ate with them, stole what little sleep he could alongside them. As assault after assault crashed into the golden Kriegan Gates, Creed stood his turn behind the aegis lines, firing volleys alongside the common soldiers with a borrowed lasgun. Those moments of theatrical defiance were the only times he looked upon the foe. At all others, he kept his back towards the carnage, a deliberate gesture of disdain. He took to pacing atop the grand bastion, even though its void shields had never recovered from the initial bombardment. He walked the ramparts where skyshields had imploded, risking the raking fire of Heldrakes with those he commanded. And where Creed went, Kell went also, the tattered colours of the Cadian 8th rousing those hearts Creed's example could not.

Under Creed's gaze, the Kriegan Gates endured. But in the east, the fate of Kasr Kraf teetered on the brink.

There, at least, there was no shortage of resolve. The surviving Valkyries of the Howling 119th had ferried what remained of the north and eastern garrisons behind Kasr Kraf's walls. Battle-sisters now took their place on those ramparts, the wounded Genevieve amongst them, and more of the black-liveried assault carriers braved the angry skies to carry the remnants of the Ironwolves and Korahael's 4th inside the stronghold. Yet not all the Ironwolves had returned, or so it was said. Rumours abounded of feral warriors prowling the killing ground beyond the wall, and wild howls touched the ramparts whenever the wind was in the east. If Orven Highfell knew anything of this, he offered no explanation.

The Legio Vulcanum ground on, implacable, unstoppable. The traitor Princeps Malas Tiron had honed the business of war for ten thousand years, and knew exhaustively the god-engines under his command. Indeed, his consciousness flowed through them all – a gift from the Dark Gods for his unswerving devotion. Possessed Warhounds were his eyes and ears, the Warlord Titan *Vessel of Damnation* his strong right arm, the Reaver maniple the bunched fingers of his left fist. When confronted by a foe, war machines across the formation combined their fire with uncanny accuracy. As void shields faded under the defenders' fire, Tiron reconfigured his formation, letting Titans as yet undamaged bear the brunt. Thus the vanguard of the Legio Vulcanum crept ever closer to the walls of Kasr Kraf, the god-machines all but unscarred, despite the ferocity of their foes.

The defenders of the eastern walls were saved, just as they had been before, by the intervention of the Howling 119th. With munitions running low, and barely a dozen flight-worthy assault carriers, the squadron took wing one last time, diving hard for the advancing Titans.

The skies about the Legio Vulcanum swarmed with Heldrakes, but the pilots of the 119th had learned a great deal about the Daemon Engines in the preceding days. Not enough to stand any chance of clearing them from the skies altogether, for their numbers were legion. Nor even for surviving more than a few minutes before being shredded by Warp-forged talons. But then, survival was not in the 119th's plan. Clavin Strekka, commander of the 119th, had noted how the lesser Titans seemed almost in thrall to the will of the lead monstrosity, *Vessel of Damnation*. Destroy the Warlord, or so Strekka reasoned, and the others might fall also.

Report X063/4V00

Sent: Dead Zone, Belial IV<<<

Received: Fortress Alphus, Corrix System

Sender: Inquisitor Ran Serastus

My Fellow Seekers,

Your fears were correct — Magos Tragan's archaelogica expedition has been destroyed. I am, however, unable to report the precise nature of their demise. The area surrounding the <record deleted> artefact is currently the site of a running battle between traitors of the Word Bearers and xenos tentatively identified as the Commorrite Kabal of the Dying Sun.

Scouts report signs of new construction around the dig site — a shrine of some kind, raised from the black stone of this fallen world. Lacking the knowledge of my trusted associate Hephaestus Grudd, I cannot confirm its purpose — but its value to the Word Bearers must be sufficient to offset the crippling losses inflicted by the xenos raids. Given similar occurrences at <record deleted>, <record deleted> and <record deleted>, and the troubled history of this planet, I suggest it is time for the Astra Militarum to sweep this world clear in the Emperor's name. I, for one, am still haunted by the consequences of <record deleted>. If it takes a billion lives to purge Belial IV once more, we may consider it a bargain.

Once night falls, it is my intention to investigate the <record deleted> site in person. The traitors are alerted to our presence, and it is my hope they will not think to seek us within their own perimeter. In any case, retreat is impossible — our treacherous captain departed orbit at the first sniff of a Chaos warship. If I am to perish here, I can at least add to our knowledge before the end.

Vigilance, my brothers and sisters. The long watch continues.

Three Valkyries were ripped asunder by Heldrakes before they even entered weapons range. Two more strayed into the path of a volcano cannon, blasted to cinders before their crews even knew their danger. The others sped on, buffeted by surface-to-air fire, armour clattering beneath the roar of Hades autocannons. Another Valkyrie disintegrated, but the first hellstrike missiles were away. *Vessel of Damnation*'s void shields flared and guttered as the missiles struck. The 119th banked away, strafing clear of ground-based autocannon fire, and prepared for another pass.

Only three Valkyries of the 119th remained, but *Vessel of Damnation*'s void shields were down. Alas, for Strekka's last throw of the dice, the strikes of his squadron's multi-lasers were but pinpricks against the god-engine's hull. A third pass, and Strekka was alone, his wingmen torn from the skies. Knowing he'd not live to make a fourth, Strekka commended his soul to the Emperor, set a collision course, and triggered his Valkyrie's afterburners.

The fireball marking the last act of the 119th blossomed skyward, clearly visible from Kasr Kraf's eastern ramparts. *Vessel of Damnation* juddered to a halt, green fire gouting from its ravaged skull. The remaining Titans lurched, suddenly directionless in the midst of battle. One Warhound came to a complete standstill long enough for macro-cannon batteries to track and blow it to scrap. Cheers rang out, but faded as the god-engines of the Legio Vulcanum recommenced their advance. Only *Vessel of Damnation* remained unmoving, its helm lost amid belching smoke.

Then came a black thunderbolt from the skies above. The defenders' cheers died ashen on their lips as the battle's architect at last took a personal hand in its prosecution. This was not the Despoiler himself, but his lieutenant, the Daemon Prince Urkanthos. Commander of the Black Fleet, and Scourgemaster of the Hounds of Abaddon, Urkanthos had been entrusted with securing the destruction of Cadia. But Abaddon's patience was not without limit, and Urkanthos sought to deliver victory before it was entirely expended.

As the black miasma of the traitors' teleport beams crackled into nothing, a great howl arose amongst the mangled bodies beneath the golden Kriegan Gates. Urkanthos spread his wings wide, and the Hounds of



Abaddon hurled themselves at the golden gates. Behind them came a fresh wave of Daemon Engines, Warp-spawned weapons spitting death at the battlements.

Up the bloody ground the Hounds surged, trampling the dead of both sides, heedless of the defenders' fire. Their war-cry was a booming bellow, more like the growl of a beast than the speech of men. *Blood! Blood! Blood!* Macro-cannon shells burst amongst the formation, hurling broken bodies down the hills of corpses. Still the Hounds came on. *Blood! Blood! Blood!* Creed bellowed orders from atop the barbican, and the approach blazed brilliant with las-fire. Still the Hounds came on. *Blood! Blood! Blood!* By prearranged signal, a new bombardment began. The vessels of the Black Fleet pounded the approach to the Kriegan Gates, uncaring of their dark brothers' lives. Tortured skyshields flared and died. Defenders were snatched into the abyss, or cast from their shattered strongholds. Traitors perished too, slain by the capricious fury of their own warships, but still the Hounds came on.

Inch by inch, Urkanthos gained ground, at last reaching the unsullied foot of the Kriegan Gates. The Hounds ignored wounds that would have felled lesser men; they disdained the burning promethium that set their flesh ablaze. They would have nothing less than victory that day. Victory for Abaddon, Warmaster of the Eye of Terror, and blood for the Lord of Battles. Charges were set, and the Kriegan Gates – weakened by the eight day bombardment of starship and artillery fire – finally tore asunder.

With a roar of triumph, Urkanthos swept into Kasr Kraf, the Hounds of Abaddon hard upon his heels.

URKANTHOS

The ascension of Urkanthos to daemonhood came as the Black Fleet approached Cadia. Surging in towards the fortress world, Urkanthos had faced a trio of enemy battleships whose captains had determined that – if they could not defeat the oncoming Chaos horde – they would at least slay the flagship of its fleetmaster. Through guile, ferocity and unmatched skill did Urkanthos captain his craft to victory over all three Imperial warships, blasting two to ruin before obliterating the final craft as it turned to flee. Such a mighty tally of blood and skulls pleased Khorne greatly, and bought Urkanthos the reward of immortality that he had long sought. So did the master of the Hounds of Abaddon become more fearsome than ever before.







THE FALL OF KASR KRAF

When the Kriegan Gates came down, the defence of Cadia fell upon the shoulders of the Kasrkin. Creed had kept three regiments in reserve throughout the fighting, husbanded for a desperate hour such as this. Now he sent them to hold the line. Lasguns flared. The ruined Kriegan barbican vanished beneath the acrid discharge of cannon shells. The leading edge of the Hounds of Abaddon vanished, torn apart by the greatest single volley yet seen on Cadia Secundus.

Yet the Hounds were undismayed by their losses – indeed, the slaughter lent them new fervour. The survivors struck the massed line of bayonets like a red wind, clawing at the wall of armoured flesh without thought for their own lives. Urkanthos led them, each swipe of his claws snatching a squad into Khorne's bloody embrace. With every foe that fell, the Daemon Prince felt the Blood God's blessings blossom. His armour-fused flesh thickened until it was harder than adamantium. As blood slicked across his wounds, they scabbed and closed. Urkanthos looked upon the massed ranks of Kasrkin and saw not a foe to be bested, but a banquet, an offering in the making to the only true God of Bloodshed.

The Kasrkin battled on beneath the ruin of Kasr Kraf's gates, but they did not fight alone. Creed's barked orders echoed from vox-casters set across the fortress walls, sending ever more men into the meatgrinder at the gates. Conscripts of the 201st fought and died alongside the grizzled veterans of the 9th. Regiments from Mordian and Vostroya entered the slaughter, fighting for a world not their own, as was so often the duty of the Astra Militarum.

But numbers alone could not win out against the Hounds' Daemon-spawned might. Worse, Urkanthos had reinforcements of his own. Slavering Daemons emerged from the pooling blood, then sprang forth to further slick the stones. Maddened Cultists, ebon-clad Black Legionnaires, hell-wrought behemoths – they stormed across the ruined gates, seizing the opportunity to slaughter, and to perhaps catch the restless eyes of the Dark Gods.

The Kasrkin of the 2nd perished where they stood. Not a man amongst them gave ground. Others were not so valorous. The discipline of the 33rd shattered when their colonel was torn apart by Raptors. Wavering hearts turned callow. Like a dam giving way before storm waters, the 33rd broke and ran. With them went all hopes of holding the gateway, and their cowardly example sapped the valour from their comrades as surely as a Daemon's roar. The trickle of the 33rd's rout became a flood as panic spread. Regimental colours were abandoned and weapons cast down. What had once been a bastion of defiance had split asunder, and Urkanthos' victory lay within his taloned grasp.

Even as the heart of Kasr Kraf wavered, old perils were renewed. Beyond the eastern wall, Baroness Vardus' Knights fought a losing duel with the surviving Titans of the Legio Vulcanum. Though the god-machines could no longer draw upon Princeps Tiron's direction, their firepower greatly outstripped that at the command of the Nobles of House Raven.

Vardus was no fool – indeed, she'd slain men in duels for even hinting such was true – and commanded a fighting retreat. Thus far, it had served her well, costing her only four brother Nobles in exchange for one traitor Reaver destroyed, and another crippled. Yet a fighting retreat required ground to retreat to, and the Knights of House Raven were rapidly running out of room to manoeuvre. As the weary baroness ordered yet another withdrawal, her lance-mate disintegrated in an eruption of superheated light. Hurried interrogation of her synapse-web confirmed Vardus' greatest fear – *Vessel of Damnation* had rejoined the fray.

Further south, knee-deep in the bodies of his foes, Marshal Amalrich experienced an uncharacteristic moment of doubt. Foes still offered their lives up to the Black Templars' positions, but no longer in the numbers that had graced previous days. Gazing north, Amalrich recognised the storm gathering over Kasr Kraf's Kriegan Gates. At last, the Marshal acknowledged what had been obvious to his peers from the first – that the Black Templars' strength would have been better employed upon the walls of the fortress than at the Martyr's Rampart. Even generations after the fact, the stubbornness of Dorn still haunted his inheritors. But perhaps there was yet time to unmake the error. One of the Cruxis Crusade's Thunderhawks had been destroyed during the opening bombardment, but the other endured, untouched in a subterranean hangar. Swallowing the last of his pride, Amalrich gave orders to abandon the Martyr's Rampart.

At Kasr Kraf, the Hounds of Abaddon slaked their blades and thirsts upon the routing guardsmen. Urkanthos bellowed with delight. He had been given one task, and one task alone: breach the fortress and destroy the machine that held the *Will of Eternity*'s fury in abeyance. But now the Scourgemaster saw no reason to stop at such half-measures. Proud Cadia had broken. Its defenders trampled one another in their eagerness to flee his coming! He, Urkanthos, would do what Abaddon never had. He would shatter the last resolve of the fortress-world. The rewards of triumph would be his, and not the Warmaster's.

A volley seared the air, its fury hot enough for the Daemon Prince to feel through his calloused skin. Where moments before there had been only a fleeing rabble, now the Hounds of Abaddon faced a manned aegis line, formed bayonets, and the unwavering ranks of the Cadian 8th.

Cadia stands! The lone voice, obdurate as the stones of Kasr Kraf, somehow carried across the tumult of battle. Other voices took up the battle-cry, the ranks of the once desperate thickening around their standards. *Cadia stands!* The third chorus was lost beneath the defiant roar of battle cannons and the dying screams of Daemons. Newborn defiance rippled across the muster field as the soldiers

of the Astra Militarum found anew their sundered courage. At the epicentre, Jarran Kell held aloft the colours of the Cadian 8th. At his side, his implacable expression giving no clue to the doubt in his heart, Lord Castellan Ursarkar E. Creed bellowed his mantra once more. *Cadia stands!*

Urkanthos' assault, grown overconfident in slaughter, burst against the breakwater of the Cadian 8th. The Hounds of Abaddon bore the brunt, torn to scraps by roiling cannon-fire. Raptors took to the air, seeking to pluck Creed from his command as they had the erstwhile colonel of the 33rd. Vox-amplifiers wailing, they ripped deep into Creed's platoon. But where the 33rd had broken and fled, the veterans of the 8th closed ranks. Scores perished before a bayonet rammed into the final Raptor's primary heart, but Creed was not amongst them. Kell's sleeve was crimson with blood, little of it his own, and dead at his feet lay the Raptor who'd come closest to laying low his beloved general.

The battle for the muster field stalled, both sides yet with numbers unbound to hurl into the battle, but neither able to gain traction over the foe. But the advantage at last lay again with the defenders, for Creed fought like a man whose hour had at last come. He never once laid hand on pistol nor blade. Instead, he wielded his soldiers as his weapon, striking hard for a weakness when it presented, and drawing back in the face of overwhelming odds. Hundreds, thousands of lives he spent in those desperate hours, though never carelessly. He bought time with the blood of his Shock Troopers – not in the hope that help would arrive, for Creed had long since abandoned such fancies, but because every moment of defiance was now a prize without price, a wound to Abaddon's pride. Cadia stood, it was true, but only because Creed stood with it.

Around the fortress, Creed's allies lent what aid they could. Korahael's dwindled 4th Company fought beside the Ironwolves in the muster field's eastern extent and, though neither party would ever acknowledge as much, each was the salvation of the other on many occasions. The Astartes of other chapters, their battle-brothers lost to the Cadian wars, set aside rivalries, forming a single demi-company of every colour and hue. The Sisters of Our Martyred Lady marshalled before the command bastion, their holy flames the bane of many a Daemon, their righteous presence instilling fresh valour in the Conscripts of the 111th, deployed immediately to their fore.

But the greatest triumph in that hour belonged to Marshal Amalrich's Black Templars. Their Thunderhawk, hull smouldering and crippled engines belching smoke, ploughed into the muster field, disgorging the vengeful warriors of the Cruxis Crusade into the heart of the heretical foe. Each blow struck by a Son of Dorn that day was one of penance as much as fury, and was all the mightier for it.



Urkanthos' dreams of glorious victory withered in the face of that defiance, and his thoughts again turned to his orders. Destroy the null-array, and every drop of the defenders' valour would be for naught, burned away by the unstoppable energies of the Blackstone Fortress. Gathering the remnants of the Hounds of Abaddon to his side, Urkanthos carved a path for the command bastion and the prize within.

Creed marked the Daemon Prince's assault, but could do little to counter it, for it coincided with the arrival of a new threat. An armoured column, the traitor Baneblade *Vicanthrus* at its head, ground its way over the dead and dying about the Kriegan Gates. The thunder-crack of demolisher cannons echoed around the crumbling bastions. Creed's leading ranks disintegrated under the bombardment. Voxes crackled, sergeants bellowed orders and the defenders' pattern of fire shifted to engage *Vicanthrus*.

The Whiteshield Conscripts of the 111th were little match for Urkanthos' retinue of damned, but they held the line to the last. Yet even when they were overcome, the Daemon Prince's route remained blocked, this time by the ardent Battle Sisters of Our Martyred Lady.

Urkanthos hurled himself into the sisters' ranks, exulting at each drop of martyr's blood to fleck his claws. Bolter-fire pattered off his carapace, and even the incandescent fury of multi-meltas were but a dull warmth upon his skin. Behind him came his last remaining Hounds. Of a dark brethren once numbering in the hundreds, now only a score remained. Lacking their master's protections, the Chaos Space Marines died hard, but die they did. It mattered not. Their purpose had only ever been to bring their master to his target. Before the last black heart stilled its motion, Urkanthos reached the command bastion's Egressium Gate.

But one last obstacle remained. A prayer upon their lips, the sisters Genevieve and Eleanor led a host of Seraphim to bar Urkanthos' path. Bellowing with laughter, the Daemon Prince struck his assailants from the air, dashing their bodies to the ground as one might scatter a swarm of insects. Pain flared in Urkanthos' mutated chest. Again Genevieve struck, her blessed blade blazing with light as it clove the beast's cursed flesh.



Urkanthos staggered away, talons raised to shield against the Canoness' strike. An exultant Genevieve pursued, blade flashing. But in her zeal, the Canoness was deceived. The Daemon Prince was not cowed, but awaiting opportunity. As Genevieve struck again, Urkanthos ripped the blade from her grip and closed a taloned hand about her throat. Seeing her sister's danger, Eleanor lunged at the beast, her frenzied flurry hacking deep into his armoured skin, and all but severing a tattered wing. It was not enough. Genevieve's spine splintered under her captor's unholy strength, her last act to headbutt the brute between his burning eyes. Loosing a desolate cry, Eleanor lunged with all her strength, the point of her sword lodging beside Urkanthos' black heart. The Daemon Prince bellowed and smote her, lifeless, to the ground. Then he stalked away, the power sword still trapped within his flesh.

In the muster field, Marshal Amalrich prepared another assault against the looming *Vicanthrus*. One had already failed, hurled back by the enfilading fire of the Baneblade's Havoc escorts, but as *Vicanthrus*' turret swung to bear on the aegis lines of the Cadian 8th, the Black Templars gathered themselves for another attempt.

Vicanthrus' turret locked into position, but didn't fire. The super-heavy tank froze in position like some great metal beast locked in the throes of confusion. Then, at an unseen command, its weapons blazed to life. Not at the Black Templars of the Cruxis Crusade. Not at the Cadian 8th. But at its own compatriots. The warriors of the Black Legion never stood a chance. *Vicanthrus*' sponson-mounted weaponry shredded the Havocs who moments before had preserved it from Amalrich's fury. The turret swung about onto a new bearing, the heavy shells ripping apart an Alpha Legion Predator spearhead as if their hulls were forged of glass.

For a heartbeat, neither side knew what to make of the sudden betrayal. None had marked the cloaked figure who ducked briefly from the shadow of a ruined bastion, a flood of silvery nanomachines flowing from his hand and into the crannies of *Vicanthrus*' armour. That heartbeat was all Creed required. At his bellow, the heart of the 8th marched for the breached command bastion. The slaughtered Whiteshields and Battle Sisters told a gruesome tale, and one boding ill for those who had fought so hard for Cadia.

Inside the command bastion, Urkanthos let the mangled body of Magos Klarn slide from his claws. A half-maniple of Skitarii had barred his way to this chamber, but not one of the Omnissiah-spawned weapons had hurt him so much as the blades of the twin Canonesses. Eleanor's sword still protruded from his flesh, the hilt burning like fire whenever the Daemon Prince touched it. But at least his goal was now within sight.

Beyond the edge of the buckled walkway, half a mile straight down into the bedrock of Cadia Secundus, the null-array's capacitors arced and crackled. Destroy them, and Cadia would be at the mercy of the *Will of Eternity* once more. Sweeping back his wings, Urkanthos plunged from the walkway, picking up speed as Cadia's gravity embraced him.

'Double time! Faster, damn you, faster!' Creed bellowed the words to be heard over the madness of battle.

Obedient as ever, the veterans of the 8th picked up their pace, their march breaking into a run. Creed told himself there was still time, still the opportunity to catch the daemonic monstrosity before it undid all their efforts.

Hospitallers parted before Creed's command platoon, their faces uncharacteristically tight. The Order of Our Martyred Lady had fought fit to shame a chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, but had paid a steep toll in dead and wounded. At least they'd fared better than the 111th Whiteshields, Creed allowed. The Order still endured in other parts of the fortress – other reaches of the galaxy, even – but the Whiteshields were no more. Would there be anyone to remember their sacrifice once Kasr Kraf fell?

The leading squads reached the wreckage of the Egressium Gate. Weapons ready, they filed inside.

'Can we even kill the beast that did this?' Lieutenant Kormachen muttered.

Creed turned. The aide's face was pale, his eyes darting warily across the carnage. It took a dozen battles to make a veteran. Maybe more. How many had Kormachen seen? How many more would any of them see? Whatever happened, Cadia's time was ending. That much was clear.

Kell aimed a kick at the corpse of a tusked brute. 'If it bleeds, it can die.' He pointed at the broken body of a Canoness, drawing attention to the thick ichor spattered across her armour. 'They made it bleed. So can we.'

The ground trembled. The ululating wail of tortured air rippled outwards from the Egressium Gate.

Creed was still processing the meaning of the sound when Kell shoved him clear. He struck the ground beside the slain Canoness just as the doorway exploded in fire. Kell crunched beside him, singed but hale. Kormachen wasn't so fortunate. He barely had time to scream before the fireball engulfed him. The air filled with the sizzle-pop of burning flesh, and a brackish meaty stench. Other aides threw themselves clear, uniforms smouldering as the flames took hold.

Kell hauled himself upright and offered Creed his hand. 'Your luck holds, Lord Castellan.'

Accepting Kell's hand, Creed rose. 'You're my luck, sergeant.'

Creed looked at the blackened doorway. A vast crack split the outer face of the command bastion – testament to the force of the explosion. The sounds of battle seemed muted now, as if they belonged to another world. Three squads had preceded them into the command bunker. They were surely dead. Not that it mattered. Not if the explosion meant what he thought. He found himself staring skyward without meaning to, searching for the angry cyclopean eye he knew he'd not see. Would there be any warning? Was there any point fighting on?

He shook the thought angrily away. There was always a point. That was a Cadian's duty. His purpose. Defiance in the face of the inevitable. His stomach knotted with rising anger. He might fail in his charge to defend the Cadian Gate, but he'd never stop fighting. Never.

'Give the order, sergeant. We're going back to the muster field. The 8th stands. Cadia stands.'

A surviving aide, as pale as Kormachen had been moments before, pressed a manuscript to his lips – a talisman. Quite possibly an heirloom. Many officers had them. 'The Emperor protects.'



Creed rounded on him, unable to contain his wrath. He dashed the scrip from the officer's hand, then ripped the aide's pistol from its holster.

'The Emperor?' Creed bellowed. 'He's light years away!' He thrust the pistol into the officer's chest, forcing him back a step. 'You want salvation, lad, you forge it with this! Not with prayer. Not with scripture. A soldier makes his own fate. He doesn't plead for miracles!'

The officer gaped open-mouthed. Not at Creed, but at something in the sky behind him, far above the command bastion. Kell was looking too, a grim smile upon his face. Clenching a fist to calm himself, Creed spun around and stared upward. He didn't see it at first, but when his eyes at last settled upon it, he was amazed they had ever failed to do so.

'Well, I'll be damned,' said Creed. Then he cracked his first smile in ten years.

ECHOES OF THE PAST

Belisarius Cawl hadn't intended to remain on Eriad VI. Logic dictated he leave. Protocol insisted. Every moment he lingered, the greater the toll inflicted upon his forces by Gangrek's inheritors. And yet, the Archmagos could not bring himself to depart. The mystery called to him, stirred emotions long-atrophied by millennia of self-augmentation.

He had to know the meaning of Veilwalker's cryptic advice. Was it tied to the reliquary concealed aboard the *Iron Revenant*? Could he take the chance that it wasn't? The Shadowseer had implied that the secrets of Eriad VI would be uncovered now, or not at all. Cawl didn't doubt that his and Veilwalker's interests were at best in temporary alignment, but even a fleeting alliance had the potential to alter the Imperium's course. He'd seen it happen so many times – even if he could no longer recall the details, or even the names of those involved. Too many broken fragments of yesterday, scattered like a mosaic. For all of Cawl's attempts to preserve it, the past lacked the texture of today.

Thus Cawl dug deeper, even as the defences of his compound wore away beneath the fury of Eriad VI's radstorms, and the bellicose deeds of greenskins. Each ruddy dawn brought fresh assaults on the perimeter, each night saw bastions abandoned as Skitarii fell back to secondary lines.

Still Cawl dug, pushing the borers to their limits in his hunger for knowledge. As predicted, each new level excavated brought greater knowledge. The fragments grew larger, the warping less pronounced. One piece confirmed the Archmagos' growing suspicions: the artefacts of Eriad VI predated not only Humanity, but most other life in the galaxy. The techniques of forging, the absence of visible circuitry – these all pointed to an origin in the darkest of times. Perhaps at the hands of the Old Ones themselves, or else the Necrontyr.

Cawl's quest encompassed all thirty-seven hours of the Eriadan day. The deeper into the planet's crust he dug, the more urgent his search became. Occasionally, he caught Veilwalker watching him from the shadows.

The Shadowseer seemed visible only to him. She came and went as she pleased, passing through shielding-lines and vacuum bulkheads like a ghost. Cawl came to wonder if she was truly there at all, or conjured by memory augments suffering rad-degradation. Each time, Cawl's conclusion was the same. It no longer mattered. The madness of discovery was upon him. He had to know.

By the fifth day, the Skitarii had fallen back to their inner perimeter. The Orks had suffered horrendous losses for their victory, but that only made them strive harder. The compound had become a challenge – a guarantee of a worthy fight on a world otherwise bereft of life. All projections insisted that if the greenskins launched another sustained assault, the compound would be overrun. Unfamiliar frustration crowding his secondary lobes, Cawl at last issued the order to withdraw.

It was then, of course, that the breakthrough came. As the colossal tunnelling machines settled into their final excavation patterns, one breached the roof of a vast natural cavern. The weakened rock beneath its treads gave way, and the borer plunged into darkness. The machine's bleating warning signals were severed by the finality of its impact with the stalagmite-strewn cavern floor, but its last transmission contained images of a slab-sided structure of black stone. At once, Cawl issued a hold on the evacuation. Commanding the Skitarii to defend the landing zone until his return, he descended into the depths.

With but a glance, the Archmagos knew that this was what he had sought. Exploratory borings revealed the edifice to be a little more than two hundred and fifty yards in height, and as many again broad. The jagged crest implied that the artefact had not survived the bombardment entirely unscathed, that the top half and much of its flank had been lost to the ravages of time. The enigmatic stone yielded no clue as to purpose, but Cawl needed none. He'd seen such creations before – intact, and reaching into the sky. On Cadia.

Struck by fevered inspiration, the Archmagos revisited the historical record. It now seemed obvious that the long-ago bombardment had come at the hands of Abaddon during the 4th Crusade, but why would the Despoiler trouble himself with an uninhabited world, unless… Unless the coming of the Black Fleet to Eriad had not been by chance, but design.

Cawl accessed his datastore of tech-anomalies, correlating them with the paths of the Black Crusades. Corolis. Belaston. Vogrid II. The list went on. Some with confirmed remnants of pylon-like structures, all of them sites of archealogica surveys – all of them caught in the furrows of destruction ploughed by the Despoiler's forces. How had no one noticed? It had been known for millennia that the Cadian pylons pushed back the Warp. What if the Imperium had underestimated Abaddon's ambitions?

Without warning, Veilwalker was there, mask swirling with unreadable emotion. 'Do you understand?'

Cawl nodded, too horrified by the implications to object to her presence. 'The pylons. The Immaterium…'

'The one holds the other to its rhythm.' Veilwalker's mask was an angry red. 'Without these stones, dancers become slaves to a refrain bereft of order. The galaxy dies, reborn in madness.'

'Can it be prevented?'

'Cadia is the end and the beginning.'

Cadia. Where the pact was first forged. Coincidence? Cawl no longer believed in such things. 'This is too important for riddles. Answer me plainly!'

But Veilwalker was gone, leaving him with no answers, but perhaps a place to seek them.







THE FIRES OF SALVATION

CHAPTER 2

'Despair, and you give yourself to the shadows. Believe, truly believe in the Emperor of Mankind, and you shall walk in His light no matter how dark the path you tread.'

- Saint Celestine

THE EMPEROR'S LIGHT

She came wreathed in holy fire, an angel cast from the Emperor's hand and into the horror of war. Down she swept, a thunderbolt shrieking from a golden star newly arrived in the skies of Cadia. As she drew closer to the beleaguered walls of Kasr Kraf, the defenders gave voice to a name. It began with the survivors of the Order of Our Martyred Lady, but it spread like wildfire, borne upon the lips of the faithful, uttered in reverence and in jubilation.

Celestine. Prayers had been answered. The miracle had come.

She smote the muster fields without slowing, the firestorm of her wake scouring besiegers from the stones. On Celestine swept, her sword a blur of silvered light amongst the spiralling smoke. Daemons scattered before her, seared from reality by the blade of one who was a blazing counterpoint to their unfathomable darkness.

Strength returned to weary limbs. Defenders who had forsaken all hope forged new mettle from despair. The Emperor was with them still. Why else would he have sent his Living Saint to guide them to victory? United, they rose for one final effort, no fear remaining in their hearts. Even Creed, lost to seething emotion, forgot the threat of the Blackstone Fortress in distant orbit and fought alongside his men. With the exception of the zealous Black Templars, only the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes felt no stirring at the sight of Celestine. The Imperial Creed was not their faith. Theirs was a bond of brotherhood, of duty to long-dead Primarchs, but if the homilies of the Ministorum would deliver victory that day, then so be it.

For one moment, one glorious moment, the attackers' ranks shuddered. The Baneblade *Vicanthrus*, still locked in sightless combat with the nanomachines shredding its system, vanished beneath a zealous tide of humanity. Cultists scattered, their apostatic dreams dispersed by the Living Saint's onset. Then the Black Legion met the defenders' newfound fury with their own blasphemous resolve. Despite their resurgence, outnumbered and outmatched, the defenders' counter-attack stalled.

But faith renewed was not the only gift Celestine had brought to Kasr Kraf. Plasma drives roared in the darkness. Landing gears crunched onto plascrete. The discordant notes of battle-hymns swelled, the chimes of blessed bells echoing along the walls. Even more than faith, even more than hope, the defenders of Kasr Kraf had needed reinforcements, and the Living Saint had provided.

Celestine had found them in the Warp, their transport's plasma drives all but dead through a traitor's act, its Gellar fields failing: five companies of the Order of Our Martyred Lady, thought lost some fourteen hundred years. Her light served as a beacon, drawing the wounded vessel into the path of another craft and binding the two until realspace claimed them both once more. Now they came forth as her fiery sword, and to avenge a seeming-eternity adrift amidst the Immaterium. With their onset, the battle shifted once again – this time in the defenders' favour.

Urkanthos lurched through the Egressium Gate, his wings scattering the ashen remains of what had once been men. The cursed machine holding the Blackstone's wrath at bay was no more. The Despoiler's will had been done. Cadia waited to die, and Urkanthos had no desire to perish with it. It was time to depart and claim his reward.

'Die, abomination!'

A guardsman ran headlong towards the Daemon Prince, bayonet lowered. Urkanthos eviscerated the mortal with a single savage swipe. Licking blood from his talons, he let the body fall upon the remains of the black-clad prayer-witches who'd sought to bar his ingress.

Slaughter still raged across the muster field, the tempo and scent of it somehow different. Urkanthos longed to join it, even though to do so was to risk annihilation beneath the Blackstone's gaze.

In a swoop of wings, she landed before Urkanthos, her armour glittering in the golden light of her halo. At last, the Daemon Prince recognised the altered stench – the battlefield stank of her faith, her certainty.

'The corpse-bride,' he growled.

The angel raised her sword, the point steady as a rock. 'Your hour is done, beast.'

Urkanthos laughed, the sound of it a rough peal of thunder. 'It has only just begun. You are nothing. The echo of a false god. I will break you in half and set your skull upon Khorne's throne.'

Agony wracked the Daemon Prince, a white heat searing the veins of his chest. Through slitted eyes, he saw the corpse-bride regarding him, unmoving. The pain passed. As ever, Urkanthos felt the stronger for it. Another trial endured. 'I am the Scourgemaster of the Black Fleet, the Right Hand of the Despoiler. You cannot match me alone.'

Urkanthos pressed a taloned hand to the site of the faded agony. Something was wrong. The sword in his flesh – the prayer-witch's sword – had gone. He spun around. Two prayer-witches stared back, their faces alive with light, their golden armour as radiant as a sun. Urkanthos, who never forgot those he slew, knew their faces. The twins he'd killed upon the threshold. His seething ichor dripped from the leftmost's blade. The blade so lately trapped in his flesh. The first glimmer of uncertainty trickled into the Daemon Prince's bartered soul.

'I am not alone,' said Celestine. 'And your hour is done.'

With a roar, Urkanthos swept back his wings, and pounced.

Beyond the eastern wall, Baroness Vardus had marked the fire in the skies, but knew nothing of its meaning. She knew only that her bid to blunt the fury of the Legio Vulcanum had failed. Too many of her lance-mates were dead; all that remained was the glory of an honourable death. Yet as Vardus keyed her Knight's reactor to overload, gold-liveried Thunderhawks and Stormhawk Interceptors roared from the skies. The starboard quadrant of *Vessel of Damnation*'s carapace disintegrated under brilliant turbolaser beams, and the Thunderhawks peeled away. With a grim smile, Vardus secured her reactor from overload. A suicide run was the strategy of the hopeless, and her hope was reborn.

In orbit, the weapons batteries of the battle-fortress *Phalanx* rumbled to life. Already the Black Fleet was reacting to the presence in its midst, but *Phalanx*'s ageing shield generators held firm beneath broadside after broadside. Captain Garadon didn't care. In recent days he'd fought alongside the spectral Legion of the Damned. He'd torn the heart out of his own sacred charge to prevent it falling into the hands of the foe. And he'd witnessed a crippled Imperial Navy transport dock with *Phalanx*'s forecastle amidst the tumult of the Warp. So many things he'd been sure he'd never see. So many events he swore he'd never understand. But this? *Phalanx* alone against the Black Fleet? This was retribution long overdue. But where was the Legion of the Damned? As *Phalanx* had entered realspace they'd faded to nothing, as silent in departure as arrival.







Phalanx bore down on the *Will of Eternity*, shields crackling as it brushed aside the leading edge of the Black Fleet. At Garadon's command, flank batteries engaged the traitor battleships, but its formidable prow guns lay silent. *Phalanx* had suffered too much from the ravages of time and its recent sacrifices, and its master sought to make sure that first planet-cracking salvo counted.

Another vessel would have perished already, battered into drifting scrap by the fury of the Black Fleet, but *Phalanx* was the fist of Dorn, his first and greatest gift to the Emperor of Mankind. Even decaying and under-crewed, no other vessel in all the heavens was its peer. Even without the escort fleet that was its right, the mighty battle-station held its own. But it could not do so forever. Already, sensor panels lit up in warning as the main body of Abaddon's fleet broke orbit to engage. Garadon paid those warnings no heed. There would be no surrender, no retreat. If this was to be *Phalanx*'s last battle, then so be it. Thus Garadon held his course, straight into the *Will of Eternity*'s black maw.

The hammer of Sven Bloodhowl's bolt pistol clicked down on an empty chamber. Cursing his mistake, the Wolf Lord slammed another magazine home and squeezed off a round. The Daemon's skull shattered, its black blade skittering across the polished black stone. Red eyes blazed in the darkness.

'Morkai's teeth!' Bloodhowl roared. 'We can't stay here forever!'

As if to prove the point, the gates of the castellum yawned wide, and a ragged mob of mutated crewers surged across the narrow causeway. Heavy bolters cut them down, reapers amongst the chaff. Solvik Whitemane fell and did not rise, a gaping hole above his primary heart.

'What choice do we have?' snarled Jarn Frostclaw. 'Those emplacements will tear us apart.'

Bloodhowl recognised his own frustration in the Wolf Guard's tone. The hours since Firemane's Fang*'s destruction and the strike of the boarding torpedoes were a blur of never-ending battle, of brothers lost, and desperate marches through the darkness to outpace pursuit. Had it been days? Weeks? Bloodhowl no longer knew. Only that their duty was not yet done. His dozen survivors were only alive because the traitors didn't seem to know the full capabilities of the Blackstone Fortress, and because the vessel itself seemed determined to aid the invaders. Bulkheads had unsealed. Automated defences disengaged without warning. Whatever passed for a machine spirit in the* Will of Eternity *wanted them to succeed. Like a frost wolf bloated by disease, it wanted to die.*

Bloodhowl leaned around the bulkhead and tossed his last frag grenade into the screaming mass. It exploded with a dull crump, hurling bodies into the gantried abyss. 'If that is our duty.'

Frostclaw scowled, but nodded. 'If that is our duty.'

What made it worse was to fail with the objective in sight. Beyond the castellum, twisted cable-clusters betrayed the presence of a power interchange, a legacy of the Blackstone's service in the Imperial Navy, now subverted by its crew of traitors to channel power to its shields and weapons batteries. Destroy it, and a portion of the Will of Eternity *would go truly dark. Perhaps even enough to give the remnants of the Cadian fleet a chance to bring about its destruction.*

A shift in the light drew Bloodhowl's gaze to the cracked viewport. Blue sparks chased across a golden prow the size of a star fort.

*'*Phalanx*,' he laughed. 'So Dorn's stiffnecks want to play, do they?'*

New shapes flickered into existence around Bloodhowl, their sable power armour edged with flame and mouldered bone. The newcomers advanced on the castellum, bolters screeching flame.

Bloodhowl raised his chainsword high. 'For Russ, and the Allfather!'

Thus did the Firehowlers of Fenris go one last time into glory.

Flame gouted from the *Will of Eternity*'s flank. It was the tiniest of pinpricks, insignificant against the Blackstone Fortress' vast bulk. But with it, the shields across the lower portside quadrant sputtered and died. From the strategium of *Phalanx*, Garadon witnessed the moment of weakness; witnessed, and embraced it. The vessel's main batteries, dormant for centuries, roared with a fury to make their long-dead creator proud. The first salvo cracked the *Will of Eternity*'s gleaming armour. The eleventh pounded it to dust.

Traitor cruisers drove hard for *Phalanx*'s main batteries, their captains ramming headlong into the fortress in the hope of halting their fury. Some guns fell silent, but not enough. Never enough. *Phalanx* gnawed at the Blackstone's obdurate hide, battering ever closer to its heart, inch by unforgiving inch. Garadon ignored the wailing klaxons warning of hull-breaches and the worried reports from his strategium crew. This was the Blackstone's hour to die, and *Phalanx* was to be its executioner.

Another salvo, and something inside the *Will of Eternity* shattered. A crack split the Blackstone's core, brilliant purple light bleeding across the stars. As the battered *Phalanx* limped to safety, the rupture spread, swallowing those vessels nearest to it. With a silent scream that echoed through the minds of every living soul across the Cadian Gate, the *Will of Eternity* broke apart, its arcane engines dissipating in dazzling aurorae across the outer atmosphere. By the time the glow faded, a third of the Black Fleet was gone, snatched into the Immaterium. Yet more ships lay strewn across Cadia's southern pole, their blackened carcasses smoking. By some fluke of fate, the empty and cracked husk of the *Will of Eternity* remained in orbit, a dark and lifeless moon staring blindly down at its former prey.

Planetside, the Knights of House Raven joined their fire to that of the Imperial Fists Thunderhawks,



PHALANX

Phalanx is the mobile battle station that serves as both the Imperial Fists' home world and their foremost warship. In form and scale, it is nearer a planetoid than a conventional vessel; it is a mighty cathedral of war that dwarfs the largest Battle Barge, and wields the firepower of a formidable fleet.

The secrets of *Phalanx*'s construction are long forgotten, though it is known that Rogal Dorn brought it into the Emperor's service at the time of their first meeting, and it has performed proudly ever since. In the days of crusade and heresy, its shadow fell across hundreds of worlds, the fury of the Imperial Fists following close behind. Since that time, it has circled the Sol System, its orbit synchronous with that of Holy Terra, an ever-vigilant golden sentinel to safeguard the cradle of Mankind as the days grow darker.

Yet the passing millennia have not been kind to *Phalanx*, and constant vigilance and warfare have taken their inevitable toll. Despite the efforts of the Imperial Fists Techmarines, more of the mighty vessel's systems fail each year, and the skill required to repair them has long passed out of living memory. Once, *Phalanx* bestrode the stars as a colossus of war, but now its zenith has passed. It has departed the Sol System only rarely in recent times, its venerable engines coaxed to life in service of great vengeance or dire need. Though *Phalanx* is a wan shadow of its former glory, the starship's might still outshines any other vessel known to Mankind, and its name strikes terror into the hearts of the Imperium's foes. Venerable *Phalanx* has many more battles yet to fight and many more blows to strike in the name of Rogal Dorn.

their volleys unceasing until *Vessel of Damnation* was naught but fused and blasted scrap. The Cadian 8th and the Sisters of Our Martyred Lady at their head, the defenders of Kasr Kraf drove the heretics from the muster field. As Kell planted the flag of the 8th atop the reclaimed Kriegan Gates, Celestine and her Geminae Superia – the slain Canonesses Genevieve and Eleanor, reborn through the glory of the Living Saint – cast the lifeless corpse of the Daemon Prince Urkanthos from the walls. It was impossible to say whether it was that or the coruscating flare of purple light in the heavens that broke the will of the traitor horde, but it broke all the same.

Harried by the Ironwolves, and by Baroness Vardus' Knights, the besiegers fled south. Cultists and heretics, their apostasy spent, threw down their arms and begged for forgiveness, but the only mercy they found was that of holy promethium. Thousands died, but as many escaped. Despite *Phalanx*'s victory in the heavens, air superiority remained with the Despoiler's forces. Drop-ships swarmed the skies, gathering the scattered warbands in readiness for a new assault.

In the shattered remains of Kasr Kraf, Creed drew fresh plans. He knew this was no victory. At best, it was survival. Cadia held its breath.

Report G121/6Y42

Sent:
Dockyard Fulguris Prime

Received: Undying Glory; flagship, Battlefleet Fulguris

Sender: >Unknown<

They're dead! You hear me? They're all dead. The plague came aboard with the shuttle. Captain got it first, coughing up pus and blood by the time he reached the medicae centre.

Sergeant Rackman reckoned that was deliberate – that the disease wanted to go there before anywhere else. 'Course, Rackman was raving by then. Reckoned that drifter who read his palm foresaw the whole thing. Maybe she did. Maybe it was her brought it aboard, not the shuttle.

Lieutenant Groth ordered the medicae sealed, but it didn't do any good. It'd spread too far. Grown men wailed like children as the swellings in their bowels burst. But that weren't the worst of it. No, that was the filth-Daemons that hatched from the frothing pustules, cackling and laughing. Bunch of 'em carried Groth and the others away, the largest of them riding him like it was parade. I only survived because I ran to the isolation airlock and blew the connecting compression hatches. They left me alone after that, but I heard the screams over the comm lines.

I didn't think it could get worse until that battleship showed up. Shrouded by green mist, a rusted, rotten lump, with a prow full of teeth and a single staring eye. There weren't a shot fired. That's when I knew I were the last survivor. The battleship didn't launch any craft, just waxy-skinned fuelling capillaries. 'Cept they weren't fuelling booms, not exactly. They were sucking the dockyards dry, harvesting the plague we'd incubated. I daren't think for what.

That was a week ago. I can't take the hunger. I have to find food. I have to open that door.

<<<





The Vengeful Spirit*'s iron-bound viewport afforded an excellent view of failure. The gem of Cadia hung suspended against the sea of stars. Sullied. Defiant. Whole.*

Not so the shattered hull of the Will of Eternity. *The once-mighty Blackstone was now a trail of debris stretching for leagues. The double-hull had fragmented into three substantive shards, the lesser of which was easily four times the mass of the* Vengeful Spirit *itself. All else was dust, or had been drawn into the Warp by the same cataclysm that had consumed so much of the Black Fleet. Prozus Ghael, the* Will of Eternity*'s captain, had survived that disaster where thousands had not. He would yet live for centuries more before death was allowed to claim him, each moment of agony in the* Vengeful Spirit*'s dungeons amplified a thousandfold by technicians of the most exquisite pain.*

'Urkanthos has failed.' Abaddon did not turn to address the warlords assembled at his command. Let the servants wait upon the whim of the master. Instead, he watched the drop-ships and transports swarming like insects, mustering the forces for the next assault. Hated Phalanx *had withdrawn beyond the equator, running like a wounded cur from the fury of a blooded pack. Surprise had been the antiquated battle-fortress' chief weapon, and it was now spent.*

At last, Abaddon turned to regard his lieutenants. Zaraphiston. Zagthean. Skyrak. Korda. All with gazes carefully averted lest the Scourgemaster's failure prove infectious. Glory and downfall. Two sides of the same blade, and one that cut indiscriminately. Who would be the first to risk the one for the other? Zagthean, perhaps. His rivalry with the banished Daemon Prince was as well known as that between their chosen patrons. Skyrak was too cautious. Korda too focussed on reclaiming his place in the Emperor's Children.

Zaraphiston… Zaraphiston had probably cast the auguries, and already knew how the coming days would unfold. His silence as likely sprang from threat as from fear. Ygethmor would have spoken by now, eager to prove his worth, desperate to snatch scraps from the table. But Ygethmor was long dead. It mattered not. They mattered not. The decision was already made.

Too often, the Vengeful Spirit *had borne witness to failure. It would do so no longer.*

'Lord Abaddon.' Zagthean stepped forward as the Despoiler had known he would. 'Grant me the burden of the next onslaught, and I shall lay the broken bodies of your enemies before your throne.'

'No.' The word reverberated around the chamber, inviting discord. None came.

'For ten thousand years, this world has defied me. No more.' Abaddon ripped Drach'nyen from its scabbard. The Daemons within the blade cackled at his rage, their faces twisting mirthfully at the prospect of slaughter. 'Gather your warriors. I will see Cadia unmade, and its armies broken for all time.'

Zaraphiston leered, his manner as ever that of one who knew the answers to questions unvoiced. 'And if not?'

Abaddon stabbed the Daemon-sword into the rusted deck, and set it quivering at his feet. 'Then I will be dust, and you will fight like dogs for my throne. But one way or another, this ends.'



THE CLARION OF TRUTH

As dawn broke the next morning, promethium flames leapt hungrily towards the stars. The defenders of Kasr Kraf had neither manpower nor time to bury their dead, and so honoured them the only way they could – in cleansing flame. Betimes, the wind shifted, carrying with it the thunder of battle from the south, as Baroness Vardus' Knights obliterated those traitors abandoned by the Black Fleet. The pyres burned for two days and nights, fed by whatever fuel could be spared, preserving the honoured dead from the corruption of the Dark Gods, and the defilement of their living thralls.

Those final rites had come at Celestine's insistence, and Creed had yielded. Not out of necessity, nor even out of respect. The Lord Castellan sought solely to keep his soldiers' minds and bodies occupied. Activity, fruitful or otherwise, was always the best way to buttress failing morale. They'd realise the grim truth soon enough – a truth Creed had embraced even before Celestine had hurled Urthankos' corpse from the top of the wall. Kasr Kraf's greatest moment of defiance had been its last. When the Despoiler's hordes came again – and Creed was certain that they would, if only because the abyssal spectres of the Legion of the Damned stood silent sentry out on the Elysion pylon fields – the defiance of Cadia would continue elsewhere, if it did so at all.

Thus Creed left the Living Saint to her ministrations amidst the flames, grateful for whatever resolve she awoke, and entertained unthinkable notions of retreat. The arrival of *Phalanx* offered a new opportunity. Though devastated in the course of its lone stand against the Black Fleet, the battle-station was still capable of Warp travel. It could carry a vast portion of the forces stranded on Cadia to safety. A voice in Creed's head urged him to remain, to fight on. But the more he dwelt upon the matter, the more Creed came to wonder if that voice spoke with the forked tongue of pride, rather than duty. Perhaps Cadia's battle was at last done, and it was time to defend the outer jaws of the Gate from Agripinaa or Belis Corona.

Little by little, reinforcements dribbled in from the outer system. Some were lost the moment they hit realspace, ill fortune bringing them under the guns of the Black Fleet. Others fared better, braving the dead-fire zone above Cadia's equator and coming safely into the waiting arms of mighty *Phalanx*. First to do so were Captain Ruis Tracinto's 5th Company of the Crimson Fists, driven back from Kasr Partox with the remnants of the Cadian 14th. A dozen battered cruisers limped in from Solar Mariatus, their hangars crammed with the tanks of the Armoured 51st and Knights of House Taranis. Their crew whispered tales of an escape in the face of inconceivable odds – one achieved only when slate-grey cruisers had emerged from the Warp and boarded the leading vessels of the pursuing fleet. Upon learning those cruisers bore the faded brands of the Space Wolves, Creed enquired of Orven Highfell if further reinforcements might yet arrive from Fenris. He received no other answer than a stony glare.

The last to arrive was not only the most unexpected, but also the most welcome. A Mechanicus fleet, inbound from the arid backwater of the Eriad System. Ever the pragmatist, Creed saw their arrival as an opportunity to remake a portion of Cadia's shattered defences. In this, he was disappointed. The newcomers had suffered travails of their own – though the fleet remained battle-ready, their Skitarii maniple had been greatly thinned by strife, the ranks of artificiers and battle-masons expended to defend a now-abandoned archeologica site. Worse, the fleet's commander, the Archmagos Belisarius Cawl, intoned a warning that Creed was initially loathe to believe, for it meant that the danger to the Imperium – indeed, to the galaxy as a whole – was far greater than any yet knew.

In a council of war held within the remains of Kasr Kraf's command bastion, Cawl laid out the scope of his discoveries on Eriad. Few understood the detail of his theories. The Archmagos constantly slipped into and out of the buzzing binharic cant of the Omnissiah, and even those parts of the explanation rendered in High Gothic dealt in subjects so arcane that Cawl might as well not have shared them at all. Yet the singular, awful truth was plain enough. For long aeons, the Cadian pylons, and others like them, had held the galaxy together. Without them, the tides of the Immaterium would consume all. Abaddon had spent ten thousand years obliterating the pylon fields, weakening the stitches holding reality together.

None present wanted to believe Cawl's words, but the clarion of truth has a sound peculiar to itself. Moreover, the theory made new sense of so much. The rising darkness of the passing millennia. The ever-increasing prevalence of Warp storms. The Despoiler's obsession with Cadia. Abaddon's Black Crusades, so long dismissed as failures – if ones greatly to the Imperium's cost – had been the product of strategy more layered than any had believed. Cancephalus. Arkreath. Kromarch. The Gothic War. For millennia, they had been viewed as causes in and of themselves. Now they were revealed as camouflage for Abaddon's true agenda, one envisioned by an immortal's eye in the prosecution of a war without end.

Cawl did not speak of everything he knew or guessed. Veilwalker's cryptic missives remained his secret. But he assured all that hope was not lost – that the pylons contained the key to Abaddon's defeat, as well as his victory. This last was merely a projection – the first guess the Archmagos had entertained in many centuries, if not the first lie offered to allies unversed in the logical precepts of the Omnissiah. And yet Cawl told himself his words contained a kernel of truth. The pylons were tools, and it was one of the founding precepts of the Adeptus Mechanicus that the difference between tools and weapons existed only in narrow minds.

To hear Cawl speak of it, there was no way to know how many pylons had already fallen, or how close to the tipping point the galaxy had come. Yet one thing was clear to Creed: retreat from Cadia was no

longer an option – Abaddon would be denied his prize today, as he had in millennia past. All that remained was to determine how that impossible goal was to be achieved. And swiftly, before the quiescent Black Fleet awoke to new fury.

The first move occurred in the skies. *Phalanx*'s abused plasma drives hauled the battle-fortress southward across the equator, attaining geostationary orbit over the pylon fields of Cadia Secundus. Every eye upon the bridge scoured the astral auspexes and sensor banks for the Black Fleet's attempt to counter the move. No such retaliation came. *Phalanx* had taught Abaddon's captains caution, if not respect – it seemed none amongst them had any stomach for mutually assured destruction that day.

With the skies thus secured from the threat of bombardment, Creed fashioned a new defence. Trenchworks and aegis lines were established across the Elysion pylon fields. The catacombs below, originally envisioned as a final line of defence, now became the sprawling heart of a makeshift fortress. Above ground, massed Cadian ranks waited alongside the Sisters of Our Martyred Lady. Below, Cawl's adepts laboured beneath the unblinking gaze of their Skitarii protectors.

The dwindled Adeptus Astartes, now reinforced by the Crimson Fists' 5th and the survivors of Garadon's depleted command, formed a single strike force under Master Korahael. Only the Ironwolves forsook unity of purpose, striking out on their own to roam the Elysion perimeter. Korahael disdained their choice, blaming the ancient enmity between the Sons of Russ and of the Lion. But Garadon wasn't so sure. He had fought alongside the Wolves of Fenris many times before, and had never known any so taciturn as the Ironwolves. That night, when the wind carried distant howls across Elysion, a chill passed through Garadon's bones, though he did not know why.

The wind howled about the crumbled spires as Highfell approached, his every step heavier than the last. No. It was not only the wind.

The Wolf Priest waited in silence at the door. Sundered by the Black Fleet's initial bombardment, the bastion was worthless as a redoubt, but it would yet serve as a cage.

'How many?' Highfell growled softly.

Harkan twitched his lip, the gesture setting the tips of his plaited moustache dancing. 'Three more.'

With an effort, Highfell kept his expression neutral. The Curse had followed them ever since Mygdal. It would consume them all, given time.

He turned to Harkan, his face an unreadable mask. 'Keep them bound. When battle comes, they will do their part. As will we all.'



Hours crawled by. With every second, the inevitable grew closer. Fevered anticipation of the fateful hour grew worse than the fear of death. All who waited on the Elysion Fields, whether born of Cadia or some distant world, silently yearned for the battle to begin, for death or triumph to find them now, while they yet had nerve and strength to face it.

Celestine and her Geminae Superia hovered silently in the skies above, their radiance bright against a dark future. Yet even the Living Saint felt foreboding in those hours. Waking dreams assailed her with each new dawn – visions of a fortress afire, of its defenders drowning beneath a bloody tide. Her wings damaged in those dreams, Celestine could not outrun that flood. Each time she made the attempt, its waters claimed her. And yet each time there was a presence beyond the tide – a warrior's silhouette, familiar and yet not, trapped beyond a wall of ice strewn with the Black Legion's dead. Each dawn, Celestine blinked the vision away. Knowledge would come in its own time. Until then, the Emperor would guide her, as he always had. She was his hand.

Amidst the roots of the pylons, Belisarius Cawl wrestled with secrets denied to Mankind for ageless millennia. Fusion-welders assailed the faceless stone, blazing silently for hours untold as they sought samples for analysis. Cawl sent servitor probes into smooth-edged breaches in the pylons' flanks, set loose every functional tech-scryer he had salvaged from the abandoned compound at Eriad VI. Nothing bore fruit. The black skin resisted all attempts to breach it. Contact was lost with each servitor precisely six seconds after it vanished into the depths, and the scryers found nothing that was not already on record.

All Cawl knew for certain was that the low-level resonance, amply quantified by generations long dead, was growing in amplitude. Indeed, several of the pylons showed signs of fatigue, as if their silent exertions were as damaging to the structures themselves as to the squalling currents of the Immaterium. Cawl hypothesised that as one pylon field was destroyed, the burden intensified upon those that remained. When one field ceased to function, those on distant worlds automatically adapted. Was Cadia the last? The Archmagos had no way of knowing, but decided it was only logical to assume that it was. Still the pylons refused to yield their secrets. Until, that was, a cloaked figure made its presence known.

With his thoughts thus directed, the Archmagos at last grasped the elegance of the pylons' construction, of technologies whose meanest function far outstripped the dreams of his long dead mentors. Though the detail remained as far beyond him as his explanation of the pylons' function was beyond his allies on the surface, Cawl at last grasped the shape of the makers' intent. Imagination awoken to fevered life by the possibilities, Cawl began his labours anew.

Meanwhile, in the silent void above Cadia's southern pole, dormant hangars stirred to life, and the first drop-ships blazed into an outer atmosphere choked with the debris of failed conquest.

The Battle of Elysion was about to begin.

Cawl disengaged his primary consciousness from the scryer's datascreen and stared upwards. The inscrutable bulk of the pylon stood like a shadow against the strata of the cavern wall. Defiant. Mocking. Had he merely traded one world of obdurate secrets for another? Days of toil, and not even a scintilla of progress.

Had Veilwalker deceived him? Or had he deceived himself – read more meaning into her words than had truly been there? Was it all a grand distraction, waylaying his attention while she stole the reliquary? Cawl felt his rebreather quicken. He could not imagine why she would do such a thing, but what cause did a xenos truly need for malice?

A familiar sensation crept across his sense-filaments. He was not alone. It seemed Cadia had yet more in common with Eriad VI than he had expected. 'I projected your arrival before now, Veilwalker.'

Cawl turned, servo-crawlers scuttling beneath him. The intruder was not the Shadowseer. Green eyes blazed from beneath a hood of metallic scale. The power core of a burnished staff glinted.

'I mean you no harm.' The figure cocked his head to one side. 'Are those the correct words? I find that no matter which I use, no one ever believes them.' He paused. 'Wait… What did you call me?'

Secondary circuits meshed, retrieving ancient data. A Necron. A soulless embodiment of the Motive Force. A blasphemy against the Omnissiah. Cawl's arc scourge slithered to life, energy crackling across its coils. 'You are an abomination.'

The Necron set his staff aside. '"Thief" normally suffices. I prefer "honoured guest". But abomination or thief, you and I have common cause.'

Cawl willed the arc scourge's tendrils to war mode, already anticipating the joy of dissection. 'Logic dictates otherwise.'

'Then you don't seek to understand the nature of this matrix?'

The arc scourge grew still at Cawl's wordless command. This was unexpected. Or was it the abomination's trick to preserve its mockery of existence? 'You comprehend its secrets?'

'I was there when they were first erected. Or perhaps I wasn't. You of all people should understand that memory is a fickle thing.'

Cawl allowed an angry hiss to rattle through his rebreather. 'We share no commonality.'

'Perhaps. I went to the fires of biotransference in chains. You, I think, have gladly sliced away your humanity piece by piece.' The Necron stepped closer, eyes blazing. 'But neither of us desires to see this galaxy ripped asunder by the Empyreal Ones. Destroy me if you wish. I will simply awaken elsewhere. Nothing will change. For me, for you… for this world.'

Cawl remained silent, probabilities warping and reforming with fresh data. First an Eldar had set him on this path, now a Necron offered to guide his steps. But if the knowledge preserved the Omnissiah's Imperium… 'Show me.'

Sardonic laughter, dry as dust, echoed around the cavern. 'I thought you'd never ask.'



THE BATTLE OF THE ELYSION FIELDS

The first wave came from the west. Landers skirted the outer edge of *Phalanx*'s bombardment zone, vomiting a filthy tide across the pylon field. They came from a hundred worlds, 'liberated' from the worship of the false Emperor, their petty desires stoked by blasphemous canticle and empty promise until they roared liked a furnace. Hive gangers, manufactorum workers, deserters from the Emperor's light – they swarmed about the pylons, a mass given purpose by the demagogic Dark Apostles railing in their midst. As they crossed a line invisible to the mortal eye, *Phalanx*'s bombardment cannons roared, snatching hundreds of ragged madmen to their deaths. Still the Cultists came on.

The survivors of the Cadian 9th held their fire to the very last moment, ignoring the reckless autogun and stubber fire whining over their heads. Every man amongst them recalled the shame of the Kriegan Gates, where they had fled alongside the 33rd. Every man had lost comrades in the brutal culling that had followed, Commissars instilling discipline through bloody example. But one factor lent them resolve more than any other. The chanting mass bearing down upon the 9th served as a dark mirror – a licentious path that could have been theirs, had fate been but a little different. The soldiers of the 9th hated the Cultists for daring to embrace a path they themselves had forsaken, and now punished them for it. At barked words of command, the 9th rose up out of their trenchlines and opened fire. Ragged Cultists screamed their last and fell dead amidst the dust. The voices of apostate preachers faded as cannon-fire sucked the air from their lungs. Hundreds crumpled beneath las-fire and earthshaker bombardments, but thousands more came on, the boots of the living stomping the dead to bloody offal in their determination to reach the Cadian lines.

Even as the Cultists thronged forward, the doleful roar of plasma drives heralded the arrival of new landing craft. Ramps slammed down into the dirt to the north and east, and Abaddon's second assault began.

The Battle Sisters of Our Martyred Lady held the northern line. Celestine at their head, they met the rush of flame-belching Daemon Engines with the steadfast roar of boltguns and the choral bellow of their Exorcists. Seraphim sisterhoods jinked and soared through the maze of pylons, hunting Warpsmiths before their dark ministrations could return sundered war machines to the fray. To the east, Baroness Vardus' Knights served as artillery support for the tanks of the 185th, meeting the battle-scarred Titans of the Legio Vulcanum and the massed tanks of the Crimson Slaughter with fury fit to shake the roots of the world itself.



But it was in the south, where the Cadian 8th and 21st held the line, that Abaddon's true assault fell. There, amidst the ruins of pylons toppled in antiquity, the Black Legion advanced through the shrieking ruin of *Phalanx*'s bombardment. They came in an armoured column two miles wide and twice that deep, the dust clouds of biker outriders upon their flanks, and banners that had once challenged the defences of Terra itself ripping and snapping in the slipstream. Shells fell like black rain in their path, littering the southern approach with twisted wrecks. Heldrakes screeched overhead, strafing volleys shredding the makeshift artillery positions. The Hydras of the 8th engaged the Daemon-craft, but it was an unending flock. Mortal might could only disperse it, not see it destroyed.

With his allies beset on all sides, with no orbital support save *Phalanx*'s bombardments, Korahael divided his Adeptus Astartes strike force; Amalrich's Black Templars and Garadon's Imperial Fists reinforced the southern lines, while the Crimson Fists and Korahael's own 4th Company lent their might to the north. Of the Ironwolves, there were no confirmed sightings, though the 8th's spotters noted that the wrecks of the Black Legion column lay thickest near a ruined bastion, some distance southwest of the trenchlines.

Hours passed. Abaddon's warbands closed around the pylon fields like a gauntleted fist, squeezing tight about Creed's command. To the south, the Black Legion cast aside their battered transports and hurled themselves bodily at the 8th, their guttural battle-cries a marrow-chilling herald to their onset.

In the east, Baroness Vardus found an honourable end worthy of her forebears, her crippled Knight dealing the deathblow to the traitor Reaver *Furioso Rex* before reactor containment failed. The baroness' death redoubled her lance-mates' determination – in the proud history of House Raven, none perished so valiantly as they in that hour. Bereft of the Knights' heavy armament, the colonel of the 185th ordered a fighting retreat, in his terror forgetting there was no longer any ground to yield.

The eastern lines would have fallen in that hour, but for the intervention of Korahael's 4th Company, and Tracinto's 5th. Screaming from skies in golden Thunderhawks, they reached the breached trenchlines in the very moment Sevastus Kranon led his crimson-armoured traitors in a final assault. As the Crimson Fists' veteran Devastators duelled with the surviving Titans, steadfast angel and fallen sabre clashed amidst the charred remnants of House Raven, bitter history lending fury to every blow.

At Kasr Kraf, the Cadian 9th had fled. At the Elysion Fields, they died by the hundred without faltering, matching the madness of their foes with a coward's zeal for redemption. Yet, little by little, their line of bayonets

shrank inwards, overwhelmed. Seeing the danger, Creed ordered new reserves into the west, but the foe were too many. Though the banners of the 75th and the 403rd reached the western trenches before they were overrun, the 9th was beyond salvation. In death, they had earned redemption.

Day ground on into night, and then into day once again, each fleeting hour standing witness to martyrdoms by the score. Not one Daemon Engine laid a warped claw on the northern trenchlines, for the Sisters of Our Martyred Lady met them on the open plain beyond. The light of battle was upon them, the Will of the Emperor coursing through their veins. The Battle Sisters paid a bloody price for their resolve, but they felt neither pain nor loss, for Celestine's presence was both a balm and a spur to holy madness.

In the east, Ruis Tracinto perished upon the chainfist of Baranox the Blood-Haunted, only to be avenged in kind by Korahael's relic sword. In the south, the colonel of the 21st, driven mad by daemonic voices that had haunted him since the fall of Kasr Kraf, seized a voxcaster and ordered his soldiers to retreat. He perished before he could repeat that command, the Emperor's Mercy delivered from Commissar Strang's smoking bolt pistol, but the damage had been done. The 21st, their morale already upon a bayonet's edge, wavered. Creed strove to rally them, his voice booming across the vox-grid as it had so many times before, but now the Lord Castellan himself came under assault.

Abaddon had sworn to crush Cadia's last resistance himself, and he now came to do so. He did not enter the maelstrom of battle alone. The Bringers of Despair, their trophy racks thick with the heads of Cadian officers, teleported into the heart of Creed's command skyshield. Dozens perished in bloody moments, ripped apart by the fury of the Black Legion's finest warriors. Only Creed survived, shoved aboard a Valkyrie at Kell's hand – the colour sergeant's last act of fealty in a lifetime of unflinching service.

The bolt shell struck a hammer-blow against Kell's knee, shredding flesh and mangling bone. He fell, agony clawing at his thoughts. Still, he found the strength to push Creed aboard the waiting assault carrier. 'Go! Go!'

The Valkryie's pilot needed no further encouragement. Engines howling, it sped skyward, bearing the Lord Castellan to safety, or whatever illusion of it remained on the Elysion Fields. Only then did Kell afford himself the luxury of pain. Bracing the foot of the 8th's standard against the ground, he fell to his remaining knee. His vision clouded. Dark shapes loomed over him, monstrous silhouettes edged with blood-spattered gold.

A gauntlet closed around Kell's throat, hoisting him up like a broken doll. Coal-black eyes stared from a pallid face. The Despoiler. Kell felt no fear. He was dead already, what more could even Abaddon the Traitor do to him? Only faith mattered now. Faith, and honour.

'Such dedication to so unworthy a cause,' the Despoiler rumbled. 'Pitiful.'



With his last strength, Kell hawked a gobbet of bloody phlegm at his captor. 'Cadia stands.'

Abaddon snorted, his lip curling in sardonic disgust. 'I don't think so.'

The last sound Kell heard was the crack of his own shattering spine.

Report K452/8T89

Sent: Kasr Sonnen Orbital Transcaster

Received: Astra Militarum Command Relay (Cadian Sector)

Sender: Colonel Strass, Cadian 4th Army

Lord Castellan,

Kasr Sonnen holds, but I cannot say for how much longer. The forces assailing us exceed expectations tenfold.

Thus far, the Alpha Legion have spearheaded every assault – the Alpha Legion, and their untrained Cultist rabble. Civilian uprisings have occurred wherever the traitors have made landfall, and I can only assume a substantial infiltration campaign was waged long before their warships reached orbit. In accordance with Standing Order 63/Gamma, I have brought the Emperor's Peace to all townships suspected of disloyalty. Should Kasr Sonnen survive this terrible hour, repopulation will be a matter of urgent priority.

I confess that the prospect of survival seems bleak. The lunar dockyards on Strobos and Panecra have been overrun. The polar fortress of Kasr Torr has fallen. We still hold the great citadels of the Larcanis Plains, but barely. Save for the unexpected intervention of Adeptus Astartes from the Doom Legion and Fire Lords Chapters, they too would have fallen. By current projections, we can hold these positions for seven more days, perhaps eight, but I must tell you I consider those estimates grounded more in faith than reality. From there, only the redoubts of the Kormic Ridge will remain, and I hardly need remind you that they will not long endure. Unless we receive reinforcements within the next two or three days, Kasr Sonnen will fall to the Dark Gods.

We will hold as long as we can. Come what may, the traitors of the Alpha Legion will regret the day they came to Kasr Sonnen.

Cadia Stands.

With the 8th's command scattered or slain, and the 21st in full retreat, the southern front collapsed. Dark praises on their lips, the Chosen of Abaddon overran the few remaining trenches held by the 21st, and rampaged east across the Elysion Fields. Amalrich and Garadon planted their banners full in the Black Legion's path – a ceramite wall of black and gold to serve as a breakwater against the tide. Had valour alone been the measure of victory, the Elysion Fields would have been won that day, but the Sons of Dorn were too few, and the Black Legion many. Their redoubt became an island swallowed by a sea of madness, and the traitors swept on.

The artillery companies of the 185th perished first, overwhelmed from ground they had thought secure. As the black tide consumed the 185th's command squadrons, the battle-worn brothers of the Crimson Fists' 5th counter-attacked, their bolters reaping vengeance for their fallen captain. Robbed of his staunched allies, Korahael rallied the last of his Dark Angels in the shadow of a sky-scraping pylon. As the Crimson Slaughter howled fresh battle-cries, the Sons of Caliban prepared to sell their lives dearly.

In the west, the 75th and the 403rd defended a rampart of dead. The wall of charred and bloody flesh grew taller with each new onslaught, a treacherous, gore-slicked mass that claimed as many lives as the defenders' volleys, yet still the Cultists came on. As yet another assault ended in sodden ruin, the tone of the Cultists' chant altered. Hellfire flared across the points of rusted icons, dark prayers billowed with the smoke, and the first Daemons clawed their way onto the Elysion Fields.

The hellspawn flickered, inconstant as dreams in the shadow of the ancient pylons, but their claws cut as a savagely as always, their whispered promises and the droning of flies no less pervasive for the infirmity of flesh. Warpfire scoured the bloody rampart, lissom Daemonettes danced into the breaches, and the western front crumbled.

Celestine saw the danger. Only to the north had the traitors' assault crumpled entirely, hammered and split by the unwavering zeal of the Adepta Sororitas. The Battle Sisters had paid a high price for their victory, but it was victory nonetheless. The light of the Living Saint shone as bright as ever, the valour of her reborn Geminae Superia undimmed. Southwards they went, hymns of battle echoing about the pylons, the thunder of boltguns never far behind.

As the remnants of the Cadian 8th withdrew into the catacombs, Abaddon led his Terminators in bloody pursuit. Other warbands followed, and soon the outermost passageways resounded to the thunder of autocannons and the screams of the dying. Their ranks bolstered by Cawl's Skitarii, the 8th fought like lions for every inch of those catacombs. Each blast door became a choke point where sacrifice bought precious moments – each crossroads a corpse-strewn redoubt.

Creed fought with the rearguard, leading by example wherever he could. With their colours lost, their command dead upon the field above, he knew the 8th needed a talisman, a promise of hope in a battle swiftly turning to defeat. The 8th did not disappoint him. Not lightly had they been named the Lord Castellan's Own. They would have followed Creed into the fires of a Daemon-world had only he led them there, and with every defiant curse, every rearguard sacrificed to the Despoiler's onset, they proved themselves worthy of their beloved general.

Deeper still in the catacomb network, Archmagos Cawl laboured on. At Trazyn's direction, he focussed his attentions on the pylon that served as the command node for the Elysion



Fields. With each moment, the tendrils of his machine consciousness wended deeper into the pylon's pathways, his understanding of its arcane constructions magnifying with each binharic calculation. At last, he comprehended the full scope and purpose of the pylon fields, the elegance of a design millennia beyond the advances of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Trazyn the Infinite watched from the shadows, careful not to provoke the Kataphron Breachers tasked with his obliteration should he attempt betrayal. He still didn't know himself if he intended one. The possibilities offered by the immediate future were too tempting, yet too finely balanced. Had he come as thief or a saviour? Did he any longer know how to make the choice? Uncertain, the Necron watched the Archmagos at his work.

The western wall of the vast cavern collapsed with an ear-splitting roar. Black-armoured traitors crashed into the line of waiting Electro-Priests, a line that collapsed within moments of the first blow. Abaddon himself hacked and tore at their head, the Daemon sword Drach'nyen cleaving alloy and bone without effort. Cawl saw none of it, his tri-level consciousness locked in the joys of discovery. Trazyn watched the Breachers' torsion cannons rip into the traitors' ranks, and knew at once the Kataphrons could not prevail. Thief or saviour? The decision had been made for him. At least for the moment. Reaching beneath his scaled cloak, the Necron withdrew a gleaming fractal tesseract labyrinth, and hurled it into the fray. It bounced twice, the shifting energy fields decomposing into glowing gossamer strands, then its captive dimensions unfolded in a burst of dazzling light, disgorging a new army into the war-torn cavern.

This was not a Necron legion, nor even a body of troops drawn from a single world. The tesseract's contents comprised the merest fragment of Trazyn's Imperial collection, drawn from archives filled to bursting, or storage vaults given over to duplicate exhibits. Some had languished in Solemnace's stasis vaults for millennia, the fleeting centuries passing unnoticed. Others had joined the collection in but recent times, their captivity measured in months or years.

For Lieutenant-Commander Cerantes of the Ultramarines, barely an eyeblink had passed since the dark days of the Heresy. For his Contemptor Dreadnoughts and mortal brothers alike, no guidance was needed save the presence of the blasphemous icons of Chaos, and the Imperium's double-headed eagle. The Dreadnought Talon at their head, the time-lost Ultramarines prosecuted their eternal battle anew.

Others were not so swift to react. The Vostroyan XXI, taken during one of the innumerable greenskin offensives along the Segmentum Obscurus, found themselves beset with stasis sickness, their heads swimming as perceptions snapped back into step with reality. But the roar of battle cures many ills of the mind, and the desire for survival transcends all existential doubt. Orders rang out, and the shaken Vostroyans entered the fray, joined by snipers from long-dead Tanith, Salamanders thought lost during the Klovian disaster, and a lone warrior in golden armour, his scarlet plume and eagle heraldry seldom seen so far from the cradle of Mankind.

With the arrival of the impossible reinforcements, the Black Legion assault stalled. His self-appointed duty done, Trazyn returned to the shadows. The role of saviour might perhaps have suited him in that hour, but self-sacrifice was a task he gladly left to organics.

Yet there was one amongst the tesseract-loosed group who did not join the battle, but surveyed it coldly from the fringes. Katarinya Greyfax, Inquisitor of the Ordo Hereticus, was not known for leaping to rash conclusions, for she counted rashness as but one of the many paths to heresy. Her bodyguard, drawn from the 55th Kappic Eagles, had learned this harsh lesson over many years of indentured service. Though lasguns were levelled and safeties disengaged, not a single Scion fired.

'Sir, we have movement amongst the Blackstone debris.'

Commodore Trevaux crossed to the auspex holo-display. Phalanx*'s sensors had taken as much of a hammering as the rest of the vessel, but fidelity enough remained to confirm the ensign's assessment. At least a dozen traitor cruisers risked oblivion amidst the debris cloud.*

'What are those scum playing at?' he breathed.



The question was purely rhetorical. Whatever the Black Fleet sought in the ruins, it was Trevaux's duty to see that it went undiscovered. 'Helm, get us underway. Set heading for the near edge of the debris cloud. Comms, relay a request to our Mechanicus allies to cover our abaft starboard engagement zone – the shield generators are still down and we've dead sensors all across that quadrant.'

The deck tremored as Phalanx *got underway. Trevaux glanced again at the display for any response from the Black Fleet. He saw none. Was it a trap?*

The communications officer looked up from his station. 'Mechanicus fleet confirms request.'

On the holo-display, the bulk of the rust-red fleet swung onto new headings. Only the Ark Mechanicus remained on station, well beyond weapons range. Trevaux knew he'd receive no explanation as to why, and gave silent thanks that the Adepts of Mars had lent him any vessels at all.



THE CHIME OF MIDNIGHT

CHAPTER 3



'Faith. In the right hands, it is Humanity's greatest weapon. Yet even the finest blade is rendered fallible by its wielder. In the wrong hands, the mighty sword of faith can do more hurt to the Emperor's realm than can all the treacherous Daemons of the Warp combined. This is why those who profess to be the most holy amongst us must be put to the sternest test.'

- Inquisitor Katarinya Greyfax

Report T134/3U65

Sent: Hydra Cordatus Sonde Relay

Received: Agripinaa

Sender: Vanguard Alpha 5-Vostok Harkon, Sigma Maniple, Agripinaa Legio XXII

Location: Hydra Cordatus pylon field, northern quadrant. 5.00021 kilometres beneath planetary surface.

Statement: Sigma Maniple under sustained attack from unidentified robed assailant. Heavy casualties.

Statement: Intruder's combat technique and power armour suggests pre-Heresy Adeptus Astartes training.

Conclusion: Intruder is an operative of the Black Fleet.

Conjecture: Intruder seeks something from the catacombs.

Directive: The unbeliever must be purged. All hail the Omnissiah!

Location: 6.11581 kilometres beneath planetary surface.

Statement: Ambush encountered at Vault Delta-031. Heavy casualties sustained.

Statement: Intruder appears to be operating alone.

Conclusion: Intruder can be overwhelmed.

Directive: Commit additional forces.

Location: 8.33942 kilometres beneath planetary surface.

Statement: Extreme casualties sustained.

Statement: Intruder exhibits resilience beyond standard Astartes parameters.

Statement: Intruder has reached Vault Delta-001. No further movement.

Conclusion: Intruder has attained his goal.

Statement: Auspex circuits register unfamiliar energies. Intruder approaches.

Directive: Ready arms. All hail the Motive Force!

<transmission ends>

THE DESPOILER'S WRATH

The nodal cavern shook with the fury of war. The bedrock of the planet trembled at the clash of immeasurable wills. As in the Elysion Fields above, this was no battle of tactics, of grand strategy calculated and unleashed. It was a brawl fought at the closest of quarters, the dying near enough to see the hatred in their slayers' eyes.

Lieutenant-Commander Cerantes knew something was amiss. The broad strokes of the battle were correct, but the details were wrong. It seemed obvious that the foe was some nest of traitors, fallen from the Emperor's light, but their heraldry was unfamiliar. Even the wargear of his allies was wrong, somehow cruder than it should have been. But one certainty overrode those doubts: the foes of the Imperium had risen, and would be put down by the might of Ultramar.

The thunderclap of a demolisher shell ripped Cawl from his binharic reverie just as the last synapse connection snapped into place. Many-faceted eyes took in the losing battle in the cavern; his cerebrum slipped into war mode. It would take time for the pylon node to process his instructions, for the schema he had fashioned to unfurl. His carapace crackled as tertiary life-support bled power into his weapon-augments. Vox-grilles cleared, the syllables of the Lingua Technis rising without conscious thought. Around the chamber, the voices of Electro-Priests and Skitarii took up the chant, and wavering lines found strength in the Omnissiah's blessings.

The hunched figure of Belisarius Cawl quickened an unfamiliar uncertainty in Abaddon's black heart. Had the Adepts of Mars at last divined the strategy of aeons? Uncertainty blossomed into doubt. The Despoiler had sought to break Cadia's defenders before ushering them into oblivion. The brutal hierarchy of the Black Fleet required a show of strength; the Dark Gods demanded it. But had he erred? Horus had failed in his grand design by succumbing to bravado, for seeking battle when none was needed. Had he, Abaddon, now fallen into the clutches of pride?

Recognising the battle for Cadia had reached its last, deadly crux, Abaddon commanded his sorcerers to breach the Immaterium. No sooner had the first cracks torn reality's veil than a host of blood-hungry Daemons burst free into the cavern. With a snarl not entirely directed at his foes, the Despoiler dredged up every last scrap of his Warp-granted strength, and hurled himself into battle anew.



The last Contemptor fell, ripped apart by a trio of Helbrutes, and the Ultramarines' fate grew bleak. Fire danced through the air, coalescing into the sombre shadows of the Legion of the Damned. Unyielding, they marched to the Ultramarines' rescue, bolters spitting soulfire to consume the corrupt. A many-armed Slaaneshi Daemon led a capering horde into the Vostroyan ranks, false and blasphemous promises spilling from its lips. Cawl's Solar Atomiser flared, and the beast disintegrated into glowing dust. Scions of the Kappic Eagles collapsed, retching bloody bile through their rebreathers as the bountiful gifts of Nurgle found purchase in their lungs. Kataphrons converged their fire, melting a pack of Maulerfields to scrap. The cavern trembled, dust scattering from newly opened fissures. Colossal stalactites, millennia in the making, fell like stone rain, pulping traitor and loyalist alike.

Cadia stands!

The battle-cry thundered across the ruin of the breached cavern wall. It issued from a thousand voices, searing forth from a quarter the Black Legion assumed tight within their merciless grasp. The Cadian 8th fired again,

then with Creed's battle-cry – the call to arms that had kept Cadia defiant for those past weeks – still upon their lips, they surged over broken stone and bloody corpses to avenge their comrades.

Howling shapes came with them, blurs of fang and slate-grey armour, the Ironwolves' sigils upon every pauldron. Wulfen led the charge, battle-brothers lost to the Space Wolves' ancestral curse since Cadia's encirclement. Even those who followed, Highfell amongst them, fought with a feral wildness in their eyes, their humanity slipping away with every blow struck. The Ironwolves had embraced this knowledge. They knew with certainty that the savagery of war would only accelerate their devolution, but they loosed the beasts in their souls all the same, for Russ and for the Allfather.

The Black Legion ground on. Ten thousand years of hate drove them, ten thousand years of pride and fury. The Bringers of Despair tore at the time-lost Ultramarines with blade and fist, rending cataphractii armour and pulping the flesh beneath. The Talon of Horus ripped Cerantes' sword arm from its socket; Drach'nyen split him in two. The captain's loss only stiffened his battle-brothers' resolve, and they met the fury of the Black Legion with discipline instilled at Guilliman's own hand. But even as the Kappic Eagles poured their fire into the Black Legion's flank, it became apparent that discipline and fury alone would not overcome ten thousand years of blessed hate. Something more was needed.

With a yawning groan, an area of ceiling the size of a landing field gave way. Cadians and Kappics scattered, or were crushed beneath the debris. The Black Legion fought on. Abaddon, Cerantes' sundered corpse lifeless at his feet, sought out the soul whose obliteration would at last break the defenders' will. Pride had led Abaddon to this hour; it could not be ignored, only sated. His black gaze settled on the heavyset general who had barely escaped him on the plains above. Creed. Cadia had stood too long through his efforts, and the Dark Gods would now take his soul. A bellowed command, and gore-slicked Daemons sprang screaming at the Cadian 8th, the Terminators of the Black Legion close behind.

Golden light spilled through the sundered ceiling, flooding the nodal chamber. Celestine, the Living Saint, corpse-bride of the eternal Emperor. She showed no hesitation, no doubt. Fire streaming from her wingtips, she swooped to confront the Despoiler. Daemons pounced, but a sweep of the Ardent Blade cast them, broken, to the ground. Winged Possessed soared, talons clawing at limb and blade, but the Geminae Superia clove them from the air. Soon they faced one another: spiritual daughter of the beneficent Emperor, and heir to the greatest traitor in the history of Mankind. No words were spoken. None were needed. Soulfire roiled as the Ardent Blade struck Drach'nyen, the wail of hope and despair shivering the spirits of all who heard it. Abaddon was the mightier by far. Alone, Celestine had no hope of triumph. But she was not alone. The Geminae Superia were ever at her side, the three fighting as one against the Despoiler of legends.

At the cavern's edge, Katarinya Greyfax beheld Celestine's arrival with revulsion. How long had she been gone that such heresy could take root? Battle Sisters suffused with the power of idolatry? Warriors of the Adeptus Astartes revelling in the corruption of their own mutations? Spirits wreathed in hellfire? And yet the loyal soldiers of Cadia and Ultramar, known across the galaxy for their unswerving devotion, their purity, embraced these evils in the name of victory?

It was a cornerstone of Greyfax's certainty that evil had no shades, no lesser forms that could be tolerated in service to a larger goal. Purity was perfection, uncompromising, ideal. She had killed thousands for lesser sins than this. She had killed her own kind for wavering from the path. What victory could there be if adamant precepts were torn asunder?

The shadows reformed around her. Green eyes blazed. Greyfax aimed the muzzle of her condemnor boltgun squarely between them. 'Abomination.'

'That word again.' A metal hand gestured lazily across the cavern. 'Stop me if this sounds familiar, but I suspect your priorities require re-evaluation.'

'You sow corruption wherever you tread. Your reckoning is overdue.' She pulled the trigger. Or she tried to. Her finger didn't respond.

Trazyn opened his palm, a flood of microscopic machines flowing over his fingers. 'I'm not a fool. The mindshackle will not let you harm me.'

Bile flooded Greyfax's mouth. Anger seared it away. 'You've corrupted me! As you did Valeria!'

'A precaution only. As for Valeria… She had a remarkable brain. You robbed me of the opportunity for study.'

Again Greyfax tried to pull the trigger. Again nothing happened. Useless.

'I brought you here out of common cause,' said Trazyn. 'I am not yet done with this world, and nor is your Imperium. If you seek to save it, I suggest you focus that formidable certainty of yours elsewhere. Our reckoning will wait.'

With a snarl, Greyfax turned away.





At last, slivers of data congealed in the mechanical recesses of Cawl's mind. The nodal grid was ready. A labour that might yet overshadow ten thousand years of lesser works was prepared. And yet the Archmagos suffered an onset of doubt. What if the Necron had lied? Cawl's delvings had only scratched the surface – there was still so much about the pylons' function that he could only guess at. As the last of the time-lost Ultramarines struck his dying blow, Cawl's priorities snapped back into focus. Logic dictated the unmistakable danger before his eyes take precedence over unsubstantiated premonition. Offering one last prayer to the Omnissiah, Cawl sent the command.

It began slowly. The resonant pulse of the pylons – normally unheard by all save Warp-sensitives – grew steadily in pitch and volume. Louder it pulsed, a dull rumble consuming the roar of battle all across the Elysion Fields. Black lightning crackled along the pylons' flanks. Combatants from both sides collapsed, blood streaming from ears and noses. Psykers froze as their connection to the Immaterium faded, their conscious minds dragged into oblivion.

Black light leapt from the pylons' pinnacles – not just from those upon the Elysion Fields, but every functioning pylon yet on Cadia. The beams converged in the upper atmosphere, the outer edge brushing *Phalanx*'s golden flank. As the battle-fortress' engines flared in evasive action, the monolithic beam seared across the stars, a sable lance aimed at the heart of the Eye of Terror. Slowly, the shift too small for even the most sensitive of instruments to tally, the Ocularis Terribus began to shrink.

Though none in the nodal cavern knew the scope of Cawl's undertaking, its effects were immediate and pronounced. Abaddon's host of Daemons, their hold on reality already made fickle by the pylons' formerly dormant state, slipped further into the abyss that spawned them. Daemon-fused traitors bellowed their last as their cursed halves were torn into the void. Possessed war-engines fell silent. Greyfax screamed wordlessly as the Immaterium-purging grasp of the pylons clawed at her mind. Righteous anger her anchor on reality's shores, she clung to the precipice, refusing to yield. Even Abaddon staggered under the assault, but the Despoiler had ever stood as much apart from his dark patrons as at their side, and he endured the fading of their blessings with snarling fortitude.

Others were not so fortunate. The Legion of the Damned, their presence in the mortal world ever inconstant, blinked out like wind-guttered candles, their flames snuffed by the pylons' power. Even Celestine, the manifestation of the Emperor's will, grew dim. The golden light faded, and with it the hopes of Mankind.

Faith – the same faith that had sustained Cadia's defence in those darkest of hours – began to recede. Valour faded alongside, not just from within the ranks of Creed's swollen regiment, but also among the Kappic Eagles and the Vostroyans so recently set loose from Trazyn's prison. As for the Black Legion, they cared not that the better part of their Daemon host was swept away, and the remainder weakened. They saw only the physical



proof of their ancient belief – the False Emperor's light was fading – and took new strength from the sight.

The battle for the nodal cavern shifted, its pace quickening. Orven Highfell died amongst his snarling brethren, gauntlets locked about a Bloodthirster's throat even as the beast tore him apart. Wulfen avenged him, ripping the Daemon asunder with fang and claw. But one by one, they too succumbed to their wounds, the wake of dead and dying traitors one last offering to the Allfather.

Creed stood firm, the 8th with him. Their example spread to the stern men of Vostroya. The Kappic Eagles, determined that the Scions of the Schola Progenium would not be outdone by mere guardsmen, found their courage in pride.

Through it all, the duel of ideologies wore on; the Despoiler on one side, the Living Saint and her Geminae Superia upon the other. What had begun as an equal battle now favoured Abaddon. Before the Dark Gods had blessed him, he had stood amongst the greatest of the Adeptus Astartes, seldom bested in battle. Bereft of the Emperor's Light, Celestine was a mortal shell, reborn too many times from the tides of the Immaterium. Her handmaidens were extensions of her faded light, weakened by the Immaterium's recession. Though their resolve didn't waver, the outcome was never in doubt.

Eleanor spiralled away from the duel, blood oozing from her lips. Black Guard closed around Genevieve, a wall of Terminator armour and roaring chainblades that even her blessed sword could not pierce. Again and again, the Ardent Blade clashed with Drach'nyen, but Celestine's efforts were now given over solely to her own defence, and even these desperate parries grew weaker with every stroke. At last, a backhand blow cast Celestine to her knees.

Creed saw the Living Saint fall, and knew at once that her death would mark the end of all they had striven for. Bellowing orders, he threw the 8th forward in one last, desperate charge. Drach'nyen slashed down. Celestine screamed and convulsed.

As Abaddon raised the Daemon-blade for a second strike, the Living Saint clambered unsteadily to her feet, one hand clamped over a bloody gash in her armour's side, but her gaze unfaltering.

Celestine knew no fear as she met the Despoiler's black gaze. All unfolded according to the Emperor's Will. He would catch her if she fell, as he had before. 'You cannot win. Mankind will be free of your masters.'

The pale brow tightened with unreadable emotion. 'There is no freedom.'

Drach'nyen speared forward.





Agony exploded behind Abaddon's eyes. Searing pain arced across his synapses. Neurons flared and died, consumed by an attack channelled through the fading skeins of the Immaterium. His Daemon-blade, meant to pierce Celestine's heart, froze mid-strike.

Katarinya Greyfax gritted her teeth, channelling into her psychic assault all the rage she had known since her reawakening. Though she was loathe to admit it, Trazyn had been correct – her priorities had strayed. An Inquisitor's duty was to the Imperium, not to her own slighted being. Moreover, while all heresies must be purged by flame, some clamoured for its caress more urgently than others. Retribution would find the false saint – of that Greyfax was certain – but Abaddon's sins held the prior claim.

Blinded and staggering, the Despoiler fought back, his indomitable will meeting the psychic fire with some of its own. Strength already sapped by her constant battle against the pylons' pull, Greyfax's hold on his mind snapped. But she wasn't yet done. As the malediction faded, the Inquisitor's condemnor boltgun roared.

Shells scattering off his armour, Abaddon started towards Celestine once more. A rush of bayonets blocked his path. The Cadian 8th were determined to preserve their beloved saint, even at the cost of their lives. And die they did, by the dozen, by the score, hacked apart as the Despoiler strove to reach the wounded Celestine. With their blood, they bought the saint precious moments.

The chamber shuddered. The nodal pylon flared again. Ceding war mode functions to his secondary and tertiary consciousnesses, Archmagos Cawl interrogated the datastreams from his surviving servitors. It was working. The impossible was coming to pass. The Cadian pylon fields, dormant for thousands upon thousands of years, were actually pushing back the Eye of Terror's warped embrace. Across the cavern, Daemons lost their last foothold in realspace, cast back into oblivion by the pylons' black light, leaving behind naught but the bodies of their victims.

In space above, navigators lost their bearings. The Cadian Gate, a legend of becalmed Warp-tides since the earliest days of the Imperium, grew motionless as a frozen millpond. The layered void shields of *Phalanx* collapsed to nothing as their connections to the Immaterium faded. Teleport relays flickered, their transit corridors defusing as the Warp receded. From *Phalanx*'s strategium, Commodore Trevaux took in the rush of reports, and wondered what it all meant. Ahead, beyond the jet-black utterance of Cadia's pylons, Chaos cruisers broke cover from amongst the *Will of Eternity*'s debris field and drove hard for the safety of the Black Fleet's big guns. As recon Thunderhawks burned towards the Blackstone's grave, Trevaux kept a suspicious eye fixed the auspex holo-grid. His instincts screamed of imminent danger, but his conscious mind saw none. Unprepared to embrace one over the other, Trevaux watched and waited for new data.

Abaddon stood like a rock jutting in a river of flesh and bone, Drach'nyen carving a bloody swath with every strike. The Despoiler and the wounded saint became the battle's focus – every soul within the nodal chamber, living or damned, knew that victory or defeat turned upon the fate of those champions. The Terminators of the Black Legion regained their master's side, only to come under renewed fire from hot-shot lasguns. The Vostroyan XXI were torn apart by a counter-charge of power-armoured Chosen. The stalemate ground on, a battle bloody enough to whet Khorne's appetites, had only the Lord of Battles been able to peer through the growing dead zone of the Cadian pylon field.

Slowly, the fate of the northern flank turned, the Black Legion driven from the beleaguered Kappic Eagles by the massed fire of Cawl's maniples. Seizing the opportunity, Greyfax rejoined the embattled Shock Troopers, her every barked order laced with unambiguous threat. More afraid of the grim Inquisitor than the guns of the Black Legion, the Eagles advanced.

Taking command of a Kasrkin platoon, Creed led another charge across the bloody ground. The Lord Castellan had no doubts about his ability to match Abaddon might for might, but the Astra Militarum's way had ever been to overcome with numbers that which could not be bested through skill.

Trazyn the Infinite watched the battle from a rocky perch, aware that history unfolded before him. His taste for glory had faded, replaced by the urge to claim a trinket from the momentous hour. Perhaps a thief was all he was meant to be. Metal fingers toyed with a tesseract labyrinth, its unfathomable dimensions fit to carry a single trophy from embattled Cadia. But what should that trophy be? So many prizes worthy of preservation clamoured for attention. A stray culverin blast shuddered Trazyn's stalagmite, and he retired to safer ground. The tesseract would wait. Whatever his prize, its historic value would only increase as the course of victory tipped one way or the other.

Creed sighted along his pistol, and sent a laser burst through a Chaos Terminator's cracked eyepiece. Before him, a gout of Warp-tainted promethium immolated a file of Kasrkin. A dark shape loomed through the flames, eyes burning like coals. The Talon of Horus roared, snatching the rest of Creed's escort into oblivion.

The air was thick with the screams of burning Kasrkin, the roar of gunfire and the Black Legion's harsh oaths. Creed twisted around, searching for allies in the dust and smoke. He found none, only the dead.

'Cadia stands!' Creed bellowed the mantra. No other voice took up the cry.

Mocking laughter cut across the cacophony. Creed raised his pistols, sending shot after shot into Abaddon's path. One raised a livid wound upon the Despoiler's pale brow. The others refracted across his baroque armour.

'Cadia is dead!' thundered Abaddon. 'Even now, its doom comes.'

The monstrous lightning claw lashed out. Creed fell amongst the dead, blood oozing from a ravaged arm, electricity arcing across his armour. His pistols had gone – one cast aside by the claw's strike, the other slipping from a bloodied hand whose fingers had been sliced away. Yet Creed felt no fear, only defiance. 'Cadia lives while but one of its soldiers fights on.'

Crackling talons closed around Creed's neck, hoisting him effortlessly into the air. 'I set this world's fate in motion before I even made planetfall. But for hubris, I would never have set foot here at all. Your games with the pylons have only reinforced the folly of pride.'

Creed clawed at the talons with his one good hand. They might as well have been carved from stone.

'But now?' rumbled Abaddon. 'The corpse-bride has fled. The will of Cadia is broken. The Imperium will follow. I do you the honour of being the last to die by my hand. Take solace in the knowledge that this benighted world will not long outlast you.' Abaddon drew Creed in, choking off his attempts to speak. 'Cadia has fallen.'

Abaddon's grip tightened. The vertebrae of Creed's neck ground together. As darkness closed in, the Lord Castellan knew only shame. Cadia had stood proud for ten thousand years only to fall under his watch. The humiliation of failed duty was worse than any death.

A roar of pain dragged Creed out of the darkness. A golden figure, pale as death, stood behind the Despoiler, her sword thrust deep into his spine. The talons snapped open, and Creed fell.

'The Emperor protects,' breathed Celestine.

THE DEATH OF DEFIANCE

Abaddon lurched away from Celestine, her blade ripping free of his flesh. The wound seethed as if aflame. It had been millennia since he had last been hurt so, and his spirit boiled with the need for revenge. But as the Cadian 8th surged to reclaim their beloved general, Abaddon realised he had no time for the luxury of pride. The last vestiges of the Warp were retreating before the pylons' arcane energies. If he were to depart, it would have to be now. Reluctantly, his eyes never leaving Celestine's, Abaddon gave the order to withdraw.

As the *Vengeful Spirit*'s teleport anchors engaged, the honourable warrior Abaddon had once been acknowledged the feat Cadia's defenders had managed. They had lost, though they did not yet know it. But they had also won. He had sought to break Cadia's spirit, send the vanquished souls of its garrisons screaming into the Warp. He had not done so.

Before the defenders' incredulous gazes, azure lighting crackled across the nodal cavern, and the surviving warriors of the Black Legion faded into nothingness. Creed pulled angrily away from the medic attempting to treat his hand, blinking away afterimages as the implications hammered home. *I set this world's fate in motion before I even made planetfall,* Abaddon had said. The Lord Castellan wished he could believe the words were mere bravado, but his heavy heart knew otherwise.

Following the sudden cessation, Archmagos Cawl's first thought was to recheck the nodal grid's function. Finding it satisfactory, he secured from war mode, and took inventory of his remaining forces. Greyfax shook with the effort of keeping her soul centred as the Warp-vacuum sought to claim it. Trazyn slipped the tesseract labyrinth beneath his cloak, and regretfully allowed that Ezekyle Abaddon would not grace his collection – at least not that day. As for Celestine, the Living Saint stared upward, through the ruined cavern roof and into the starlit skies beyond, her manner that of one who already knew what would happen next.

The void in Greyfax's mind grew larger, black and hungry against the red rage of her thoughts. Her weapons fell from numbed hands. She knew that to yield to it was to embrace oblivion, but still the temptation was there. She staggered, and sought to right herself before one of her bodyguard could help her do so. A hand seized Greyfax's shoulder and steadied her. Not that of a Tempestus Scion, but the heretic Celestine.

'Endure,' said the false saint. 'It will not be forever.'

Greyfax lurched away, the suddenness of the motion shooting fresh spikes of pain through her mind. 'Touch me not, witch.'

Celestine's lips curled into a supercilious smile. 'If I am a witch, then why did you save me?'

'I struck at another. It is not the same.'

'Or perhaps the Emperor's hand guided you, as it guided me.'

'A miracle?' The throbbing pain made the disdain all the easier.

'Some call them so.'

'There are no miracles,' spat Greyfax. 'Only delusions. I will break your heresy. You will beg for death.' The void in her mind pulsed. Again she staggered. Again Celestine caught her.

'We shall see,' said the false saint. Letting go of the Inquisitor's shoulder, she walked away.



On the surface, the Thunderhawks of the Crimson Slaughter and warped drop-ships of the Traitor Legions braved the defenders' fire, retrieving whatever dark brothers and Daemon Engines they could. The Cultists and heretic citizenry, never more than fodder to weary Cadia's guns, were abandoned to their fate.

Tor Garadon rallied what remained of the Imperial Fists. Scarce a score of battle-brothers from the 3rd Company still fought, some through horrendous wounds. Of the 1st, only Sergeant Furan remained. Garadon was struck by the irony. The 3rd had only been on *Phalanx* because they had been considered too inexperienced to join the chapter's Crusade of Vengeance. Those who remained had nothing more to prove – assuming they survived what was to come next. By contrast, Marshal Amalrich's Black Templars harried the retreating traitors, slaughtering the crew of one drop-ship before they could take flight, and bringing another two down with missile fire.

Even discounting Amalrich's efforts, not all the Black Legion arrived safely



at their destination. Caught in the turbulent currents of the Warp, scores were torn apart or simply scattered as monomolecular dust across Cadia's atmosphere. But Abaddon survived, bloody and consumed with fury at his failure. From the *Vengeful Spirit*'s strategium, he sounded the knell of Cadia's doom.

Deep within the *Will of Eternity*'s debris cloud, Warpsmiths heard Abaddon's order. All across the largest fragment of debris – a mass of ancient stone the size of a small moon – banks of plasma drives roared into life. The Blackstone's corpse shuddered as the engines fought to overcome the inertia of orbit. Then, slowly at first, but with ever-increasing velocity, the ungainly missile broke orbit, and roared planetwards.

Across the Black Fleet, plasma drives blazed as soon as the last drop-ships were aboard, pulling away from atmosphere at whatever speed their captains could urge. As the *Vengeful Spirit* led the exodus, Abaddon beheld the blue-grey orb of Cadia one last time. For ten thousand years, that world had been as much his foe as the warriors that garrisoned its fortresses. But nothing defied the will of Chaos forever. Nothing defied *his* will forever. Loosing a peal of dark laughter, the Despoiler decanted a draught of brulkwine into a chalice fashioned from the skull of Fabius Bile's clone of Horus and toasted the death of one ancient foe with the remains of another.

Aboard *Phalanx*, Commodore Trevaux at least realised the Chaos cruisers' purpose within the debris cloud, and ordered the battle-station's batteries to engage the improvised missile. But in death, the Blackstone resisted *Phalanx*'s fire as it had failed to do in life. A section of the ramshackle drive-train went dark beneath the bombardment, but by then Cadia's gluttonous gravity well had seized the plunging Blackstone. All Trevaux could do was broadcast a warning to those on the planet's surface.

Down the Blackstone wreckage plunged, its outer edge blazing red with atmospheric friction. But the *Will of Eternity* had been forged to withstand fiercer fires than any that nature could provide. Though the last of the Warpsmiths perished, their hab-shelters burned away by Cadia's wrath, the main body plunged on, a bolt of flaming brimstone cast from Abaddon's dark hand.

All upon the planet's surface heard the Blackstone's coming. Its soul-wrenching onset screeched through the quickening winds, its presence already disrupting the complex web of thermals and weather patterns across the beleaguered planet. On Cadia Tertius, half a world away from the slaughter of the Elysion Fields, the defenders of scattered garrisons deemed too insignificant for Abaddon's attention beheld the Blackstone's onset as a pinprick of fire amidst shrieking skies. At first, it was taken for a ship's reactor going critical in outer orbit. But as the moments ticked passed, and the fireball grew ever larger, it became clear that the light heralded an altogether different scale of disaster.

Winds howling about it, the artificial meteor impacted Cadia.



THE FALL OF CADIA

Report Z111/8T39

Sent: Agripinaa

Received: Cypra Mundi

Sender: Mechasapient Devan Cauxos

Status Report Chi-13

Siegeworks proceed as anticipated, within acceptable margin of error.

The orbital flux-grid has proven disappointing, resulting only in the destruction of a single Executor-class grand cruiser. However, all counter-batteries are operating to within 0.5% of intended efficiency. Of an estimated traitor fleet strength of thirty capital ships, five are disabled, and three more show signs of weakness.

Unbeliever landings are hampered by Agripinaa's blessed atmosphere. Equatorial hive-fortresses report successful repulsions. Polar Hive Acrastos defences have been overwhelmed by blasphemous forge-born. Legio Cybernetica XXX and XXIX despatched to reinforce. Polar Hive Horaxes holds though intervention of Adeptus Astartes bearing the sigil of the Space Wolves 13th Company. Magos Biologis Tagran confirms feral behaviour associated mass destabilisation of Canis Helix (cf Wulfen). Hive Horaxes to be sealed. We give thanks to the Omnissiah for their sacrifice.

Without further reinforcement, it is predicted Agripinaa will hold for two Terran weeks. Current projections estimate the heretic fleet can sustain these losses for a further five Terran weeks. Thus, by the bonds of cog and creed, and on behalf of Agripinaa's Council Munitorum, I hereby request reinforcement, that our great works may continue in the Omnissiah's name.

Cadia shuddered, impossible forces jarring it loose of age-old orbit.

The survivors clinging to the ruined fortresses of Cadia Tertius barely had time to scream. Those beneath the vast impact site perished first, super-heated wind roaring in their ears before it seared flesh from bone, and reduced bone to scattered ash.

The Blackstone remnant struck, gouging a crater hundreds of miles in breadth. Mountains crumbled to dust. Seas vanished into plumes of scalding steam. Continental plates rumbled and groaned as they shifted beneath titanic forces not seen since Cadia first cooled from the star-stuff of the galactic void.

The tremors spread, tidal waves and screaming particulate winds their heralds. Coastal bastions that had survived bombardment and siege drowned beneath the unnatural tide, ripped from their foundations and dragged beneath the squalling seas. The island of Ran Storn vanished entirely, its shell-ravaged landing fields drowned beneath the waves. A thousand miles inland on Cadia Secundus, the enduring spires of Kasr Vark at last fell, smashed apart by waters of the Caducades Sea as the tidal shelves buckled.

Forests that had been old when Mankind first settled Cadia burned away in the briefest of moments. Crustal platelets shattered and split, the furious life-blood of the world boiling forth. Long-dormant volcanoes flared to life along the Rossvar Mountains, pyroclastic flows consuming all in their path. The great killing fields of Tyrok, site of Creed's ascension, split asunder and vanished into magma-lit gloom, swallowed by the world's torment.

At the Elysion Fields, half a world away from the impact site, they heard the roar of the winds, and saw the dark onrush of particulate clouds that blocked out the sun. The canny sought what cover they could amongst the pylons and ruined war machines. The slow-witted perished, torn apart by the vaporised bones of Cadia. The prayers of Battle Sisters and Cultists alike were snatched away by the planet's dying breath, unheard by any deity or saint. In the nodal cavern, the ceiling cracked wider yet, raining boulders down on Creed's bloodied victors.

The winds grew, hurling tanks across the pylon fields, crushing those who had sought shelter beneath them. Ancient pylons gave up their grasp on the bedrock, toppling like petrified trees. The pylon field's beam of dark light flickered as the monoliths fell. The retreat of the Immaterium faltered, and then slowly reversed.

The storm raged for minutes that seemed eternities, and then fell away into hurricane winds. They blew over a world forever altered. Cadia Tertius was gone, obliterated by fire and drowned beneath howling seas. The Krian Fault, bane of Cadia Tertius since the Age of Strife, had ruptured one last, fateful time, and the planetary crust split apart. Cadia Primus was half-drowned, its forested mountainsides now isolated islands scattered across a new ocean. Cadia Secundus lay wreathed in fire, its continental plates sinking as the pressure of their neighbours forced them steadily inwards. None of it mattered. Cadia was already dead.



But even then, there was worse to come. As the aftershocks of impact rippled through the dying rock, more pylons shattered against the dust-strewn tundra – not just at the Elysion Fields, but at the lesser sites of Kasarn, Trosk and Vorg. As the pylons fell, the nodal web stuttered, and then withered entirely. The dark light beam, Cawl's spear into the heart of the Eye of Terror, flickered once more, and died. A new sound pealed through the howling winds – the dark laughter of gods too long denied their prize. The crimson maelstrom of the Eye of Terror pulsed anew, and reached out to embrace sundered Cadia.

Cawl felt the nodal grid pull apart, the remaining pylons no match for the pressure of the resurgent Immaterium. Through his third consciousness, he dimly acknowledged the screams and the grinding of tortured rock. Then he slaved all his attention to the task at hand.

The Archmagos' secondary consciousness translated the alien whisper of the pylons to a static-filled flow of Lingua Technis. Gaps appeared in the binharic equations, untranslatable fragments glowing with green fire. They had not been there before. Their presence confirmed the growing instability of the grid.

No! He would not fail, not after coming so close!

As Cawl's tertiary mind approximated translation for the unfamiliar code, his primary consciousness tightened its grip, as if to hold together the grid by will alone. His optics scoured the shuddering cavern for any trace of Trazyn – but of the Necron, there was no sign. Curse him! And curse Veilwalker too, for setting him on this course. Failure changed nothing. Worse, it had jeopardised the pact. A ten thousand year geas, now thrown into jeopardy by perfidious xenos!

Rage overwhelmed the logic calculations of Cawl's tri-fold mind, passionless composure wilting beneath the realisation of his folly. The pylons were not the Omnissiah's work. And yet, blinded by pride, he had sought to bind them to holy purpose. He had erred, been seduced from the precepts of Mars by vainglory.

Skeins of binharic code slipped into dust beneath Cawl's grip. Equations breathed through his mind, more alien now than recognisable. He felt the nodal grid convulse, the last bindings falling away as critical pylons fell, a dark cancerous presence flooding across Cadia's surface, rapacious, unstoppable. As the last binharic skeins slipped free of his grip, Cawl finally recognised his folly. The door he had sought to close forever had swung open wider than before. Tri-fold mind atremble, he disengaged from the dying grid.

'Cadia is lost,' he breathed.





Save for the presence of the pylons, the Immaterium would have claimed Cadia long ago. The long-dead artisans who had set the pylon fields in Cadia's living rock could not have foreseen the Eye of Terror's cataclysmic birth, could not have known the vital bulwark their works would become. But now, with the pylons' fall, the tendrils of the Warp laid their first loving caress upon Cadian realspace, and the Daemons of the Dark Gods spilled forth.

These were not the flickering manifestations so lately loosed upon the world, their presence in realspace under constant challenge by the pylons' power. These were the gods' servants, hale and whole, fed by the raw stuff of Chaos. They first appeared amidst drowned Cadia Tertius, where the Blackstone's demise had torn a rent in reality's veil. But as the Eye of Terror slipped its ancient bounds, the rifts multiplied, dragging the beleaguered world into the bowels of the Immaterium.

Dark laughter echoed across skies still choked with particulate matter. Cadia's surviving psykers, at last freed from the tyranny of the pylons, came under new assault from the perils of the Warp. Most were slain at the hand of former allies, their possessed bodies ripped apart by las and bolter fire as flesh reshaped into new and terrible forms. Only those with a will of iron held back the Daemons clawing at their thoughts, and only Katarinya Greyfax found the strength of mind to repel them entirely.

And yet, in that darkest hour, hope was reborn, for the restoration of the Immaterium saw also the renewed ascension of Celestine and her Geminae Superia. The Light of the Emperor restored, she led the survivors out of the chamber and into the wasteland of the Elysion Fields. None recognised the sight they beheld. Magma wended its sluggish path amidst the fallen pylons, consuming the bodies of the dead and their armaments of war. Here and there across the plains, sporadic fire rang out as the first Daemons clawed their way onto the war-torn fields.

As the scant survivors of the Elysion Fields converged, drawn like flaremoths to Celestine's light,

the Cadian 8th once again looked to Creed for leadership. For the first time since he had joined the Whiteshields, so many years ago, none was forthcoming. The Lord Castellan looked out upon the ruin of his world, his Cadia, and knew only despair.

Recognising that Creed's mind now roamed distant fields, and determined not to allow authority to fall into Celestine's dubious hands, Greyfax seized command. Using what remained of the planetary vox-net, she issued the evacuation order. Cadia had fallen – even if it endured the physical trauma of the Blackstone's collision, the Warp would soon claim it. Victory in the Imperium's name was worth the sacrifice of thousands, of millions, but the Inquisitor knew no victory could any longer be had on Cadia. Every living soul abandoned upon its sundered shores was but a sacrifice to the Dark Gods. Greyfax expected Celestine to challenge her order, to exhort Cadia to one last, glorious stand. But the golden saint merely took wing north through the howling winds to carry her blade against the Daemons assailing the surviving Adepta Sororitas.

Thus began the last exodus of Cadia. From across the globe they came, in landing craft and transport vessels barely fit to fly, plasma drives burning hard for the safety of *Phalanx* and the rag-tag fleet sheltering in its shadow.

Not all came safe to their destinations. The overburdened engines failed amidst the howling winds, condemning their cargo to stomach-lurching freefall until the oblivion of impact. Others were peeled apart by winged Daemons, or simply had their weakened hulls implode under the fantastic pressures. The Cadian 27th perished to the last man as their Tetrarch's pilot succumbed to Warp-cast madness and ploughed the limping behemoth into the remains of the Trados Mountains.

Heldrakes and Harbingers, operating far from the trailing edge of the Black Fleet, risked the savage winds to spill more blood for the Dark Gods. Dogfights unfolded amongst swirling dust storms as the last of the Imperial Fists' Stormhawk Interceptors sought to clear the skies. Yet they were too few to keep the foe contained, and the evacuation fields of Elysion became shell-riddled mausoleums.

Elsewhere, the evacuation was dogged by the panic of stampeding masses. Just as the Immaterium came to consume Cadia, terror sought to devour its populace. Some regiments kept their order. Others disintegrated into mindless mobs, clambering atop overloaded transports in their desperation to escape. At Kasr Luten and Kasr Gorsk, officers ordered their Kasrkin to fire into the crowds, and disorder became full-blooded riot.

At the Elysion Fields, the evacuation became a fighting retreat, every transport a target for soul-hungry Daemons. In the north, Celestine's Adepta Sororitas slowly gave ground, but at a high cost to their foes. To the south, the tale was the same – the Daemons there were held by a ragged line of guardsmen, buttressed at either end by Garadon's Imperial Fists and the Black Templars of the Cruxis Crusade. But despite their heroism, it soon became clear to Greyfax that the evacuation fields would soon be overrun. Flight-worthy craft were too few, and growing scarcer with each passing moment. Some would have to be sacrificed for the rest to escape.

It was then that Creed at last roused himself from despair. The Lord Castellan's own would hold Cadia one last time, he decreed. They would buy the time needed, as Cadia ever had, with an offering of blood and bone. Orders were issued, their bleak consequence plain to all who heard, but the Cadian 8th did not blanche at the duty placed before them. There was not one amongst them who did not feel the cold hand of fear, but none broke ranks or attempted desertion. Creed was Cadia, but more than that, he was of the 8th. He had led the regiment safely through fire and death where others had been consumed. There was not one amongst those ranks who did not owe the Lord Castellan their lives, and all accepted that the debt was due.

As the last transports soared into the hellish skies, the 8th fought and died amongst the ruins of their world. The Sisters of Our Martyred Lady and Marshal Amalrich's Black Templars were the last to depart, their bloodied survivors crowding aboard transports sent from the *Iron Revenant* to reclaim the Knights of House Taranis. Greyfax departed with them, her suspicious eye ever upon Celestine. But as the landing thrusters flared, the Inquisitor thought she heard a bellowed cry, clear and proud over the howling winds and the roar of cannons. It was a deep voice, bowed by the horrors of war, but not unbroken – defiant to the last.

Cadia stands!

Creed waved his maimed hand in the air, signalling his troops and bellowing to be heard over the fury of the wind. 'Fall back! Fall back!'

With a shudder, the Cadian line shrank towards the evacuation fields. The winds rose, stirring the dust-storm to new heights. Suddenly Creed was alone. A flame-chased shadow passed overhead, the cog-toothed skull of the Adeptus Mechanicus emblazoned on its flanks. Las-fire lanced from its prow, provoking daemonic screams from deeper within dust-storm. Then engines roared, and the transport thundered skywards. The last transport. Cadia was now little more than a graveyard, haunted by the stubborn and the dead.

Creed stumbled. Despite the medics' labours, his wounds still bled. He felt his strength ebbing as his lifeblood seeped into the greatcoat's fabric. One last effort. Then he'd rest. One last effort.

The storm parted – not before a Daemon, but a metal giant in a scaled cloak. The wind snatched away Creed's hurried shot. Light glittered upon the figure's upraised palm, iridescent polygons billowing in a hypnotic dance.

'Ursarkar E. Creed.' The giant's words slammed down like tombstones. 'This need not be your end. Eternity awaits.'

The giant's laughter followed Creed into darkness.

Report R563/2G35

Sent: Thracian Primaris

Received: Scarus Sector Command Relay Theta-Rho

Sender: Office Adjudico: Lord Thybault Helican XXIII

Lord Commander Balchor,

It is with the greatest urgency that I must request immediate and substantial reinforcement for the worlds of this system. Within the last thirty-six hours sidereal, outsystem monitor stations and empyric beacons have returned readings that can only be described as alarming in the extreme. Astropath mortality stands at 46% and climbing, with all omens pointing towards dire and immediate threat. A vast, fanged maw, they say, yawning wide to devour all light.

We are seeing such ferocious disturbance in the Warp that all nonessential void transit has been temporarily forbidden, while the Lord Judiciary of the Thracian Primaris Arbites has reported an increase in deviant cult activity in excess of 400% planet-wide.

Coupled with the reports we have heard regarding the renewed traitor offensive against the Cadian Gate, and the ominous Inquisitorial edicts that have been circulated through this court, I hardly need to spell out to you the severity of the developing situation. Lord Commander, you know as well as I that Thracian Primaris stands as the lynchpin of this sub-sector. In the Emperor's name, send us all the strength you can spare. I fear that we shall need it all and more in the days ahead.

Throne Regnum Eternum,

Lord Thybalt Helican XXIII

IN THE TEETH OF THE STORM

And so, a shrunken fleet of battered vessels and weary souls left Cadia's orbit, and set course for the system's edge. The Eye of Terror, no longer contained, spilled from its ancient bounds, a crimson trail of roiling flame bleeding through the Cadian Gate and into the galaxy.

There was no jubilation aboard the fleet, no sense of victory, despite the odds endured. Too many had perished before Greyfax issued her evacuation order, and even then a bare fraction of Cadia's surviving outposts had heard the desperate vox-cast. At the Thirteenth Black Crusade's inception, Cadia had been a world of some 850 million souls. Scarce three million now sought salvation from Abaddon's forces. The legend of Cadia might yet one day endure on another, distant world, but now its bloodlines teetered on the brink.

From the outset, Warp travel was decreed unwise, the starships' navigators unable to see safe routes through the Immaterium. With the fall of the pylons, the navigable corridor of the Cadian Gate was collapsing in upon itself – there was no surer way to embrace oblivion than risk those turbulent tides. So it was that the fleet's plasma drives were pushed up to – and sometimes beyond – their limits.

Once more under Tor Garadon's command, *Phalanx* took the lead, the threat of its guns driving traitor cruisers from the evacuation's path. Behind came the battle-scarred vessels of the Imperial Navy, and those few civilian craft that had survived Cadia's fall. Last came the Mechanicus vessels of Belisarius Cawl. The Adepts of Mars had come late to the Cadian war zone, and their ships were the least damaged as a consequence. As the evacuee fleet crawled beyond the horizon of Cadia's gravity well, this changed.

Inured to the dangers of travel within the Eye of Terror's corona, Abaddon's most opportunistic captains now swarmed in relentless pursuit. The void blazed with light as waves of corsairs braved the Adeptus Mechanicus broadsides to claim prizes amongst the retreating fleet. All perished, their atoms scattered across the collapsing Cadian Gate by the unfaltering fire of Cawl's fleet, but few without leaving their mark.

Twenty hours into the retreat, the Dictator-class cruiser *Hand of Satarael* was crippled by enemy fire, to the loss of all hands and ten thousand souls. In the next ten hours, two frigates and a light cruiser met the same fate. Cawl bore the losses stoically, interpreting them as penance for his hubris on Cadia, and exhorted his servitor-crews to further effort.

Forty hours into the retreat, the plasma drives failed on the agri-hauler, *Pride of St. Cerephos*. Faced with the choice of risking the whole fleet for the sake of those crammed like a slaughter-herd into the hauler's hold, Garadon took aboard what sparse transport craft escaped the wreck, but reluctantly abandoned the *Pride* to the enemy. The captains of the *Emperor's Wrath* and *Dominus Victor*, appalled at Garadon's pragmatism, defied his orders and went to the *Pride*'s aid.

Their choice proved noble, but foolish. Scarce half of the Cadian soldiers aboard the *Pride of St. Cerephos* had been taken aboard the two battleships when the leading edge of the Black Fleet caught up with them. *Emperor's Wrath* died without ever disengaging its docking beams, torn apart by a traitor's broadside. *Dominus Victor* broke away, fires blazing all along its starboard flank but its plasma drives roaring at full force. With fortune and perseverance, it might even have regained the safety of Cawl's rearguard, had not its captain been slain during the fight. In panic, his subordinate ordered an emergency Warp jump, even knowing the dangers such a course presented. What heading he ordered was a mystery, for *Dominus Victor* never emerged from the Immaterium, the panic of those within a delicacy for thirsting Slaanesh. Thus another quarter million fell to the Black Fleet's guns – a tenth of whom had perished through naught save misguided compassion.

The red orb of Cadia was barely a pinprick of light against the void. Scarce a day had passed, and it was already succumbing to the Eye of Terror's baleful influence. It would make a fine Daemon world, Abaddon decided, if the tectonic forces he'd set loose did not see it destroyed first. It mattered little either way. After ten millennia of preparation, the Crimson Path was now ready for him to tread. The only question was whether it would bring him to Terra before it split the galaxy asunder. Again, it mattered little either way.

He turned from the viewport as the strategium's doors rumbled open. Zaraphiston advanced across the rusted deck, the clawed foot of his Warp-stave clicking against the decaying mesh. 'My Lord Abaddon, why do we not pursue?'

Abaddon frowned, leaning forward on the obsidian table that stood between them. A bold question – too bold for obsequious Zaraphiston. 'The loyalists are beaten. Let the curs of the fleet snap at their heels. They are worth no more than that.'

The sorcerer crossed to the viewport, his eyes settling upon the red orb of Cadia, transfixed upon the Crimson Path. 'But one vessel carries something precious.'

Abaddon sneered. 'There is nothing of any value aboard Phalanx.*'*

Zaraphiston's third eye blinked. His lips curled into a knowing smile. 'I do not speak of Phalanx. *The Ark Mechanicus. The relic that lies within its stasis hold.'*

Unease prickled at Abaddon's thoughts. 'What have you seen? What have the auguries told you?'

Zaraphiston spoke a name. One Abaddon had put from his thoughts long ago. It seemed impossible, but such words had as much currency now as they had when Horus first set foot on Davin.

Lost to sudden rage, the Despoiler brought his fist down on the table, shattering it into two. Zaraphiston stepped back, his smile fading.



In an effort to avoid further losses, Garadon slowed *Phalanx*'s pace so as not to place unnecessary strain on vessels already overburdened. The least space-worthy vessels were brought aboard *Phalanx*'s foredeck hangars, their hatches sealed tight to prevent the curious or treacherous entering the battle-fortress proper. Having almost lost *Phalanx* to invasion weeks earlier, Garadon refused to take any chances with it now – especially as the fury of its guns was the only thing keeping Abaddon's capital ships at a respectful distance.

Still the losses mounted – fatigue now as deadly a foe as the corsairs of Abaddon's fleet. Sleep was but a memory, banished by the chems consumed with rations during the long hours at battle-quarters. Two days after *Dominus Victor*'s disappearance, mistakes by a weary gunnery crew aboard the *Toxra Clavius* saw the destroyer's superstructure blown apart, setting



the ship adrift. Within hours of that disaster, a Primaris Psyker aboard *Hades XII* succumbed to the whispers in his waking dreams. The emergent Keeper of Secrets rampaged across three decks before the Whiteshields of the Cadian 79th – by now as veteran in thought and deed as any of their comrades – brought it down with unrelenting las-fire. Even after the Daemon was purged, Garadon ordered *Hades XII* quarantined from the rest of the fleet. That status remained until Cawl's Ark Mechanicus, acting under Katarinya Greyfax's orders, blasted the destroyer to twisted scrap to prevent any possibility of the heresy within infecting others.

One hundred and twelve hours into the retreat, at the very moment that the Daemon World once known as Cadia finally succumbed to its fiery death-throes, the evacuation fleet approached the outer orbit of Klaisus, Kasr Holn's icy moon. *Phalanx*'s Navigators at last pronounced the tides of the Warp clear enough to attempt travel. Of the twenty-nine ships that had left Cadia, sixteen remained, bearing just over two and a half million souls between them.

It was in that hour that the capital ships of the Black Fleet lost their apparent fear of *Phalanx*'s guns.

They dropped out of Warp transit just inside weapons range – ten of the Black Fleet's mightiest vessels, the *Vengeful Spirit* at their head. A mix of grand cruisers and battleships, they drove hard for the evacuation fleet's Adeptus Mechanicus rearguard, eschewing the oblique advance favoured by captains seeking to minimise their losses. Abaddon had come, and hell rode upon his heels.

Panicked comm-bursts crackled across *Phalanx*'s strategium, cut off one by one as the vessels of the evacuee fleet slipped into the relative safety of the Warp. Cruisers, heavy transports, freighters, mining scows – all departed the system for the last time, grateful to have escaped Cadia's doom, but fearful of the future that lay ahead. Garadon had time for a single heartfelt curse before *Phalanx* followed, its countdown too far advanced for safe interruption. With the yawning and creaking of strained metal, the mighty battle-fortress let slip the anchors of realspace and plunged into the Immaterium. Cawl's fleet, their departure deliberately staggered to guard against any vessel being left stranded, was alone.

The first shells burst amongst Cawl's formation. Fired at such extreme range, accuracy was impossible. Thus, it was only the most damnable ill-fortune that saw one shell explode against the Ark Mechanicus' aft shields. The detonation knocked two of the vessel's plasma drives out of alignment – far worse, it crippled the *Iron Revenant*'s Gellar fields. For Cawl, and all aboard his ship, there could be no escape into the Warp.

Consumed with fear at the prospect of losing his sacred cargo, Cawl brought the *Iron Revenant* about to an evasion heading. As their flagship sought to make its escape, the remainder of the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet swung around into blockade formation, their captains accepting without question the sacrifice required of them. The last surviving interceptors boiled from their hangers. The first salvoes roared silently away into the void, raking the oncoming cruisers. Of all Cawl's fleet, only the Ark Mechanicus could match one of Abaddon's vessels broadside to broadside – and even then the *Iron Revenant*'s weaponry was but a pale shadow of the *Vengeful Spirit*'s – but the directness of the Chaos fleet's approach offered initial fire superiority.

Salvo after salvo pounded the traitor vessels, overloading shields and buckling armour. Servitor crews laboured with mechanical efficiency, loading and firing without trace of the fatigue that plagued unaugmented crews. Explosions flared in the ever-closing gap between the two fleets as the outnumbered interceptors clashed with Heldrakes and Hell Talons. Prow lances flared, and liquefied adamantium ran like tears across the armoured flanks of the Adeptus Mechanicus ships. The *Sanctus Malefic* – prow reduced to a torn and pock-marked ruin by torpedo salvoes, and its strategium crew dead – peeled away on the whim of jammed rudders. But even had twice the vessels barred Abaddon's path, there would have been no halting that advance.



The captain of *Strokkor's Fist* – his auspex arrays blinded by shells – lost his taste for a headlong assault, and gave orders for his grand cruiser to instead trade extreme-range volleys. *Apocalyptia* and the *Vengeful Spirit*, battered but hale, reached Cawl's picket line of cruisers. The first Chaos broadsides thundered. Caught between the two, *Arcses Phobos* melted like ice before the flame, its shields and armour boiling into space moments before a destabilised plasma reactor consumed the vessel from within. *Xanthos* and *Everos Mondas* endured the first raking salvoes, only to perish in the teeth of the Chaos cruisers that came behind.

Cerebos died snarling, trading broadsides with a grand cruiser twice its size before one last salvo broke its back. *Stellaris Mons*, its targeting systems obliterated by cannon fire, set collision course for its tormentor, the detonation of its plasma reactor shattering the Chaos battleship's drive section, leaving it drifting amongst the debris. *Alpha Scion*, its interceptor screen shredded by the Black Fleet's fighters, was swarmed by assault boats. As its captain ordered a last valiant stand, Black Legion boarding parties ripped through the cruiser's breaching bulkheads, and slaughtered the bridge crew. One by one, the ships of the Adeptus Mechanicus fleet went dark, or detonated in a flare of plasma.

The sacrifices were not in vain. Every moment bought was a moment in which the *Iron Revenant*'s damaged Gellar fields could be repaired. But the Ark Mechanicus quickly lost ground before the *Vengeful Spirit*, which alone of the traitor fleet had ignored the blockade and come full-burn after its fleeing prize. Now, Abaddon secured the battleship's prow guns from firing, not wanting their ferocious recall to slow the pace of pursuit. Little by little, the battleship closed with its prey.

Recognising the inevitability that the *Vengeful Spirit* would soon overtake his injured Ark, Cawl pushed the systems beyond maximum tolerance. Super-heated steam roared from cracked coolant pipes. Klaxons sounded across the drive decks and pressure manifolds exceeded safety thresholds. It made little difference. Whatever additional acceleration the Archmagos coaxed from the *Iron Revenant*'s damaged engines, it was never enough – the *Vengeful Spirit* was closing too fast. In a matter of minutes the battleship would draw level, and the broadsides would begin. Again and again, Cawl processed the probabilities of survival. Each time, the calculations returned vanishing and distant odds.

Curiosity had led Cawl to Cadia. Pride had held him there. Now the *Iron Revenant* would be lost, and its precious cargo alongside. He had failed.

'Increase drive threshold seventeen percent.' The strategium shuddered as the Iron Revenant*'s crew enacted Cawl's orders.*

Greyfax needed no telepathy to know that Cawl understood the futility of his command. The Iron Revenant *was doomed. But she would never have known of his secret had she not peered into his mind. An obligation, a sense of duty not yet fulfilled, drove the Archmagos – an imperative so closely guarded she could only see its shape, not its detail.*

'We cannot outrun this fate,' intoned Celestine.

Marshal Amalrich stirred, his low growl carrying a warning. 'Would you have us offer our necks to the Despoiler without a fight?'

The false saint turned from the viewport. 'I beheld this in a dream. A river of blood amongst the stars. The harder we struggle, the more certain our fate. We must find another way.'

Greyfax felt the old anger rise at those words. 'There is no salvation to be found in your heresy. If...'

She fell silent at Cawl's impatient gesture. 'Necessity considers all answers, however improbable their provenance.'

'She is a heretic!' Greyfax interjected.

Greyfax fell silent. She reminded herself that Cawl's artificial span far predated the Inquisition from which her authority sprang. She couldn't take his obedience for granted.

'A bold accusation,' hissed Cawl, 'for one whose blood seethes with Necron artifice. Do not deny it. I perceive the nanomachines writhing beneath your skin.'

At once, Greyfax felt the mood in the strategium shift. Amalrich's expression darkened with fresh suspicion, reminding her of the Black Templars' unpredictable zeal. 'I remain uncorrupted.'

Cawl observed her thoughtfully. 'So you say. I can even free you from their grasp. But for that, we must first survive.' He shifted his attention to Celestine. 'What else did your vision show? What must we do?'

The saint indicated Klaisus on the viewscreen. 'We will find salvation within the ice. And then our crusade will begin anew.'

Amalrich nodded. 'Your crusade, lady. But we will follow while our strength remains.'

Disgusted, Greyfax turned away. The Celestinian Crusade? The very thought of it made her skin crawl.

So the *Iron Revenant* set course for Klaisus, the ice moon, under Celestine's direction. Stressed plasma drives brought the Ark Mechanicus around on a new bearing, the motion affording the *Iron Revenant* one furious, unanswered broadside at the pursuing *Vengeful Spirit*. The Black Fleet battleship, taken unawares by the sudden change of course, had no opportunity to evade the swarm of torpedoes that sped like rippy-fish towards its prow. Shields collapsed, armour crumpled. The prow cannons were blasted free of their mountings, and the colossal, eight-pointed star that served as the *Vengeful Spirit*'s figurehead was reduced to mangled scrap. But that battleship had survived the Siege of the Emperor's palace – it had borne wounds far greater than any the *Iron Revenant* could inflict. It would not go so quietly.

Whatever salvation awaited the *Iron Revenant* on Klaisus, Celestine's guidance now put the ship within range of the *Vengeful Spirit*'s main guns. Abandoning the head-on course, Abaddon closed obliquely, his starboard batteries blazing as they gnawed at the Ark Mechanicus' hull. Unable to outpace the battleship, the *Iron Revenant* did the only thing it could: it endured, meeting the *Vengeful Spirit*'s fury with its own.

The two warships pounded at one another for over an hour, the pale disc of Klaisus growing ever larger. The *Iron Revenant*'s macro-cannons crashed back on their bearings, unseated by enemy fire. Torpedo tubes spat their last. Hundreds perished in every broadside, their bodies thickening the Ark Mechanicus' causeways, or expelled by violent decompression to bob along the mangled outer hull.

Aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, traitors flooded to their assault claws along passageways crushed by the *Iron Revenant*'s broadsides. The Despoiler meant to claim his prize for himself, or else see it burn to nothing in Klaisus' thin atmosphere. As the battleship shuddered with one final broadside, silencing the *Iron Revenant*'s last interceptor batteries, the Dreadclaws screamed across the void.

As the garbled reports of boarding parties reached the *Iron Revenant*'s strategium, Cawl knew the ship was lost. But it had served its purpose. The duelling vessels were now deep in Klaisus' orbit, and the relative shelter of the moon's swirling blizzards was but minutes away. Ceding command of the dying Ark to the crew, Cawl headed deeper into the ship, and began the process of unsealing the stasis vault.

As the Adepta Sororitas made for the undamaged portside hangars, Marshal Amalrich declared his battle-brothers would ensure the *Iron Revenant* died fighting. Greyfax argued against this course. To her mind, Cawl was already half-under Celestine's spell, and the Inquisitor wanted allies of her own close to hand. Still, Amalrich was resistant – the Marshal's pride chafed from the long retreat, and only the presentation of the Inquisitorial Seal bent him to Greyfax's will.

So it was that a flight of transports spiralled planetwards, bearing their weary cargo. They used the dying *Iron Revenant* as cover against the *Vengeful Spirit*, and the last of the doomed Ark's fighter-craft as escort. As *Iron Revenant* at last began to break apart, and the first Heldrakes screamed in pursuit, the fleeing convoy vanished into the howling snow-storms.

THE SNOWS OF KLAISUS

The blizzards of frozen Klaisus might have blinded Abaddon's pursuit, but they did not end it. Enraged that his quarry might yet escape, the Despoiler launched every flight-worthy vessel at his command, scouring the surface for any trace of his prey.

Thus Cawl's trek across the glaciers became a fighting retreat, the survivors sent scrambling for cover amidst the rocks each time a Heldrake shrieked overhead. Such precautions were born more of hope than strategy – there was no hiding the modified Triaros Conveyer that contained Cawl's precious reliquary, or the lumbering Knights of House Taranis – but good fortune held for the first few hours of planetfall. On they trudged, the Adepta Sororitas following Celestine's holy light, each as unfaltering as she, even though the Living Saint offered no clue as to the path she struck, or her purpose for doing so. With them came the survivors of the Kappic Eagles, flesh blackening with frostbite, but determined to prove as unswerving as the Battle Sisters. Inquisitor Greyfax and Marshal Amalrich's Black Templars brought up the rear, each battle-brother grim as death in the teeming blizzard.

Cawl followed Celestine unfalteringly through the swirling snows. With each step, he grew increasingly certain that the Living Saint knew his purpose – the burden he had carried for so long. And if that was so, perhaps that had been Veilwalker's purpose in directing him to Cadia – not to unlock the secrets of the pylons, but for Celestine to lead him to the pact's completion. The Living Saint was a vessel of the Omnissiah's tripartite will, his purpose was hers. Step by step, Cawl's resolve returned. He told himself that his path from Eriad VI had been a pilgrimage, a test. He chastened himself for ever doubting the Omnissiah's purpose and pressed on.

Then the snows stopped.

The Heldrakes came again soon after, their strafing runs leaving trails of dead and dying across the glacier. Two of the Daemon-craft perished without even touching the frozen ground, blown out of the skies by krak missiles. A third tore a squad of Tempestus Scions apart with tooth and claw, and ripped a chunk of armour from the Triaros before Cawl's axe split its Warp-metal skull asunder.

From that moment on, there was no silence, no reprieve. Alerted to their quarry's presence, the Black Legion warbands converged upon the glacier. Running battles broke out upon the snowfields, the thunderous echoes of one skirmish scarcely fading before another began. Havocs rained fire down from the mountainous heights. Raptors struck from cloudless skies, their discordant battle-cries further shredding the nerves of men and women weary from weeks of strife. Bikers prowled the flanks, roaring into weapons range only when they believed their quarry's attention was elsewhere.

All perished. Seraphim swept the crags clear, the backwash of promethium melting ice formed centuries before. Lasgun volleys cleared the skies of Raptors; the pounding cannons of Taranis Knights purged the icy fields of the Despoiler's bikers. But there were always more, their numbers ever-replenishing, while the ranks of Cawl's escort grew thinner with each passing hour. As ever more succumbed to their wounds, the survivors drew in closer to the Triaros Conveyer. Its projected void shields provided some protection for those closest to it, and, inexplicably, every Imperial soul present felt it their duty to protect whatever was inside. Greyfax's psychic interrogation of her wounded foes revealed that they were surrounded, and the noose was tightening. But there was nothing more to be done other than keep moving – to perhaps break out of the encirclement and buy a few hours of respite.

On Celestine journeyed, leading her tattered pilgrimage ever higher into the jagged mountains. Tempestus Scions fell dead amidst the snows, skin blackened and eyes frozen. By this time, Greyfax had abandoned her attempts at questioning Celestine's purpose. Redoubtable though the Inquisitor was, hers was not the gene-forged fortitude of the Adeptus Astartes, and she needed all her breath for the endless march.

Still the Black Legion pursued, the roaring plasma drives of their drop-ships a constant echo through the mountain passes. As the mismatched company reached a ridge-line, Greyfax caught sight of a column of traitor tanks, thick as beetles in the valley below.

When Cawl's escort reached the sunken gate of some ancient structure, its surface smoothed flat by the driving winds, they found it held against them by a sorcerous cabal. Another bloody skirmish saw the gateway claimed, but the smoke clouds rising from the wreck of a Predator revealed the company's position as clearly as any signal beacon. Before the last sorcerer fell dead, the roar of engines echoed up from the valley.



'What do you see?' asked the false saint, moving to stand beside the Inquisitor on the ridge.

It had to be a rhetorical question, Greyfax decided. No eye could have missed the spreading stain of Black Legion tanks across the glacier. 'I see our death,' she answered sourly.

'No,' said Celestine. 'Salvation awaits us.'

Stilling her chattering teeth, Greyfax turned angrily away from the ridge-line. 'Your lies are wasted on me, idolatress.'

As ever, the false saint seemed to take no offence. 'You serve the Emperor. You trust the Emperor. Why can you not believe his hand guides me?'

Greyfax drew closer. 'I don't believe anything guides you. You're a heretic, preying on the credulous. I should have let the Despoiler kill you. Were you not surrounded by your acolytes, I'd kill you now.'

Celestine smiled. 'Then I should kill you first, while I can?'

Greyfax squared her shoulders. 'Yes.'

The smile faded. 'He has a plan for you too, Katarinya. I have seen it.'

So saying, the false saint took wing. Katarinya Greyfax returned to her place in the procession of fools. But though her mood remained bleak, a small corner of her soul took heart from Celestine's words.



Marshal Amalrich detailed half of his surviving battle-brothers to remain behind and guard the pass. The pursuit they faced was now no mere rabble of scattered warbands, he argued, but a column armed and arrayed for battle. Better a few of their number hold and delay that pursuit, buying time for the others to proceed. Volunteers were sought and found, and Emperor's Champion Garrein led his battle-brothers away down the dreary slopes, knowing that the next battle would also be their last.

On Celestine's path wound, ever higher into the peaks. As night fell, the echoes of battle faded from the slopes below. Those Black Templars still at Cawl's side knelt a moment in the snows, Amalrich's rumbling voice leading a warrior's chant of benediction for lost brothers. Then they pressed on unburdened by grief or guilt. By dawn, the snows came again, shielding Cawl's company from prying eyes, but also slowing their advance to a near standstill. They forged onwards, though at a painfully slow pace, and even Celestine's light seemed to fade.

As the pale sun reached apogee, the roar of engines came again through the slackening snows. Land Raiders slewed across the lower slopes, their teethed tracks biting deep into the permafrost as they clawed their way in pursuit.

At Celestine's urging, Cawl's company pressed on. As the Knights of House Taranis rained fire on their pursuers, their comrades fell back by squads, each giving covering fire for those that followed, expending their last precious ammunition in the wild climb for the summit. The heavy snowdrifts were taking their toll on the Triaros' tracks, and progress slowed to a crawl. Cawl's spirits, restored by faith during the long climb, wavered anew as he sought to soothe the conveyor's wounded spirit. Helbrutes bellowed their mad praises, and the wail of the Raptors' vox-casters set the air screaming.

The assault ramp of the nearest Land Raider crashed down, and Abaddon strode forth, his inner guard of Terminators at his back. The Despoiler's coming was too much for the last of the Kappic Eagles. Frozen and weary beyond reckoning, they fled uphill, all discipline forgotten. As the Despoiler advanced through the snows, Cawl took his place at the forefront of his dwindled company, and prepared to die for a pact that would never now be fulfilled.

The ice in front of Cawl exploded in a burst of dazzling light. Jetbikes hissed over the icy crest, underslung shuriken cannons rasping death at the Black Legion. Trails of fractured light followed, the whirl of vibrant colours dancing and reforming around leaping, pirouetting warriors. The crest, so lately occupied by the fleeing Scions, thickened with graceful warriors armoured in myriad colours. Behind them came slender walkers, their every stride rippling with grace and power, the searing light of their armament unanswerable.

The Black Legion fell back before the Eldar onslaught. They had prepared for battle against a fractured and weary foe, half-beaten by cold and despair. Instead, they had been met by an Ulthwé Strike Force and, behind them, Wyches of Commorragh, warriors of Biel-Tan, and Eldar from a number of other craftworlds. Abaddon advanced into the maelstrom, bellowing at his warriors to follow. Those who did so perished, sliced apart by dancing blades or shredded by razor-edged shuriken. Twice the Despoiler led a charge towards the Triaros. Twice the Eldar hurled the Black Legion bloodily from the crest. Through it all, Cawl and his company staggered deeper into the xenos ranks until the crest was behind them.

Ahead, nestled in a natural valley, stretched the elegant spires of a webway gate, its columns blazing with light. Celestine hovered above the portal's dancing energies, arms outspread in silent prayer.

Cadia had been lost, but the war continued.

Cawl topped the crest and gazed down into the mustering warhost. Subroutines drew archival data from storage, matching the strange shapes of xenos armour to records salvaged from a million scattered conflicts.

A datacluster salvaged from Port Demesnus confirmed the presence of the notorious rune-witch, Eldrad Ulthran, but as for the others, his analysis returned no firm conclusions. It was scarcely surprising. The Eldar were inconstant, as ever-shifting as sand, changing personality as freely as they changed their masks. What did surprise Cawl was the motley nature of the xenos assemblage. He could access no prior reports of so many disparate Eldar cultures fighting together as one in this manner.

Two figures at the centre of the host were a true enigma. One, a female attired in an elaborate gown, appeared to be directing proceedings, moving with calm authority amid the swirling storm of colour. Beside her was a warrior in crimson, his raiment echoing both Craftworld Aspect armour and the crueller plate of the Commorrite pirates. Cawl found no record of its design, even in the deepest archives.

With a flicker of light, a familiar figure appeared at Cawl's side, the patterns of her mask dancing with light. Veilwalker.

'What is this?' Cawl asked. 'Where are you taking us?'

'Into the light of a new dawn.' The Shadowseer tilted her head, as if confused by the question. 'Unless you prefer to remain in the darkness?'

With an effort, the Archmagos ignored what he hoped was an attempt at humour. 'The Despoiler has a warship in orbit. You cannot hold them for long.'

'We will not have to.' The patterns of Veilwalker's mask danced with new light. 'The ending has passed. It is time for a new beginning. There is a parley to be struck, if you have the courage.'

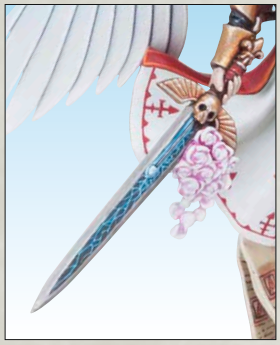
The Shadowseer cast a graceful hand towards the host.

With but the merest hesitation, Cawl followed her into the future.







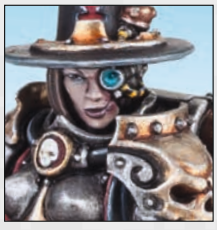




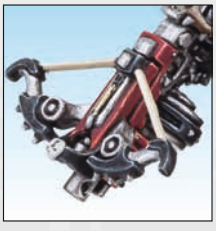
Saint Celestine and her Geminae Superia



Inquisitor Greyfax







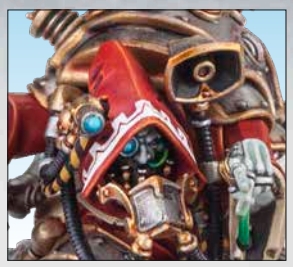




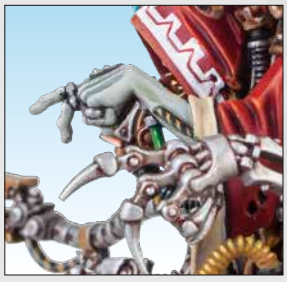




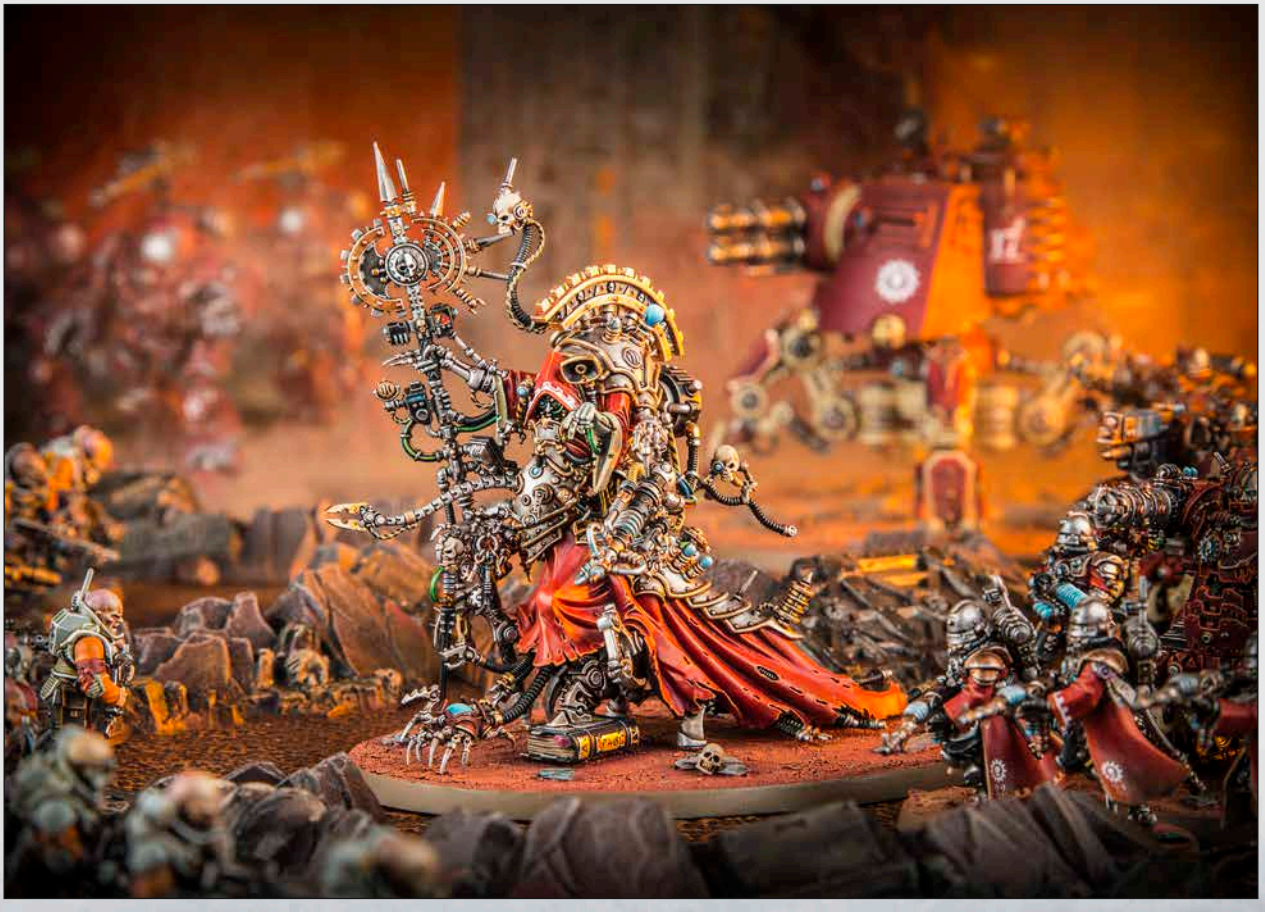








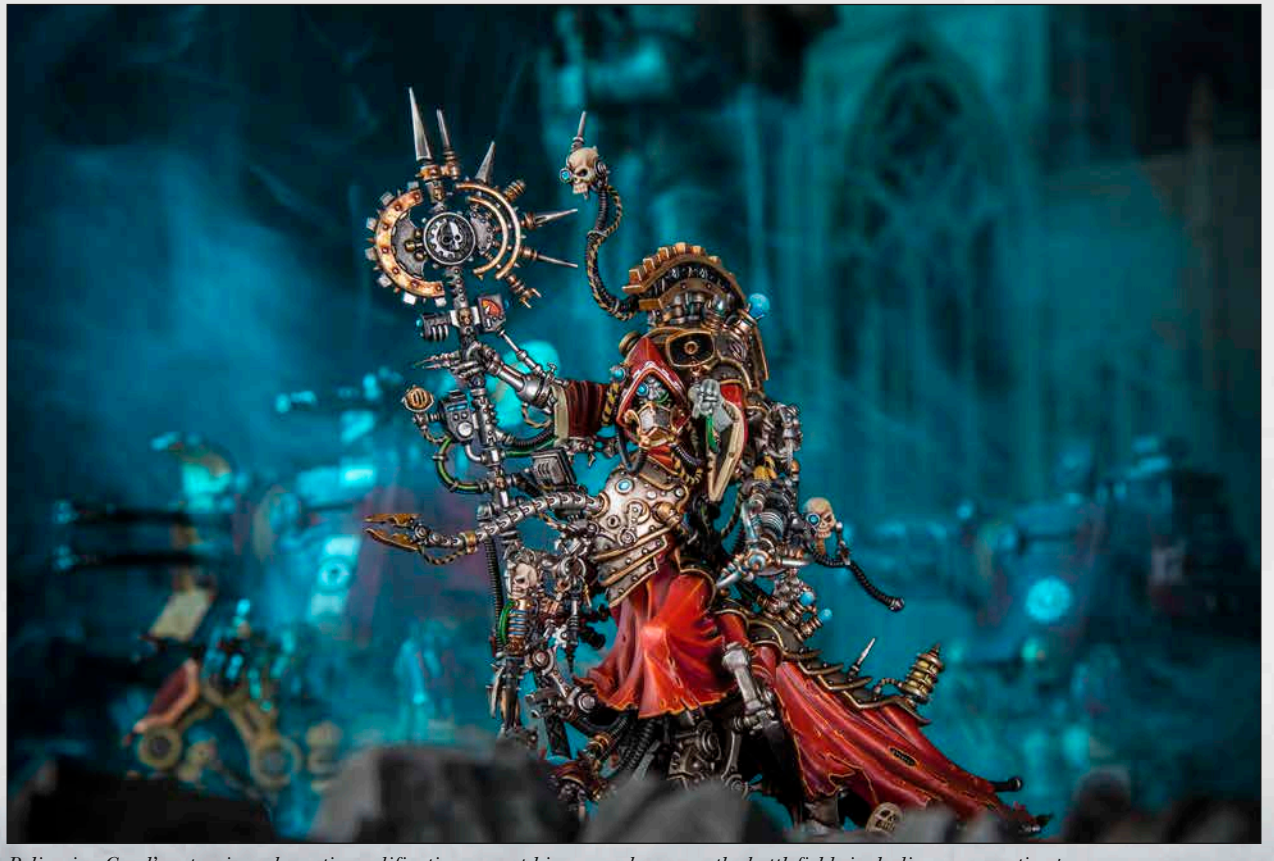
Belisarius Cawl



Belisarius Cawl leads the warriors of the Omnissiah to battle.



Inquisitor Greyfax's prodigious psychic might is capable of dominating the minds of even the most strong-willed foes.



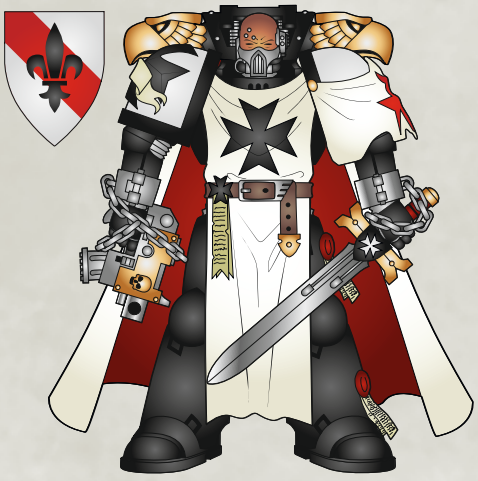
Belisarius Cawl's extensive cybernetic modifications grant him many boons on the battlefield, including regenerative powers.



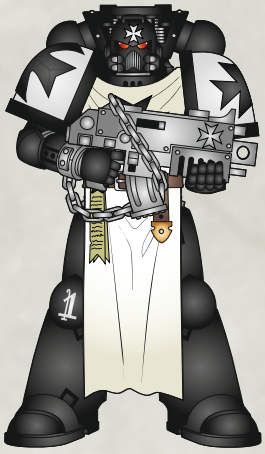
DEFENDERS OF CADIA

The forces that defended Kasr Kraf and the pylons on the Elysion Fields were but a fraction of the Imperial strength fighting against Abaddon's hordes in the region of space known as the Cadian Gate. Numerous Space Marine Chapters rallied to push back against the invasion, along with elements of the Astra Militarum and warriors from many Adeptus Mechanicus forge worlds.

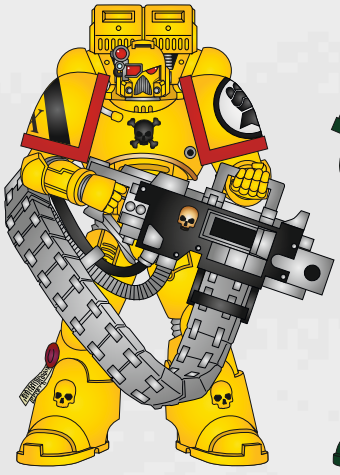
Proudly bearing their unique heraldries and colours in the name of the Emperor, these defenders of Cadia met the Warmaster's armies on the ground, across the skies and in the void of space, determined to put an end to the Despoiler's ambitions.



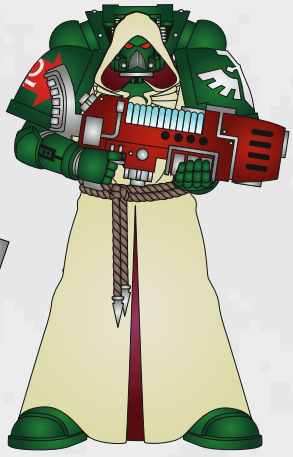
Marshal Amalrich bears the black cross of his Chapter and the red cross of the Sword Brethren.



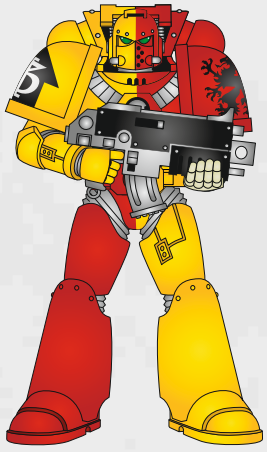
Black Templars usually bear their squad numerals on their right leg.



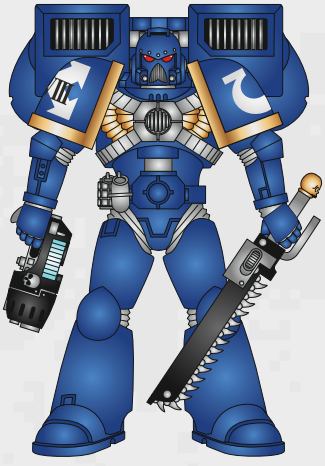
Devastator Brother Orman, defender of *Phalanx*



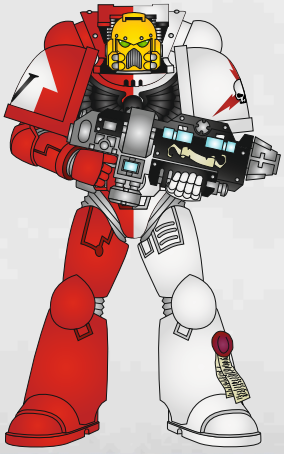
Brother Malacas fought in Korahael's strike force.



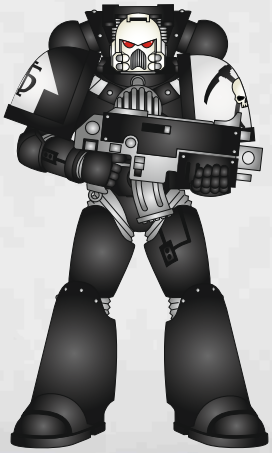
Battle-brother of the Howling Griffons



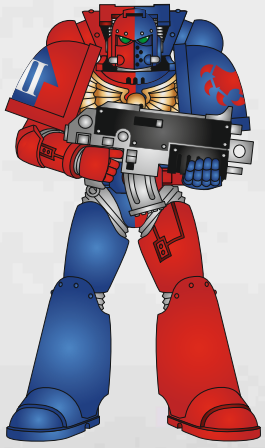
Assault Marine of the Ultramarines 2nd Company



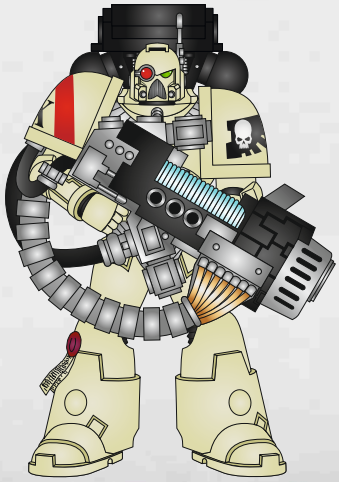
Tactical Marine of the Storm Lords 2nd Company



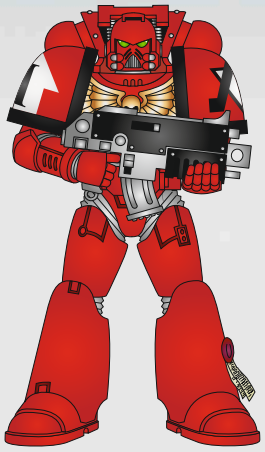
Battle-brother of the Death Spectres 5th Tactical Squad



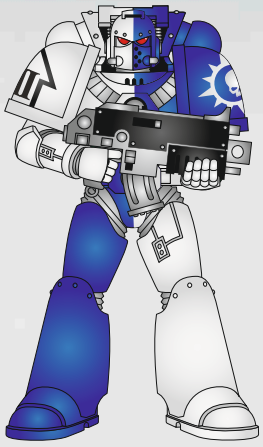
A Brazen Claws 2nd Company Tactical Marine



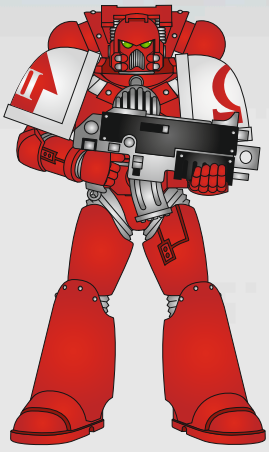
Angels of Absolution, 10th Devastator Squad



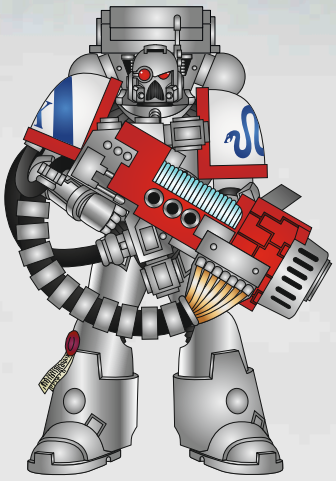
Brother of the Genesis Chapter 5th Company



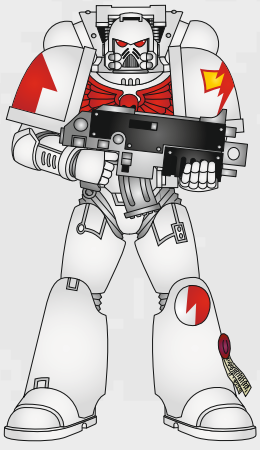
Battle-brother, Novamarines 3rd Tactical Squad



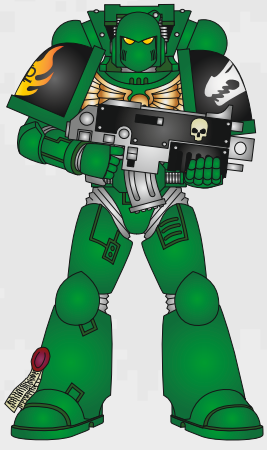
This battle-brother fights for the Sons of Orar.



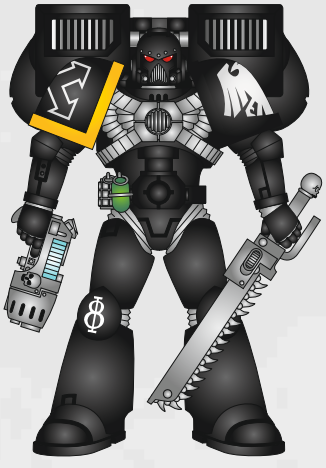
Devastator of the Iron Snakes 4th Company



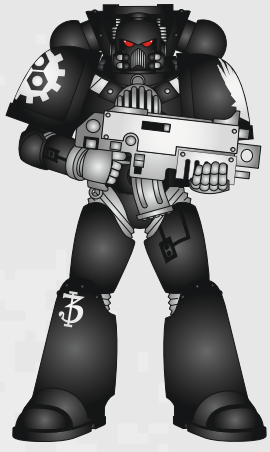
This White Scars Tactical Marine fought during the siege of the Kriegan Gates.



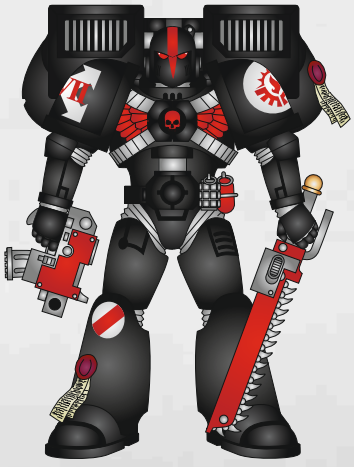
One of the Salamanders long imprisoned in the stasis vaults of Solemnace



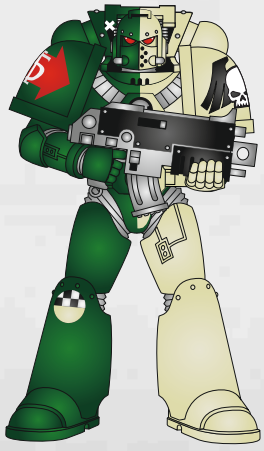
3rd Company Assault Marine of the Raven Guard



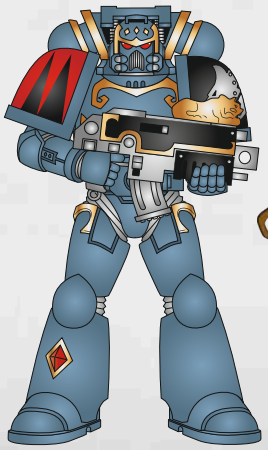
A Battle-brother of the Iron Hands Clan Raukaan



Brother of the Consecrators 7th Assault Squad



Angels of Redemption Tactical Marine



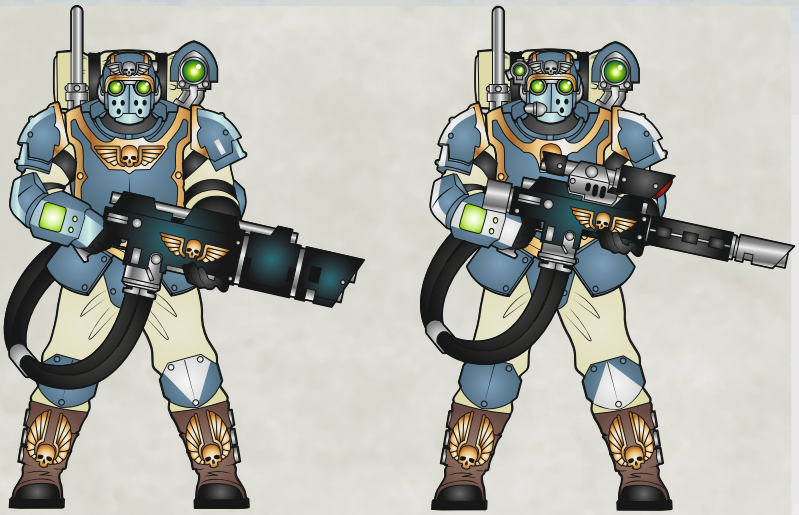
The Ironwolves played a vital role in the defence of Kasr Kraf.



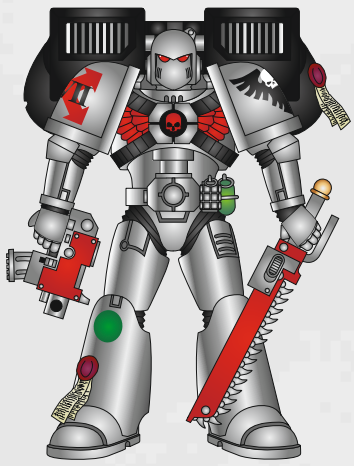
In the final battle for Cadia, the Wulfen proved their worth.



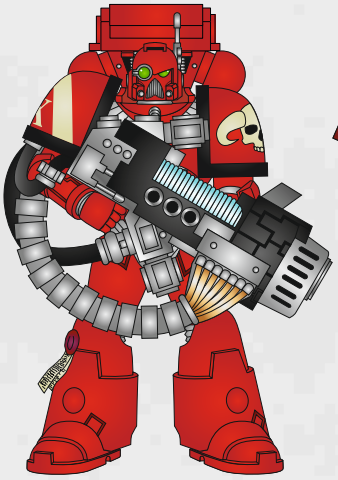
Greyfax was accompanied by warriors of the Militarum Tempestus.



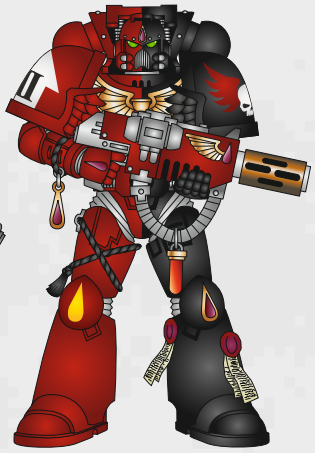
Tempestus Scions of the 55th Kappic Eagles. Their regimental symbol, a vertical white bar, is displayed on their shoulder guards.



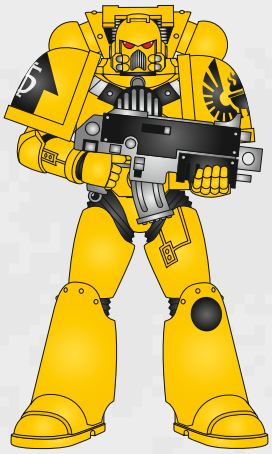
Assault Marine of the Doom Eagles



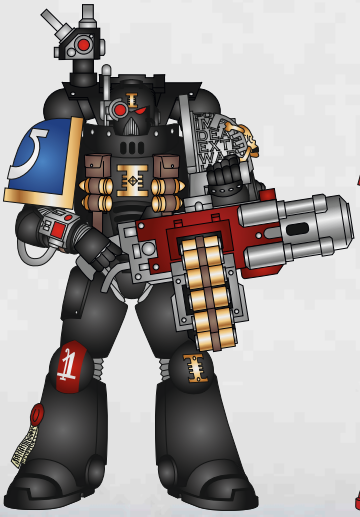
The Exorcists are highly proficient Daemon-hunters.



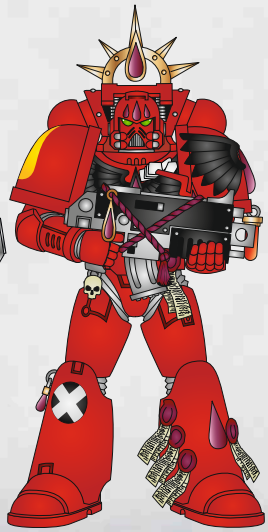
Tactical Marine of the Angels Sanguine



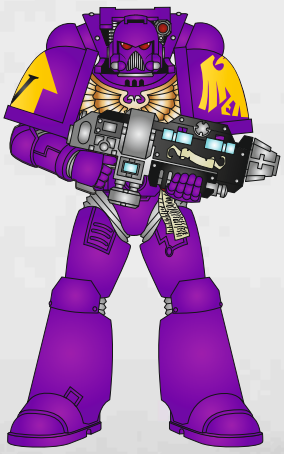
Angels of Vigilance, 5th Tactical Squad



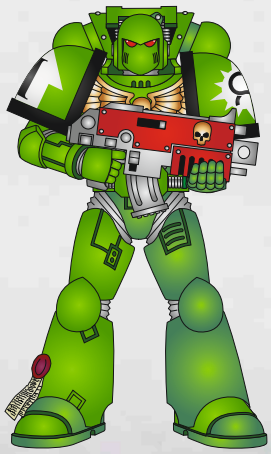
Ultramarines battle-brother seconded to the Deathwatch



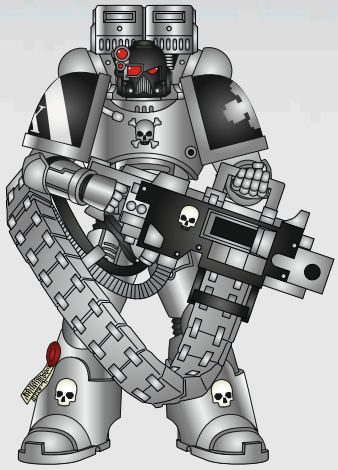
Brother of 'The Blooded' 2nd Company, Blood Angels



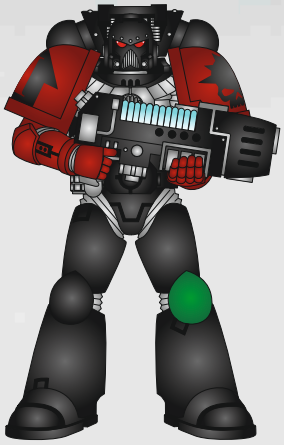
Tactical Marine of the Hawk Lords 7th Company



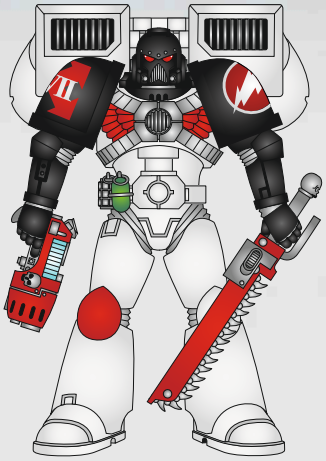
The Aurora Chapter strictly follows the Codex Astartes.



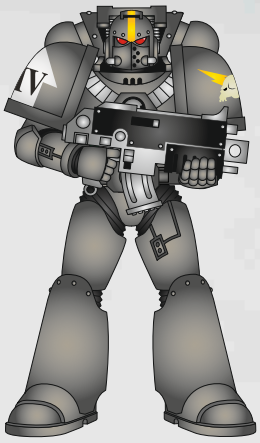
Iron Knights Devastator



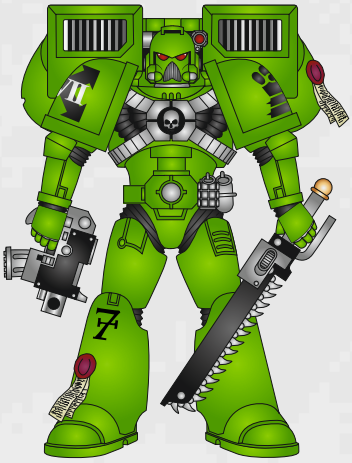
Marines Exemplar Tactical Marine



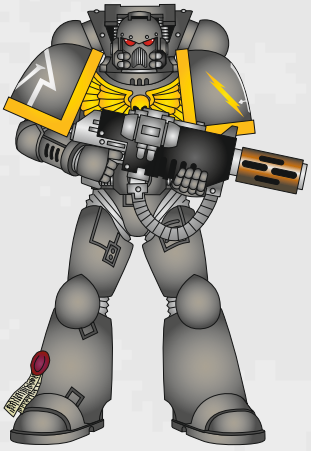
Battle-brother of the Black Guard 3rd Company



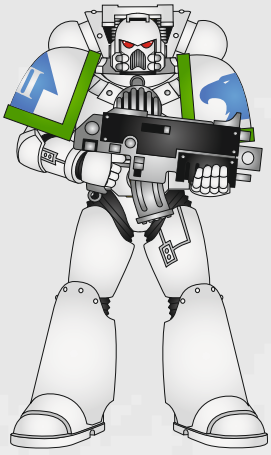
Revilers Tactical Marine, 4th Squad



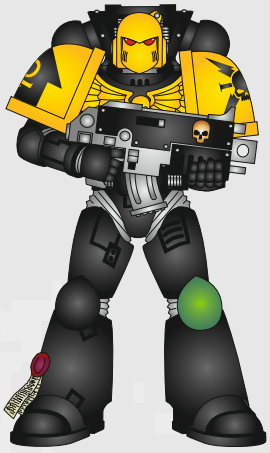
Assault Marine of the Subjugators 5th Company



Battle-brother of the Storm Warriors 2nd Company



Many squads of White Consuls fought for Cadia.



Tactical Marine of the Destroyers 4th Company



This Alpha of Mars bears the skull icon of his rank.



The Skitarii of Lucius use the same markings as Mars.



Stygies VIII is a mine of forbidden xenos tech.



The orange robes of Ryza echo the world's rust dunes.

