

The Calculus of Battle

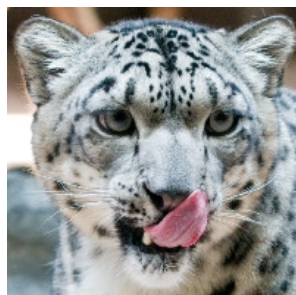
An Iron Hands Audio Drama (2016)

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Kardan Stronos: "It is them that I am thinking of. Point nine percent of two billion fighting men would make a material contribution to any warzone".

Magos Calculi (over vox): "Questionable. You overlook your own losses, expenditure of material to refuel, rearm and repair".

Kardan Stronos: "And how many men is one Space Marine worth in this war?"

Magos Calculi (over vox): "Do you wish for an answer, Warleader? I have one".

Stiff-muscled particularly around the mouth Stronos frowned behind his visor. On derricks and hanging pallets all over the flight deck, dozens of blank-faced servitors tested every bolt and rivet of every black and silver gunship for signs of stress or damage. The uniformed ratings necessary to supervise their labors saluted as Stronos and his retinue marched by the hallowed machines.

Kardan Stronos: "The battle calculus can be flexible".

Magos Calculi (over vox): "One plus one always equals two".

Kardan Stronos: "And if we had one again... You talk of a closed system, magos, but I fully intend to open it up".

There was a moment of inactivity from the data tether.

Magos Calculi (over vox): "Your armor's spirit informs me that you are on the embarkation deck. I take it your mind is set".

Kardan Stronos: "Take it as you see it, my friend".

The code presence in his organic cortex sighed.

Magos Calculi (over vox): "Cost increases in line with potential gains. A ratio remains marginal".

Kardan Stronos: "I will work that margin".

Dispensing with any superfluous to a sign off the Magos Calculi disconnected.

Jallenhall: "What is the prognosis?"

Though he was half a stride behind Sergeant Jallenhall clearly knew who he had been communing with. They were Iron Hands. Their bond of brotherhood went deeper than mere blood and flesh. Their battle

plate and bionics linked by a stream of inload-exload unbroken in almost six hundred years.

Kardan Stronos: "Immediate insertion. We will reinforce the cordon around the Vassis citadel and buy time for the evacuation".

Jallenhall: "This world's proven its weakness. It is a blight that should be excised".

So it was. Even brothers did not always see eye to eye.

Kardan Stronos: "Dead men do not learn from their errors, Sergeant".

Jallenhall: "A canker that is burned from the body will not metastasize spreading fear and weakness to distant worlds. And for what? A few million men? Do you know how many billions are deployed to this sector alone?"

Stronos looked to their Thunderhawk bearing the silvered heraldry of the Iron Council. Deck servitors, their hands welded to massive winch handles operated the turntable that slowly cranked the gunship's armored nose around to face the intemperate blue glare of the coherence field. It's powering turbo fans filled Stronos's body with the visceral full body thunder of raw machine aggression. The energy field spasmed under the inky caress of the Thunderhawk's exhaust fumes. He strode towards the opened assault ramp.

Kardan Stronos (sighing): "There are 18 million men down there, brother. A drop in the ocean maybe. But it is my drop, my ocean".

Jallenhall dipped his cable-snarled helm in acquiescence and followed Stronos wordlessly into the gunship. The veteran Iron Hands of his honor guard began to lock themselves into position for launch, but Stronos stopped them.

Kardan Stronos: "No, no restraints, brothers".

Jallenhall: "It is protocol".

Kardan Stronos: "We fight not only the alien, but our own calculus. The cost of every second is measured in lives".

Stronos switched his vox frequency to interface with the servitor pilot in the cockpit.

Kardan Stronos (over vox): "Ready for launch".

Jallenhall and his Clave readied their weapons as the assault ramp closed on its hydraulics and the turbo fans built towards lift-off.

* * *

The descent from high polar geostationary orbit to the combat zone was rapid. The Clave had their weapons loaded, blessed and triply checked. Stronos's storm bolter communicated with his armor's core intelligence in the series of clicks and pins as it ran self diagnostics. His relic weapon, the ancient axe of Medusa, chattered nonsense to itself as it stole tactical inloads from Stronos's armor. The servo skull wired between its cocked tooth axe blades always hungry to raw data.

The migranous pinch of the Magos Calculi interrupted his thoughts.

Magos Calculi: "Eight percent".

Even Stronos's advanced wargear was struggling to punch a vox signal through the psycho electric field distortions of the hive mind. But the words from the neural tether were clear.

Magos Calculi: "That is the potential benefit to loss ratio of your current action. Eight percent".

Stronos ignored him. His attention was split between the tactical charts in his visor display and its accompanying screed.

Kardan Stronos: "Bring us down, good zeta three. It is easy terrain and the line there is crumbling. If it falls the Tyranids will be on the walls in minutes. Order all inbound Thunderhawks to deploy to a chasse grids, a half ring from epsilon eighteen to the range of hills encroaching from zeta one. Then to provide additional air cover to the evacuation craft".

Jallenhall nodded in approval.

Jallenhall: "A wall of iron, but it will not endure indefinitely against such numbers".

Kardan Stronos: "The flesh is weak, brother".

Jallenhall: "Some weaker than others".

Stronos clasped his brother's pauldron, a pre-battle ritual that Jallenhall had never yet decided to acknowledge. No one walked into punishment like an Iron Hand.

The assault ramp lowered even as the Thunderhawk leveled out, the ramp wobbling in the ferocious wind. It was a dry world. The briefing inloads had told him that, but seeing it for himself was different. It was windswept, coppery and dark. The tactical charts that flickered across his display to keep pace with the gunship described a prehistoric ocean

basin. The gross contours Stronos could still see but everything less had been flooded beneath the scything tide of alien filth. Chitinous bodies rushed like sea water over rocks and even over the engine thunder of the gunship's fans Stronos could hear the clacking of segmented legs and hideously irrational body limbs. The Great Devourer swept beneath them towards the static guns of the Imperial Guard. Stronos had no stomach but he still felt sickened by it.

Jallenhall raised a fist.

Jallenhall: "Praise the Omnissiah for the Leviathan. We demonstrate the weakness of flesh today".

Iron Hands (altogether): "Praise the Omnissiah!"

Stronos nodded.

Kardan Stronos: "Let us unbalance the calculus".

Then he stepped off the ramp.

(Stronos roaring and jumping out)

He smashed into a tide like a colossal bomb dropped by an over flying Marauder. Bone shards and alien blood spraying high into the air. The tremendous mass of his augmented terminator plate and servo harness drove him into the ground when a lesser body would have been balled through the swarm after the gunship.

He rose from his knees with a cry of actuators. Tyranid warrior forms by the thousands already thundering towards him. With a single irresistible will his storm bolter gave a blurt as it ranked targets from one all the way two nine hundred ninety nine and established a fire pattern. He fired. Alien bodies burst as he sprayed the scrabbling beasts with bolter shells. A Termagant with two thick rows of spines running along its back managed to scramble between exploding bodies untouched. Stronos beheaded it with a single swipe of his axe. The weapon servo mind muttered as it consumed the feast of kill data reluctantly passing scraps to Stronos's display.

The screed had not paused for a moment, but had been shunted to the side again to allow his tactically augmented reality to become the main focus. Brightly defined blocks scrolled down the edges of his display appraising him of the xenos creatures' bone density, muscle distribution, death reflexes and the exact amount of force necessary to kill it. That amount of force was exactly what Stronos hammered into

the neck of the next beast that tried to gallop past him. Another scabbled in behind, bounded on to the first alien's corpse that sprung off just Stronos swung for it. The quick shift in direction fooled his combat algorithms and spared its neck at the expense of its groin. It appeared to feel no pain as the axe of Medusa hacked it open, but slithered to the ground in a welter of gore, its legs suddenly unable to bear its weight. Stronos stamped on it, the force of his heavily reinforced armor driven down through his heel.

Magos Calculi: "Four percent".

The Magos Calculi's reasoned modulation amidst the alien's stampede was jarring.

Kardan Stronos (breathing hard): "It dropped so quickly".

Magos Calculi: "You have unbalanced the equation as I believe was your intention. Every second removes more Imperial resource from the world. By your actions and the actions of your gunship pilots are the benefits of such action diminished".

The hissed click of his storm bolter's autoloaders seamlessly interjected into the hard roar of gunfire. He shattered the skull of a Hormagaunt, refusing to retreat a single stride and then drew a tasteless breath of his armor's purified air. It was the first he had needed since embarkation. His machine lungs were commendably efficient.

Kardan Stronos: "But I do miss the taste of alien blood on my lips".

He was tracking the active runes of his Clave with his organic eye. Clad in power armor their lesser mass had necessitated a more conventional deployment, but the Clave advanced now. War machines in approximated human form stuffed in black, gun metal grills and gorget bundles underlit by the blaze of the semiautomatic fire. Automatic status updates blinked between their armor systems and their Warleader's as they drew close. But not a word was wasted in greeting.

Stronos expected none. He looked back, his first real world glimpse of the beleaguered Vassis citadel. He grunted hollowly. It had seemed more formidable in schematic. A ragged cheer rang out as an armored fist squadron – four beat-up Chimeras escorted by a Leman Russ with guardsmen clinging to cargo netting on the vehicle's hulls – trundled towards the Iron Hands. The escorting battle tank clattered on one creaking track, dropping slowly off the pace, belching off black smoke

each time its frustrated driver tried to adhere and make up the distance on the transports.

(several bolter rounds)

Jallenhall shredded a pair of Tyranid warrior forms with bursts of bolter fire.

Jallenhall: "Unexpected reinforcements".

For the second time in one day Stronos's facial muscles tried to force an expression where there could be none. Centuries he had lived as one of the Iron Hands and still mortal could surprise him.

Jallenhall: "They come to our aid. What manner of angels do they choose to see in us,

I wonder".

Magos Calculi: "Ratio now at two percent within the margin of error".

Kardan Stronos: "We are sources of that error, magus. I will make the margin what I wish it to be".

Stronos disconnected from the link, then issued his armor a mental command to isolate the platoon commander's frequency and open a channel.

Kardan Stronos: "Return to the defensive line. We cannot hold them here. Turn back".

The response was a hash of static. The platoon systems lacked the power of a standard Adeptus Astartes squad's wargear, much less that of an Iron Hands' command Clave. Stronos modulated his own signal power to compensate.

Tank Commander (over vox in static): "This is Lieutenant Jarro, requesting... (static) Throne, for you... (static) For the...".

Stronos held the signal power there.

Kardan Stronos: "Reverse, Lieutenant. Your priority is the evacuation. Turn back now".

Panic noises punctuated the static.

Tank Commander (over vox in static): "But listen... Please..."

Stronos saw the Leman Russ's long turret cannon begin to traverse. Levitating above the smaller bioforms like a fetal deformity displayed on an invisibly cushion was an atrophied creature with a cranium so vast

that it had appeared to have withered its own limbs to order to feed its growth. Its eyes began to glow until turret incandescence sipped through the gaps in its exoskeleton. There was a pulse just as Stronos's optics began to burr in protest of the witch light and a bolt of energy jabbed from the alien's cranial ridge towards the row of vehicles.

(Chimera exploding)

A synapse blinked later and an implosive crack peeled out from one of the Chimeras. The tank managed to rumble a few meters on, then flipped into the air with a bubble of green veined lightning opening its hull from the inside, shedding screaming guardsmen as it sommerfelded once and crashed to the ground on its roof. Then the tank's battle cannon fired. The Lemman Russ rocked back and the creature vanished in a maelstrom of vindictive counter annihilation worthy of an ally of the Iron Hands. Smoke rose from the tank's motive units. The big gun's recoil had finally done for the damaged track and the Lemman Russ grunted to a terminal halt. A swarm of smaller Tyranids scuttled in through the wreckage, smoke and debris. Multi lasers and sponson-mounted heavy bolters mowed down their numbers, but they were too many and too fast.

Stronos bellowed at the swarmed tanks.

Kardan Stronos: "Reverse".

Tank Commander: "Fire! Fire all guns now! Fire!"

Stronos stilled himself as lasfire stitched out from the vehicles. Numbered brackets and closed targets of choice. The axe of Medusa excitedly shunted reserve power to its blades.

Kardan Stronos: "Clave Stronos, new objective. Exterminate!"

Jallenhall swung his bolter from the main swell of the tide.

Jallenhall: "Confirmed, exter...!"

(Jallenhall unable to finish while being attacked by a Tyranid)

His words were cut short by a Tyranid blade leaping at him. The gigantic warrior form was twice the height of a Space Marine. Upright, encased in thick bone armor that soaked up the Clave's snapshot fire as it hacked through the ceramite and iron to cleave off Jallenhall's arm at the elbow. The second of four switching blades reversed back, then rammed up the skewered veteran Iron Hand through the belly, serrated

bone erupting between his shoulders in a welter of sparks. Damage signifiers turned a portion of Stronos's visor display red.

Kardan Stronos: "Brother!"

Calmly Jallenhall lifted his bolter one-handed and blasted the monster's face apart. Only once he was mathematically convinced of its death did he then shoot through the armor tagged to the impaling blade and dropped, the bone sword still embedded in him.

)Jallenhall shooting off the bladed claw and falling to the ground)

Kardan Stronos: "Brother! Are you combat effective?"

The Sergeant responded with a hail of fire into the swarm.

Jallenhall (breathing hard): "A flesh wound. If a Tyranid intends to fell an Iron Hand of my age, then it will need to be more thorough".

Stronos turned his fire on the warrior forms assailing his brothers. The guardsmen were on their own.

(Leman Russ exploding)

He felt the shockwave as the Leman Russ's shell store detonated, blowing off the tank's turret. The remaining Chimeras belatedly backed up slowly, finding it tough going through the swarm of gaunts, that had already got between them and the defense lines.

Tank Commander (over vox, static and screams): "This is Lieutenant Jarro here... I need help. Please, there are too many of them. Help. Please, help".

Stronos moved ponderously through the mallet of hammering bolters and hissing claws, a large Tyranid warrior struggling in the grip of his servo arm. Bio acid and bone missiles scratched the gilt from his armor, but he knew as Jallenhall had known that he could take the punishment.

(Stronos roaring)

There had laid the thin power of the calculus; to ensure that victory was certain before ever setting foot on a world. Hearing the scream of descending turbo fans he looked up into the white glare of spotlights and a brutal downwash that tossed dust across his face plate. The gunship came down, preempting the data emission that he had known was coming.

Magos Calculi: "Ratio at zero, Warleader. There is nothing further to be gained".

Kardan Stronos: "I know".

The gunship's underwing heavy bolters murdered the ground beneath it, enough to lower its ramp. Jallenhall and the honor Clave stomped towards it, their own bolters overlapping meticulously to keep the swarm from the aircraft. Last to go, Stronos turned to watch as a pack of Hormagaunts leapt into the back of one of the Chimeras. Screams tore across the vox, one longer and more immediate in its agony than the others. The tank that eminently been Jarro's. The last spits of lasfire spotted out. Heavier bioforms with massive rending tusks chewing through the stranded vehicles.

Stronos kept his compassion for humanity alive by keeping it cold, locked forever in iron like an undying corpse in the body of a Dreadnought. And he turned his gaze to the ocean of purple and white carapace that seethed towards the faltering siege guns of the citadel. It had been a long time since Kardan Stronos had been truly afraid. But he thought he could imagine the terror that would soon rip the people of Vassis. His helm picters recorded the scene. It would almost certainly be useful data to somebody. One day.

Kardan Stronos: "Terminate the evacuation. Recall all Chapter vessels".

Voice (desperately crying from below): "Don't leave us! No!"

He could hear the desperate pleases of the tank crew. Through the last metal of the Chimera's armor and through the vox bid of Lieutenant Jarro whose lifeless ear must have been pressed against it.

(numerous screams over the vox)

He ignored them. Ultimately they were all merely numbers in an equation.

(sounds of the battle)