

Chapter I – CHANGES BEFORE THE STORM

The door opened with a clatter, then the tortured man slowly crossed the threshold of his cabin. The metal gates quickly closed behind him, making a loud screeching sound. The sound didn't bother him now as much as the rifle weighing heavily in his hand. Even though he hadn't had to use it at all during the last few weeks, he never parted with it. It was a remnant from the mistakes of his youth. Shattered childhood dreams of being someone he so desperately wanted to be. To become an elite and admired Special Forces officer. His ambitious plans were derailed by a single gunshot. Right when he was doing his training at the Shadows Facility. An education which, by a single decision, was abruptly interrupted. Therefore for many years improved by him M-15, was not only an element of personal armament but also a symbol of his own downfall. A moral decline, as well as a professional one, which he had been trying to repair for many years. Trying to get his life back on track. Over the years, however, he had been extremely reluctant to do so. Just as he felt now. Scrambling to his feet, propping himself up with whatever was available along the way, he finally made it to his berth. Collapsing onto the previously unmade sheets, he immediately fell asleep. Still, keeping one hand tightly clenched on his weapon. The fatigue from the battle he had just finished was so great that sleep that day came immediately. Again the nightmare he knew so well returned. The childhood experience that shaped his future. The sounds of glass breaking around him, the screams of terrified people, the sounds of gunfire, and most of all his own crying and screaming. The sound of a five-year-old boy paralyzed with fear, who accidentally found himself in a place that was attacked by terrorists. The criminals, who in a moment will strongly regret their decision. The sleeping man was shaking slightly on his bed when he heard a muffled sound, and then a second fuzzy sound. In his head, he knew that the Special Forces assault had just begun. The soldiers squeezed the trigger, and there was that regular rumbling and muffled sound all around. A peculiar sound that was becoming incomprehensible to him with each passing minute. It was as if this dream had ended differently today. So he began to focus on those sounds, which became more and more distinct and accurate. Finally, he realized that the nightmare had passed and the noise was being generated by someone who was just banging on his door. On top of that, he repeats his unbearable rule. *"Lieutenant, open up, there's a briefing on the bridge in an hour."* His dark brown eyes painfully opened. He saw slight darkness in front of him. A sign that his gaze was fixed on the bedding. So he instinctively turned his head slightly towards the source of the noise and saw a familiar sight. The interior of his humble cabin, measuring four by four meters. A place where he had spent every spare moment during the last few months. A room that slowly felt like a metal cage to him. A cabin that was, after all, on an Earth Destroyer. Not on a standard ship of this type, however. Oh no, much improved and rearmed by the technicians and engineers. After all, he was on the flagship of their armada called the Rostov. In honor of the centuries-old city located on the Earth. A concrete jungle, about which he himself knew practically nothing. The only thing he knew about it was that it was supposedly founded by the first representatives of a no longer existing state. Therefore, he did not even dream that he would ever be allowed to visit it. On the one hand, he hated his cabin, which slowly became his prison. On the other hand, he thanked the admiralty for recognizing the fact that he was once an officer. A would-be Special Forces soldier. That was why they had given him this little cottage exclusively for himself. So it was also an oasis of retreat for him. A refuge from the countless people he passed day after day on the mighty Rostov. Also protected, as a fighter pilot. That was why the man finally looked at his watch. He realized that it had been less than six hours of Earth time since he had crossed the threshold of his cabin. It took him a moment to realize that just as he had fallen, he had slept all that time. He had to lift himself out of bed now. His muscles protested in pain. Gritting his teeth, he managed to fight it off, letting out a slight sigh in the process. He clenched his right hand even tighter on the barrel of the rifle. The unbearable rumbling and the rule still didn't stop, but he decided to ignore it for now. He walked to the sink standing in the corner and looked in the mirror, at the same time leaning the gun against the wall. In it, he saw his oval and thirty-two-year-old face as white as a wall. Now it did not look like the face of some adored southern European beauty. It was more like a picture of misery and despair. It was as if she would suddenly fall apart. Fatigue certainly added ten years to him now. A few weeks old dark stubbles, scattered black short hair. An indistinguishable straight and fleshy nose and, above all, bags under his dark brown eyes. They were the ones that made his agonized state most apparent. Seeing how tragic he looked, he began to wonder. Was participation in this cursed expedition surely a good idea? On the other hand, his mind told him that it was his last resort. Hope to give him at least a shadow of a chance to rebuild his destroyed military career. So he began to struggle with his thoughts. Is the participation in the expedition, during which he will often have to take risks threatening the loss of his own life, really worth it? A fierce battle with an enemy who could kill him at any time. He has had to fight him several times since he began his journey. Only to fulfill an order. An order that would save him from another demotion and, above all, a field trial. An order which he now had to obey without a word. As a reward, perhaps he would receive another insignificant praise. Unless the words he spoke nervously banging on the door meant something else today? Something he so desperately wanted to hear. Therefore, when the voice uttering the officer's rank rang out again outside the door, he thought back to his miserable appearance. He wiped his increasingly long beard with his hand, then looked at his watch. He realized immediately that there was no time for shaving now. He quickly threw off his upper garment to wash cursorily with cold water. A tired body immediately appeared before his eyes. Even so, it was quite well-shaped from ten years of rough military service. Not too lean and not too much muscle mass. Just right. When he finished his quick toilet, he put on a clean shirt. He put his special jacket back on and slung his inseparable weapon over his shoulder before finally answering.

"Just a moment, I'll open it," replied the tired man.

"Lieutenant. I can hear that you are no longer asleep. I hope..." continued the messenger.

The cabin door opened, making the same unbearable noise. In front of them stood a private Marine. He was dressed in blue full-powered armor and on his back was his classic armament. The reliable MG-49 rifle. On seeing the man, he immediately started saluting and reciting his unbearable rule. The tired man looked at him with disapproving eyes. Instantly, he realized that he had to slightly raise his head to look him straight in the eye. Although he measured over a meter eighty, the Marine in his armor was about twenty centimeters taller than him.

"All right, all right, Private. Skip the formalities and above all the fact that I'm not a lieutenant. I am Sergeant Robert Agesa," explained a slightly nervous man.

"Mr... e... sergeant... e... lieutenant... e... Robert..." began the private.

The tired man interrupted him immediately.

"What's up soldier! Have you forgotten your tongue? First, nobody calls me by my first name. Everybody calls me by my surname or by my military rank. It is simply more comfortable for them. Secondly, you seem to have the wrong cabin," Agesa explained.

"Not at all, Mr... e... Lieutenant..." muttered the messenger, then he seemed to regain his confidence and started to continue with a raised voice. "Admiral Malaraine calls you for a briefing at 13:00 Earth time! Report to the bridge immediately!"

"Keep your voice down. I told you I'm not a lieutenant. Report accepted. You can tell Command I'll be sure to report to the bridge. I don't know what for. Dismissed," replied an irritated and very tired man.

"Yes, Lieutenant!" the Marine ended the conversation.

The man again looked disapprovingly at the soldier saluting and walking slowly away, then walked outside his cabin. He simply wanted to look around the hallway, a rather quiet Destroyer at this hour. At the same time, he wanted to find out if by any chance anyone had heard his conversation with the rather expressive private. Taking a few steps in front of his cabin, he felt the pain in his muscles slowly subside. The prevailing silence slowly convinced him that he could finally turn back and prepare for the setting that awaited him. Before he entered his cabin, however, he saw someone tinkering with his door. At his eye level, a new nameplate appeared to him. Its inscription made him realize why the private, had addressed him as such. *Lieutenant Robert Agesa - Commander 85 Squadron*. Instantly a cavalcade of thoughts ran through his mind. Someone had promoted him and yet handed over the supervision of an entire squadron. Why? Had he finally managed to regain his lost military rank? That was a question he would definitely have to ask the Admiralty when he went to the briefing. However, he didn't have time to worry about that now. He had to ignore the dilemmas rising within him now. He decided to use the remaining minutes to take a refreshing shower, put on fresh uniforms and maintain his indispensable weapons. Therefore, he stepped inside his cabin, then closed the door after himself. Again he heard that unbearable sound. As if someone deliberately forgot to grease the mechanisms. Ignoring this fact, he put his hands into his pockets to retrieve the buried items. Standard tactical ration packs, a handy weapon repair kit, special goggles, and other minor junk began to fall onto the bed. Then he began to pull off his custom-made Shadow suit. Unlike the tight-fitting multi-layered, single-color standard outfit, his uniform consisted of loose black combat trousers and a navy blue jacket. It looked similar to those worn by fighter plane pilots in the 20th century. Pulling off the last layer of sweaty clothing, he finally stepped into the shower. Then he turned on the soothing warm water. The first drops falling on his tired body were like life-giving rain hitting the cracked and thirsty earth.

He decided to go to the meeting as always before time. He never liked to be late. He found this fact offensive. Both for him and for the people he was to meet. Therefore, he was walking quite fast now. Even so, his special shoes and uniforms did not make any unnecessary noise when he stepped on the metal floor. With each step, he realized that the silence that prevailed outside his door was probably present throughout the ship. The noiseless atmosphere only began to change as he began to approach the ship's central command post. The indistinct hum slowly became a mixture of music and conversation. Its epicenter was in the corridor leading to the bridge. The place was guarded by several armed Marines and Grenadiers. There were definitely some Shadows lurking in wait somewhere as well, although he couldn't see them. The time spent in the Facility had made him sensitive to their presence. He also knew that there were definitely traps or other security features hidden somewhere. His perceptive eyes recognized the strange unevenness in the floor after a moment. They only confirmed his beliefs. As he approached the main entrance, he immediately caught the attention of the guard commander. His powered combat armor was painted black and had a large red lightning symbol on it. In one hand he held an unusual MG-49 rifle. The newly-promoted lieutenant began to guess that the guard commander's weapon was probably upgraded. Just like his rifle. Still absorbed in observing the weapon and without waiting for a signal, he immediately pulled his identification card toward the guard commander.

"Please surrender your weapons before entering the bridge." Master Sergeant Tuborg addressed him.

"Weapons are my religion," Agesa grunted.

The man quickly regretted his words. The guard's brown eyes squinted angrily as if they would not take for any refusal. His one hand, despite being in powered armor, clamped down on his newly donned shirt in a swift motion. The other guardsmen, who had stood relaxed until then, quickly turned their weapons towards him. They began to assume combat positions. Instantly, Agesa heard the distinctive sound of weapons being unlocked and a nervous murmuring.

"Put down your weapons before entering the bridge! I don't care who you are or your rank! This is not a request, it's an order!" shouted the man in black power armor straight into his face, then seemed to soften. "You can always turn back if you don't like it."

Then the commander of the guard pushed the newly promoted officer away. He reluctantly started to remove his weapon from his back and put it on the table prepared for this purpose. At the same time, Agesa looked at the commanding officer with a studied gaze. Due to the fact that the sergeant was in his powered armor, he could not fully assess his physique. He also did not know how to judge his height. Metal armor was, after all, customizable to the owner's height. The only thing he could see through the open sun visor was his menacing round face. His teeth were clenched and his angry brown eyes were piercing him. Only after a moment did he notice the white symbol of Elefantros painted on his right epaulet. A creature that was the most powerful land creature of the bloodthirsty and invasive cybernetic-organic Mechatron race. A race that was like Earth's locusts. Replicating in large numbers and consuming everything and everyone in its path. Unlike Earth's insects, the Mechatrons did not devour crops or vegetation. They killed every living organism they found in their path. Only so they could transform into even better and more perfect killers. While still at the Shadow Facility, Agesa had read about the Elefantros. About those huge creatures that can easily tear through an entire squad of Marines. Real living bunkers on four massive limbs. At least five meters tall and over twenty long. Looking like mechanized killer triceratops. Covered in heavily hardened metallic armor that was designed to protect the owner of the huge whips. Several meters long mechanical tentacles, which can make real chaff out of

anyone. Therefore, when Agesa straightened up, he remembered that there were veterans in their expedition after all. Soldiers who were members of the legendary expedition that had gone to the Mayall sector. It was there that the people of the New Earth Federation first had the opportunity to fight, and were still fighting with considerable success against the Mechatrons. Therefore, when he tore his gaze away from the painting and looked at the angry face of the guard commander. He already knew that this man deserved more respect than he had initially assumed. He himself had yet to meet such a great Mechatron on his path, let alone kill him. Yesterday's battle in space had quickly taught him that Mechatrons were very dangerous opponents. They don't care about their own lives. They try to kill you every time. If you don't destroy it, it will regenerate and grow back like cut grass.

"Now you can come in, the briefing is about to begin," announced Master Sergeant Tuborg calmly.

The guard's words shook him out of his momentary reverie. He nodded, acknowledging his acceptance of his words, then silently headed for the bridge. Seeing the door open before him, he immediately felt his breath and blood begin to quicken within him. Since he began his part in this strange expedition, he had not had the opportunity to be in this room. After all, he had been a lower-rank soldier before. An ordinary sergeant, who was quite good at flying all kinds of machines. No matter if ground or air. Now he was summoned by the admiralty. By a woman and her deputy who could determine his military career at any moment. That was why he paused for a moment and tried to fight the excitement growing within him. As he entered the room, which was twenty by twenty meters in size, he quickly noticed several people gathered there. They were standing in pairs or threes. They were nervously talking and gesticulating. Judging by the grimaces on their faces, the atmosphere on the bridge was very tense. After crossing the threshold, he even felt it, as if it was floating in the air. It was like a thick fog that could be cut with a knife. In the center of the room, there was a large operating table. A rectangular piece of furniture measuring two and a half by four meters, on which there was a device for displaying a holographic image. Around the furniture were quite a few additional smaller tables measuring one meter by one meter with a single chair. Agesa quickly thought to himself that there was really quite a lot of space here. If all the furniture could be removed, it would even be possible to hold a large party here. Then he chased this thought away. He started to analyze the number of chairs and people on the bridge. After a while, he knew that not everyone had arrived on time. He wanted to speak up to report his arrival. Just as he was about to open his mouth, Admiral Malarine noticed his arrival. She was a short and thin woman. Roughly speaking, she was over sixty meters tall. She was slightly in her forties. Her black hair was cut short and even. No strands of it covered her small ears. Although there was a small scar on one of them. Probably a memento from her childhood. Nevertheless, the scar did not disfigure her oval face with narrow lips. In the hazel eyes, he saw the wisdom and experience. A perfectly fine nose crowned the whole. She wore a typical blue military shirt, which effectively masked her physical features. Dark blue pants were perfectly pressed. They matched her slightly darkened olive skin tone. Earthlings would describe her beauty as South American in origin. He quickly noticed that her black officer's coat was lying carelessly nearby on one of the chairs by the operating table. Finally, he heard her rather melodious voice.

"Hello, Lieutenant Agesa. Please dispense with the formalities, we don't have time for this right now. Pour yourself a cup of coffee and read the situation report. I hope you've prepared your comments on yesterday's clash. I will at once convey my condolences for the loss we suffered yesterday. Lieutenant Rogers was an excellent soldier. Unfortunately, the enemy does not forgive any mistakes. It's a pity because sometimes even the best mistakes can happen," the woman spoke calmly, then looked at her watch and added. "In ten minutes we start, there is your place."

Finishing her speech, the admiral showed with her hand an empty chair, in the second row on the right, near the window. The newly appointed lieutenant, listening to her words, suddenly realized that the woman's voice was very soothing to him. For a moment he even caught himself admiring his commander's charms instead of taking a message from her. He also recognized that yesterday's battle had certainly given her a few wrinkles, which still did not detract from her above-average exotic beauty. He quickly chased those unnecessary thoughts away. He checked out and then made his way to the coffee machine standing against the wall. Pouring himself a cup of the warm beverage, he began to wonder if this was really happening? Had the short woman really promoted him? Did his long road to regaining his lost military rank just end today? On the other hand, doubts began to gather in his mind. How long would he enjoy this promotion? Because of his fatigue and lack of a prepared report, would he not be demoted again? There was still the question of what he should present during the briefing? In case the woman or her deputy would ask about something. Finally dispelling his thoughts, he took his first sip of the warm and soothing coffee. It spread through his body like life-giving energy. The effect of sleeplessness slowly disappeared with every tilt of the mug. With his other hand, he grabbed the sandwich lying on the table and made his way to his assigned seat. Before he sat down, he looked out the window. Through it, he could see the armada flying in hyperspace, or at least part of it. From here, the enormous Kraken-class Destroyers made an electrifying impression on him. Over six hundred meters long, the ships were the backbone of their fleet. A fleet that had one task. To provide assistance at all costs to someone who needed it. Someone who was sending out that strange rescue signal. That was all he knew when he enlisted in the mad expedition. That was all the Admiralty had revealed to him at the time. To himself and the rest of the lower-ranking people. At least, that's what he'd guessed when he was a mere sergeant. Now he was a lieutenant, an officer, a squadron leader. Someone who might finally know the true purpose of their expedition. Agesa was slightly encouraged by this thought and by the observation of how numerous and how powerful their armada was. After all, only yesterday they had defeated an enemy that outnumbered them. After a moment, he realized that every chair around the operations table must correspond to one of the commanders of these powerful ships. After yesterday, he knew that today one of them would surely be empty. A great flash of light immediately appeared in his mind. He had seen it yesterday while sitting inside his fighter jet. The flash of the explosion of the Trondheim Destroyer. The painful memory that so many good people had lost their lives in an instant. A cold shiver went through him immediately. He squinted his eyes, suppressing a tear gathering in the corner. He shook his head in disbelief. He took a bite of his sandwich and then finally sat down in his seat. The situation report lay on the table. He rested one hand on the tabletop and, like a lazy schoolboy, began to browse through it. The first thing he immediately picked up was the number of casualties. Nearly seven thousand, most of whom were obviously the crew of the lost Destroyer. We lost one Devil squadron, two Aquarius-class fighters, and one Lander. It certainly wasn't empty inside. The Mechatrons were knocked down to nothing. No one expected a different outcome in a clash with such an armada and the extraordinary skills of the Admiralty. Immersing himself in reading, he noted that the analysts were right to suggest that the losses could have been offset. The unlucky Destroyer could have used a short hyperspace jump

technique. As he read the next lines of the report, he finally reached the sections reporting the death of his commanding officer. According to the analysts, Lieutenant Rogers had been using his machine's cloak for too long. This led to overheating of the systems. At the same time, he started the withdrawal maneuver too late, so the enemy could easily catch him and destroy his fighter. The newly-promoted lieutenant, thinking back to yesterday, remembered the incident differently. In his view, Rogers was doing the job he was instructed to do. He had penetrated deep into enemy ranks, just as the Admiralty had expected. Command was too late in ordering him to withdraw while failing to support him. He spotted a palm top with a stylus lying on the table. He finished the last bite of his sandwich. He crouched down and began entering his remarks at the loss of Lieutenant Rogers. As he made corrections, he ignored the fact that more officers were entering the room. As he did, they took their seats. As he finished typing the last sentence, he was jolted out of his work by the melodious and raised voice of the admiral.

"Ladies and gentlemen officers! It is now 13:00 Earth time! Please take your seats immediately!" the woman announced.

He immediately turned his gaze towards the commander-in-chief without changing his position. Her body language made it clear who was really in charge. With slow steps, she began circling the center table, while periodically casting chilling glances at the assembled officers. They quickly began to take their seats. All conversations and whispers quieted down.

"Now we don't have time for the official roll call and other formalities," the admiral continued her speech more calmly. "Before I begin, I would like to quickly welcome the new members of the officer cadre. For some of you, this is the culmination of your many years of service. For others, as in the case of Lieutenant Agesa, a promotion for meritorious service in yesterday's battle. If you've looked at the report of yesterday's clash, you're aware that we lost the commander of the 85th Squadron. Fortunately, thanks to the lieutenant present here, we did not lose the entire squadron. This man, at a critical moment, not only tamed the nervous atmosphere in his squadron but also took command of it. This enabled us to bring about a successful defense of the cruiser Detroit. We avoided unnecessary losses."

As Agesa listened to her words, he felt the eyes of those gathered in the room turn towards him. He felt them like a stigma burning a huge hole inside him. He stopped following the woman for a moment to glance surreptitiously through his black tousled hair at the people sitting at the tables. Their reaction to her words. Suddenly he noticed that one person, who was not sitting at any of the tables, was looking around intently. It was as if he was trying to find him in the crowd of lower rank officers. He remained in the shadow, so he could not get a good look at him. To see who he was and what the mysterious person looked like. But he knew one thing. It was definitely not the commanding officer of the Destroyer. He did not sit at the main table. Nor could it be the squadron leader, because he did not sit at a smaller table as he did. So who, then? However, he didn't have time to observe for long now. Examining who the mystery man might be because Malaraine continued her monologue.

"I'm sorry we don't have time for an official promotion right now. Please accept my sincere congratulations and official welcome to the officer cadre of the New Earth Federation," announced the woman.

These words were followed by a brief round of applause, which quickly died down. They were followed by an awkward moment of silence. Only then did the armada commander continue.

"Back to our main objective. We continue to receive a drifting rescue signal from around the Ventarium galaxy. Our fleet will be exiting hyperspace in about an hour. At a marching pace, we will make it to our last stop before finally heading to the surrounding impulse. Yesterday's contact with the enemy may have been just a foretaste of what awaits us once we reach our destination," the woman continued, then walked over to the table.

She picked up a small square device and turned on the holographic image. After a moment, a greenish light appeared to all those gathered and began to form patterns. One could see silhouettes of miniature Destroyers that were surrounded by small dots. Agesa quickly guessed that they were fighters and transport ships.

"Our scout squadron reports that the assembly point is secure. We will jump out at this exact spot. We'll have the local sun behind us, so its glare should make it at least a little harder for the enemy to see our presence. Together with Vice Admiral Johansson, we have decided that we will use a modified phalanx formation. Additionally, all Lander and the badly damaged Destroyer Detroit will remain behind for at least 20 minutes. The rest will proceed to designated sectors. Each of our ships will have a squadron of Aquarius covering them. The Devils will take up a position in front of the armada and will engage cloaking in case of enemy contact. Devils' pilots should watch out for the Shepherds. Our magnetic guns will try to bring them down, but only with the second salvo. The first one will be used to kill at least one Lycanthrope. In the first place, we direct our fire at the Vipers. I don't have to remind you that a single contact with those suicides may lead to the loss of a valuable fighter, the Admiral spoke energetically.

Suddenly, the woman's monologue was interrupted by a question from the room.

"With a damaged Destroyer we have to defend all those Lander? Give us at least one..." protested one of the commanders.

"The closest to you will be the Destroyer Madrid and the Devils of 85 Squadron. If the enemy comes towards you, their task will be to withdraw and help you. Our reconnaissance and analysis lead us to believe that this will not be necessary. The enemy should have little chance of outflanking us," she continued, then moved one item on the holographic map with her hand. "If even that... so be it. You will get one Frigate, which will be between you and the Destroyer Madrid. If something happens, she will be able to retreat to you quickly and impose a Protective Prism on you. Getting back to the topic at hand, the Rostov, our flagship, will be flying on point. Because of this, it should immediately focus the enemy's attention on us. If they attack us as they did yesterday, we'll be able to draw them into a trap. A Protective Prism thrown at the last moment should eliminate more serious damage. Additionally, I remind you to save the Annihilators for last. Notes?" Malaraine concluded.

There was an awkward silence on the bridge. Most of those gathered nervously glanced either at their notes or the holographic map. The newly appointed lieutenant was also studying the location of his squadron. He realized that he would be in the second line of battle as if the Admiral was holding some of his forces in reserve. He thought, on the one hand, that was a wise strategy, one he would probably use himself. As he could see, Malaraine wasn't pulling all her cards on the table right away. On the other hand, he didn't like the vision of watching others fight and possibly die. He was also tormented by one question. Did the scouts truly manage to fully estimate the enemy forces? Yesterday's battle had shown that the Mechatrons were almost twice as many as originally thought. So he looked around at those gathered and raised his hand not willingly.

"Please speak up, this is not a school. We are open to any comments," a woman turned towards him.

"How sure is the reconnaissance? Will, it did not turn out again that we will be overwhelmed by the enemy? Yesterday showed that sometimes it is worth multiplying everything by two or even three. Wouldn't all the Devil squadrons in the first line be more effective against the Trichinosis?" the newly appointed lieutenant asked.

The woman, accepting his words, looked at the new officer with slight appreciation. She then turned towards the holographic map to process the information she had heard herself.

"Good point, that's why our plan assumes that we will encounter twice as many forces as those we have detected so far," the woman, while speaking her words, started pointing at one of the squadron commanders. "If you have any doubts about the number of enemy forces, feel free to ask Captain West sitting here. He personally conducted reconnaissance with his squadron. Fortunately, he remained undetected, so the enemy should not expect us at all. Hm... as for the Devils... as you can see for yourself, we plan to camouflage them and place them as a buffer against our forces. The death of Lieutenant Rogers has given us the idea that we need to try a new tactic. By dividing the Devils in half, after one hour of the clash, we will be able to withdraw the first row and replace it with the second row. This will avoid overheating the systems. If there are no further comments, I ask everyone to get their men ready. At 15:45 Earth time, we will emerge from the warp and proceed to tactical deployment. Dismissed. End of the briefing," Malaraine announced unopposed.

Agesa stood up and immediately directed his steps towards the captain in question. He was a well-built black man in his forties. He had a typical, even regulation military haircut. The first gray hairs had already started to appear on his sides. A slight scar on his cheek looked as if it had been caused by some kind of melee in a bar, not by contact with the enemy. However, the newly appointed lieutenant could not rule out both reasons at once. Especially when he saw the look on Captain West's face.

"Sir. If you don't mind me asking, the enemy's forces are certainly not superior to ours?" He asked Ages.

The captain squinted his eyes and expressively began to answer.

"You new guys think this is going to be a piece of cake. I don't know what they teach you in the damn Facility, but Mechatrons attack with mass. A huge mass that obscures everything. It's a good thing you'll have the sun behind your back because they'd obscure it anyway. Their forces are so voracious that it is impossible to judge when they end. When one dies, three appear in his place. That's why..." continued Captain West.

The man stopped suddenly, looked the new officer over from head to toe, and then continued in a less energetic voice.

"Hm... perhaps I misjudged you. I took you for one of those momma's boys who only smelled gunpowder at the range and only saw the enemy on instructional videos. Okay, I won't beat around the bush," answered the captain, then he leaned towards Agesa and lowered his voice by half a tone. "What we saw yesterday is a trifle small compared to what we will face today. You were right when you said their forces could be three times greater, because... they are. There's a sea of Worgs out there, and the Trichinellosis is patrolling the area like crazy. They're looking for opportunities to bite into the metal of our plating. My compliments on yesterday's maneuver, by the way," West continued, then straightened up and looked disapprovingly at the officers leaving the bridge. "Not many of them would have the guts to take on an entire Worgs cloud and drag it along with them. Put them under Destroyer fire like ducks," announced the Captain and congratulated yesterday's action with a firm hug. "Son, if we survive today, join us in the bar for a glass of something stronger. Captain West is buying."

The lieutenant looked at the tall black man, processing his words in his mind. The mention of the Facility in particular awakened a painful fact from his youth. Although he had been expelled from the Shadow training at the time, the command had allowed him to keep his uniform and weapons despite the demotion. It also gave him a chance to make amends for his behavior. It allowed him to start over as a regular soldier. Several years of hard work had brought him to where he was today. As you can see, with yesterday's battle he had not only managed to regain his lost officer rank, but also his slowly good reputation. The thought caused him a forced smile of pride. Following it, he headed towards the exit. Leaving the bridge, he picked up his precious weapon without a word. After which he headed towards where his squadron was stationed. All the time, he processed the words spoken by his senior officers. With every step, he thought about how he would explain to his men what they would face. Would the second rank be their salvation or a curse? Condemning them to eternal guilt. While others will fight and perhaps die in the first minutes of the battle, they will sit idle for an hour. Waiting for the command's decision. Clenching one fist, he knew he wasn't the only one who wouldn't like this information. Unfortunately, over the past years of service, he had learned that the orders of the command could no longer be ignored. Every time he disobeyed them, his military career would end badly. He also knew that he might not get another chance. An assignment under the wing of Admiral Malaraine is his last resort at this point. It could save him from banishment to some godforsaken outpost. The role of a mere sentry in secure sectors was something he certainly never dreamed of. Warding off reflexive thoughts, he abruptly changed his walking direction and directed his steps towards his cabin. Entering the room, he ignored the unbearable sound. He took a seat at his small desk and set about drafting a quick report, or rather a request to command. *I request that 85 Squadron be allowed to participate in the first line of operations or be allowed to conduct support fire from behind the Destroyers on the front line.* He attached his standard signature to the message, forgetting that he should change his military rank in it. He then stood up and made his way to the hangar where his men should slowly begin to gather. With every step he took, the words kept popping up in his head. "This is a good day to die." He reaffirmed his belief that those were the words he should greet the squadron with. It was his squadron now. After all, the command had put him in charge of it. He quickened his pace, knowing there was no time to lose. As he walked the last few meters, he saw a white man leaning against the doorframe in the doorway leading to the hangar. He was a fighter pilot, a soldier who was slightly overweight and his left eye was slightly squinty. He wore slightly tinted glasses that fell lazily over his plump nose. His hair was dark brown and cut short. His posture and expression were sassy and etched into the lieutenant's memory. He couldn't just forget them. Instantly, Agesa's thoughts flashed back to the first time he saw the man on Irtana. Back then, he had been pushed into a cell so he could serve his sentence after another demotion. For striking a senior at the time. He did this because his superior officer had mistreated him and his comrades in arms. He was proud of his action at the time, but years later he realized he should have done things differently. He should have reported everything and acted as the rigid rules of the United Earth Directory dictated. On the other hand, he knew that if he had done so, he would not have found himself in the same cell where the aforementioned pilot was. A man who, as it turned out in time, was the same age as him. In addition, he came from the same planet and the same city as him. Ralph Pavlowski, once an ordinary private, now is a pilot with the rank of

sergeant. A surprisingly good, even masterful pilot. Although he didn't look like one at all. Sometimes Agesa wondered if he wasn't simply better at these things than he was. Especially in piloting the Devil. Still, ever since their memorable imprisonment together, he had been a good old friend of his. A man behind whom various rumors swirled, which he himself never believed or took as truth. He was the only one who did not spread them either. In fact, he never asked him, if there was an element of truth in them. Especially since this pilot had gone practically the same way as he had. From infantryman to pilot. In addition, a damn good pilot. Now at the same time his subordinate. That was why he finally had to give up nostalgic thoughts and come back to reality. After all, until yesterday they were equal in rank. In the army, especially during the upcoming battle, there should be no place for sentiments. Therefore he quickly chased away unnecessary thoughts and without slowing his step, walked towards him. Then he heard his always cheerful voice.

"You late? No way. Something serious must have happened that you came late," the man laughed and then became more serious. "Our new commander should be arriving soon. Do you want to mess him up right away? We all know that yesterday you were able to tame us and get us together. Dude, you know we're really grateful, but, you know, it is what it is. No one's going to officially tell you this, but everyone knows exactly how it was and who they owe it for save their asses," continued the pilot, adopting his cheerful tone of voice again. "I wonder what kind of asshole they'll assign us now? I hope he'll be smarter than Rogers. Too bad for the guy, but you know, that's the life of a pilot."

Hearing his words, the new squadron leader forgot in a moment what he was supposed to say. He only looked at his friend with astonishment. At his always smiling face.

"Did you forget your tongue or something? We are all tired, but you should at least say hello to your old friend. Well, let's go, your fighter should be ready by now. Come on, before we get it unnecessarily," Pavlowski rebuked.

The man started to turn around to enter the hangar. At the same moment, Agesa grabbed him by the arm and stopped him.

"I'm sorry Ralph. I don't know how to say this. Walking here, I had a whole plan devised. But your cheerful smile spoiled everything," the lieutenant sighed.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Don't talk!" the man was surprised.

"I see that we always understood each other without words old friend." replied the lieutenant, smiling slightly.

"Just because we've had a few drinks together and you've saved my ass, doesn't mean you have to give me a head start," Ralph gave him a little nudge.

"I'm not going to, but you know I'm going to need a wingman. Someone good and trusted." Agesa replied.

"That's the kind of small familiarity you might be able to afford on my part. Now to the point, how bad is it?" Pavlowski asked.

"Very bad," whispered the officer.

The lieutenant loosened his grip slightly and motioned for them both to begin to enter the hangar. Both men, approaching the door, took out their identification cards and ran them through the reader. The lock released, allowing them to go inside. In the large room measuring several hundred square feet, other pilots and flight attendants were scrambling everywhere. Everyone seemed to be moving in a hurry. The atmosphere of an impending battle hung in the air. As they moved toward the part of the hangar where their fighters were, they continued their conversation.

"We have to multiply what happened to us yesterday times four. You know I'm distrustful of intelligence data, so I'm taking the worst-case scenario as the optimistic one," the lieutenant informed me.

"Shit, are you telling me I'm supposed to sit in this metal can again for a few hours chasing Mechatrons?" protested Ralph.

"You won't have to chase, there will be so many of them that eventually your finger will hurt from holding on to the trigger," reassured Agesa and then added. "There is something else."

"What could be worse than a swarm of Mechatrons?" asked the wingman, simultaneously stopping him and looking him straight in the eye.

"We've got an hour's TV break," stated the officer, using their shared code.

Then they both moved on.

"Are you telling me we're going to sit around idly watching fireworks for that long?" the sergeant asked with frustration in his voice, weaving in their shared code.

"Unfortunately, the decision of M. I signaled it on the meeting and I have already sent a pigeon in this matter. Probably there will be no response," Agesa answered.

"Too bad," Pavlowski said with disappointment.

At the end of the friendly conversation, Agesa felt a little uplifted. He already knew that if anything happened, he could count on his friend's help. Standing in the middle of the hangar section where his squadron was stationed, he gave him a visual tour. He watched as he walked away towards his machine. A Devil-class fighter whose wings were arranged in a V shape, with Needle missile generators at their ends. When the man finally reached him, he looked at Agesa with a smile and reciprocated his attitude with a nod. The lieutenant pulled himself together and began giving the order.

"Attention! 85th squadron! Inline facing the commander, march!" shouted the lieutenant's command confidently.

Suddenly there was silence in the part of the hangar where they were. Both the pilots and the maintenance staff interrupted their usual activities to look carefully at the commander. After a moment of consternation, Ralph was the first to line up in front of him, followed by the rest of the pilots.

"At ease! I know this comes as a surprise to many, but the command has decided to put me in charge of 85 Squadron. I had the same look on my face as you this morning. I won't beat around the bush. A quarter to four, our armada will come out of warp.

We'll only have a few minutes to launch our machines and proceed to our designated position. I know many of you want to repay the enemy for yesterday's losses. But we will have to be patient. We are stationed in the second line. We do not use camouflage unnecessarily. Please check the condition of your machines and weapons carefully. Sergeant Pavlowski is my wingman. The action plan should be sent to your onboard computers. That's all I have to report so far. Any questions? Issues? Problems...? None? Good luck," the lieutenant said.

After a short briefing, he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that both the staff and the pilots had gone into action without any unnecessary comments under their breath. Sam also decided to check his fighter, correct his uniform and take a seat in the

pilot's seat. Walking slowly up to his machine, which by its creators had been given the code name Devil, he began to look at it carefully. Assessing its appearance and condition after yesterday's clash. The fighter measured over eight meters tall and fifteen long. By its characteristic arrangement of folded wings, its lateral span was the same as its height. The multi-purpose machine was the culmination of an age-old struggle between Earth technicians and the radar systems of their adversaries. A technique developed over hundreds of years of masking and scattering radar waves, which eventually led to the creation of the special Cerber reactor. A unique generator that allowed the fighter to disappear from ordinary radars and the eyes of the average observer. They made him invisible, as did his specially converted Shadow suit. Agesa knew full well that the effect was only temporary and could be detected by special sensors at any time. Devices or creatures that could make something that was invisible, could eventually be seen. Therefore, after making sure that everything outside with his machine was okay, he began to climb the ladder. When he reached the last rung, he removed his rifle from his back and put it inside the machine. He immediately noticed that someone from the staff had applied a fresh coat of paint, changing his military rank on the Devil's plating. Still unable to get used to this fact yet, he sat down at the controls of his fighter. Looking around the machine, he immediately recognized the distinctive paint splatter near one of the onboard computers. Recalling how he had inadvertently caused it with his rifle. So he vaguely checked the positioning of his personal and indispensable weapon. A rifle that he practically never parted with. The weapon was his religion, reminding him of his past and his future. When he made sure everything was in place, he started the onboard computer. A blinking envelope icon immediately appeared on the monitor screen. It was a message from command, which he immediately decided to read. The content was very short: *Request partially denied. Admiral Malaraine.* He momentarily began to wonder why partially. What was behind that word? What, in turn, had the Commander-in-Chief agreed to? What changes before the storm had yet been made? To clarify his doubts, he knew he would have to wait a while longer. After all, there were only a few lingering minutes left, after which the mighty armada would come out of warp and begin to lose its speed. Only then will it fly out into the soulless void of black space to head into the next battle. He would then find out what the short woman had decided. Finally, the light in the hangar turned yellow. It was a sign that in a moment the mighty Destroyer he was on would begin to rapidly reduce its speed. A sound began to come from the speakers, ordering the pilots to take their seats in their machines and the unnecessary personnel to leave the hangar. All the flight attendants hurriedly removed the unnecessary equipment and left the hangar. Agesa watched through the closing fairing as the doors leading to the Destroyer's inner corridors closed after the last service member. In a moment, as the Rostov, the mighty flagship of their fleet began to brake, the great gates would open, allowing them to fly out. Finally, he felt a gentle tug, even though he was inside his fighter. A clear sign that this very moment had arrived. His breath, as well as his blood, began to accelerate slightly as the huge metal bulkhead began to rise. The white light of the force field, protecting the air from being sucked out into the void of endless space, blinded him slightly. He ignored it as the light in the hangar turned red. He was well aware that the fighter launch procedure had just begun. In a moment, he and his squadron would fly out from inside the Destroyer to take part in the show. In a game where their lives and the fate of their entire expedition would be at stake.