Chapter 357: Hades Only Cares About Those Worth Caring About

[Nikaea Theatre, Death Guard Legion Lounge]

This was wrong, one-sided, shouldn't have happened, biased, targeted at him personally, schemed, and unfortunate.

Right now was the Nikaea Council—Hades repeated it heavily in his mind—the Nikaea Council. The Changer of Ways would appear at the council, and this very gathering would determine the Empire's future direction.

He should be with Magnus, watching for any possible abnormality, doing whatever he could to avoid Magnus' world-shattering brilliance.

But he might not be able to leave for the moment. Angron's good intentions had temporarily trapped Hades here. Hades should have left some time to introduce the two sides, but regrettably, the timing of the Primarchs' meeting was simply too coincidental.

So Hades could only place his hope in the Emperor and Malcador—or perhaps the Custodes would do their job well enough. He had already sent a message to Malcador through the channel, asking him to keep an eye on Magnus. The Imperial Regent would not disappoint him.

Meanwhile, Hades kept an ear on the channel for Malcador's possible sudden summons and monitored the fluctuations in the surrounding psychic field. The Sisters of Silence and the Custodes were already moving toward the Thousand Sons' lounge.

Hades sat silently. His gaze drifted slowly toward the tray of pastries the servitor was holding beside him. Perhaps he could…

In front of the distracted, wandering-eyed Hades, two Primarchs were facing off. They hadn't even introduced themselves. Angron stood before Hades, his brow deeply furrowed, looking utterly confused.

Across from Angron, Mortarion stood with one hand on his hip and the other gripping the great scythe Oblivion—no, that hand on his hip was simply to keep it ready to draw his sidearm at any moment.

Mortarion didn't move. His expression was blank as he stared at Angron, seemingly puzzled and uncertain.

The two Primarchs had been frozen like this for three minutes. Hades had no idea what sort of silent play they were performing—perhaps the Primarchs had awakened some kind of telepathic communication.

But the oppressive tension between them was far too obvious, and Hades didn't dare speak rashly—whatever happened, he should at least wait until Mortarion and Angron introduced themselves.

At first, Hades felt uneasy—it reminded him of wearing an entire set of Macragge-blue armor to go meet Mortarion. Later, he simply felt bored: neither Primarch reacted, so there probably wouldn't be any messy bloodshed. Besides, the Emperor and Sanguinius were both present. Finally, Hades looked at the pastries and decided to eat something first; the council would likely drag on for quite a while anyway. Better to eat first—he'd need the energy to beat up Magnus or Tzeentch later.

Mortarion expressionlessly watched Hades quietly reach toward the plate of pastries.

Yes. This was Hades.

This was the commander of the Death Guard.

Mortarion should dump every bit of food in the lounge into a waste-gas processor, then fire into it, curse those innocent baked grains in the vilest language he knew, pour level-seven industrial sewage over them, and finally shove Hades in head-first.

If it were the old Mortarion, the Death Lord would have already swung his scythe at someone—anyone in front of him would do. But after years of waging war alone while commanding the Death Guard, those years had etched their own indelible marks upon Mortarion.

A deep rasp sounded from beneath the Death Lord's gas mask. With a metallic clang, Mortarion simply let go—Oblivion slammed against the wall behind him, leaning there at an angle.

Like a corpse crawling out of its grave, Mortarion slowly extended a hand toward Angron.

His hoarse voice scraped like sandpaper, barely intelligible:

"Mortarion. Primarch of the Death Guard. Lord of Barbarus."

Angron broke into a grin—broad, tooth-baring, but genuine. He strode forward and clasped Mortarion's hand with a loud smack, shaking it firmly.

“Angron, Primarch of the Twelfth Legion, the World Eaters. A pleasure, truly.”

And just as the two Primarchs shook hands, the great Lord of the Underworld reached his loyal pastry tray. Hades smoothly and naturally pulled the plate toward himself, then lifted his head to finally check on the two Primarchs who were showing signs of movement.

His hand froze mid-bite.

Mortarion and Angron were both staring at him.

“Uh… how about we all sit down, eat, and talk?”

Hades said hesitantly. Was that a faint ripple in the warp just now? Their combined gazes made him lose focus for a moment.

. . .

Mortarion should have foreseen all of this.

It began with Guilliman—no, perhaps even earlier. He remembered that the one who could communicate calmly with Perturabo was Hades. The one Horus praised was Hades. The one Guilliman admired was Hades. Even Lorgar…

The commander of the Death Guard was far more well-liked than Mortarion had ever imagined.

So of course, he should have expected this scene to happen one day.

Mortarion thought emotionlessly. Hades shone brightly; he had the ability to unite the Death Guard—naturally he had the ability to win over other Legions as well.

But… but…

He stared at Hades, now nearly the size of a Primarch, and at how easily Hades got along with another Legion. Mortarion remembered Calas Typhon's mocking words. In the end, the one left behind had always been him—just like Typhon had once been left behind halfway up that accursed mountain.

If you lack ability, then all you can do is watch your former comrades move forward, pull away, embark on ever-greater battlefields…

No…

Mortarion thought in pain. Had he really stagnated? He, the Death Lord, had led the Death Guard across countless campaigns. He had conquered innumerable worlds with minimal losses. He had established ties with the Iron Hands while remotely managing the Barbarus system. He had already done so much—far more than he ever had in the past. He was standing on a new rung of the ladder.

So why did Calas' mocking voice still ring in his ears? Had Typhon too once drunk this poison of self-blame and inadequacy?

Jealousy. Annoyance. Anger. Unwillingness. Anxiety. Self-reproach. Helplessness—

"Are you alright, brother?"

Angron's voice broke in—unbelievably, he called him *brother*, and there was concern in that man's tone.

Mortarion's eyes snapped open. The Death Lord shot to his feet, glaring warily at Angron. He drew the dagger from his belt and pointed it at him.

"Witch."

Mortarion said.

Before the word even finished echoing, Hades leapt up like a startled animal. A familiar discomfort swept across the room as Hades darted his eyes everywhere in alarm—only to quickly look confused.

"Mortarion, where's the psyker?"

Hades asked.

A hiss of toxic vapors puffed from beneath Mortarion's mask. He answered irritably:

"Right in front of you."

And then Mortarion watched as Hades stared at *him* in utter puzzlement.

It was wildly inappropriate, but Mortarion felt as though he might actually die of exasperation right then and there.

"It's… it's numerology."

Mortarion said through gritted teeth, furious at Hades yet powerless to change him.

To guard against Magnus' plots, Mortarion *had* indeed been using numerology to help better detect shifts in the warp flow. It was that same method that had allowed him to catch Angron's little trick just now.

While Mortarion and Hades were exchanging a flurry of silent expressions, Angron suddenly slapped his thigh and burst into laughter.

"Relax, my brothers! You both look so tense!"

Angron said, spreading his hands casually—

"You've got quite a bit of hostility toward me. Why, Mortarion? I had hoped we could fight side by side. I've heard you and the Death Guard are remarkably resilient."

"Who told you about me and my Legion—"

Mortarion began angrily, but the moment the words left his mouth, he knew it was a foolish question. Who else could it have been?

The shadowed aura receded, and Hades—very proudly—said, *"Me,"* though his mind was clearly elsewhere.

Mortarion sheathed his dagger with crisp efficiency. He stood there in silence, completely unsure what to do after having his entire emotional storm interrupted by this absurd farce.

First, he was angry—perhaps even grieving. He felt the poison Typhon had once tasted, the same venom Mortarion himself had brewed now running through his own veins.

But second, he looked at Hades. Hades was still Hades, and Mortarion could tell that Hades' attention wasn't really here. He was alert, watching for some unseen presence, even though he was trying to spare a sliver of his focus for this conversation.

Hades' true attention wasn't on his long-unseen old companion. Nor was it on the new friend he'd just made.

Mortarion let out a defeated sigh.

He seemed to finally remember where they were—Nikaea. Magnus' trial was still underway. The Emperor would soon return to Terra. This was a council centered on psykers. Mortarion had prepared far too long for this meeting.

Mortarion collapsed back into his seat. He watched Hades casually sit down again, picking up pastries with his usual ease—Hades was good at spouting strange, abrupt nonsense while eating, but right now he said nothing at all. Only when Hades was simultaneously handling emergency dispatches and shoving food into his mouth could Mortarion see him silent like this.

Hades' communication channel was absolutely open—and he was probably using its signal waves to converse with people outside.

Realizing this, Mortarion buried his head in both hands in hopeless resignation.

He remembered the countless hours he had spent gathering evidence, suppressing his temper while negotiating with Leman Russ, configuring toxins, endlessly rehearsing operations against the Thousand Sons.

Mortarion finally remembered Magnus' call to suspend the council session. If Mortarion had insisted the meeting continue, would Magnus already have been punished by now?

He had let victory slip through his own fingers.

For what?

Because of Hades?

What had Hades even done?

Mortarion realized painfully that Hades didn't care about what was happening here. Was it because Hades trusted him? Or because Hades was too preoccupied to care? The Nikaea Council was supposed to be a stage where the soulless punished the psykers.

So what had he done—?

Mortarion looked toward Angron. The Red Angel sat there, watching Mortarion with confusion and a hint of concern.

Did he even know what he had done?

Could this really be Angron's fault? If he saw yet *another* Legion warming up to Hades… wasn't that a good thing?

Mortarion thought: there were reasons he had been left behind.

After a brief moment of internal struggle, Mortarion spoke directly:

“Hades. The Sisters of Silence are calling you, aren’t they?”

He saw Hades nod.

“Go.”

Mortarion said. And he watched Hades stand up without a moment’s hesitation, ready to leave, offering him an apologetic smile on the way out. Hades trusted him—just as always. He looked at Mortarion with the same gaze he’d had when he first stepped out of the Death Guard’s initial drop pod.

Hades was saying: *Brother, I believe in you.*

He believed Mortarion could understand on his own that this was not the time for personal issues—just as he had entrusted air superiority to Mortarion on the battlefield without question.

The door closed with a soft thud. Mortarion bent forward, staring at the plate now reduced to crumbs.

“Alright, I still have no idea what’s going on.”

Angron’s voice sounded in front of him.

“But you suddenly looked really down, my brother.”

Mortarion didn’t blink. He stared at Angron.

“You don’t care about my hostility toward you?” The Death Lord asked calmly.

Angron grinned wide.

“I believe a friend of a friend is still a friend. You’ve no idea how many stories Hades has told me about you—like he has nothing else to talk about besides Barbarus and the Death Guard. I got sick of hearing them.”

A faint, fragile laugh escaped from beneath Mortarion’s gas mask.

All he could hope now was that his earlier impulsiveness hadn’t slowed Hades down in punishing the psykers.