

The Matrix: End of the Machines

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Here it begins...

The docks of Zion, or rather, what is left of them. Construction and repair is taking place throughout the ruins of the docks; arc welding showers sparks and bright lights throughout the ruins. Hundreds swarm over structures and scaffolding. Patched and battered APUs stand guard, gunners nervously watching the workers slowly rebuild the shattered infrastructure of the docks. All occasionally throw glances at the hole in the ceiling, and the gaping maw that is dock gate #3.

At one edge of the new dock structure, a ship is being rebuilt; smaller than the original, but none the less a full ship of Zion. Workers are still welding the hull together as technicians wire the myriad systems of a Zion ship inside.

A crew stands on the dock, waiting to take possession of the first of Zion's new ships....

Captain: There she is, people; our new ship. She should be ready in a week, maybe two.

Operator: What's she named?

Captain: Pheonix; she'll be the first to rise from our ashes. She'll give us a good look at what's left up on top; how much damage did the Machines take before Neo bought the truce....

The crew watches as electric arcs give birth to the hull of the Pheonix, first of ship of the peace...

*A ship of Zion, recently patched and refitted, hugs the dark ground on the surface of Earth. The name **Pheonix** is painted on the side. It cruises toward the Machine city, looking at the bleak, blasted ground. Lights in the distance point out the Matrix and the City.*

Mjolnir: Zion ship Pheonix, do you copy? Zion ship Pheonix, do you copy? Over.

Pheonix: This is Pheonix, who is this?

Mjolnir: Pheonix, I am a liason from Paradise, callsign Mjolnir. Request permission to come alongside.

Pheonix: Permission granted, Mjolnir.

A small speck of a ship rockets down to the Pheonix, slowing radically as it comes alongside. There is the flare of plasma jets as the small fighter-craft matches speed and direction with Pheonix; both continue moving across the blasted desert that is Earth's surface.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, I am here to inform you that Paradise is preparing a strike against the Machines. I request that you follow me, so you will not get in the way of the strike forces. You might like the show.

Pheonix: Mjolnir, we have no knowledge of Paradise; please explain.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, will advise once we clear the strike path. Please follow me to a high orbit over this region. I will hold for your ascent.

Debate among the captain and crew of Pheonix; the fighter craft is unlike anything Zion (or the Machines) has produced; small, flying by plasma jets, and sprouting guns over nearly ever surface. It is apparently far more agile than a small Zion craft, and yet more heavily armed than two Zion large hovercraft. The captain decides to play along.

Pheonix: Mjolnir, we will follow. Lead the way.

Mjolnir: Roger that, taking it high.

The fighter abruptly noses up and rockets to just below the cloud layer. It begins circling while it dumps speed. The Pheonix ascends at a relatively ponderous pace, matching the fighter eventually.

The fighter abruptly alters course, heading towards the Matrix and City. Pheonix matches the maneuvers, with a slight delay.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, tune your sensors for the terrain below. We are currently orbiting at a range of approximately 500 km from the Machine city. 300 km to the north is the main Matrix installation. Right now, there are teams of force recon commandoes infiltrating next to the five uplinks from the Matrix. At the signal, they will cut power and comm from the Matrix to the Machines. Then we strike. Do not descend without warning; there will be multiple strike waves inbound to the City through this corridor. IFF will not recongize the Pheonix, and point defense will shoot you down. Please acknowledge.

Pheonix: Mjolnir, we acknowledge, but we do not believe. We've never heard of Paradise, and Zion has nothing like your ship. Please explain.

The view out the front window of the fighter craft. Boiling clouds overlain by the HUDs of a combat fighter. Along the sides, maps and animations of the planet, Machine defenses, and strike paths are laid out for reference. In the corner of the forward HUD, a counter changes from green to blinking red as it races towards zero.

Mjolnir: Phoenix, we are out of time; strike counter is nearly gone. Will answer questions once strikes are underway. Follow me; speed run for the City.

The fighter rockets forward, Pheonix matching its' speed as best it can. The two ships, racing just below the boiling cloud layer, approach the Matrix and City at nearly a thousand km per hour.

Pheonix: Mjolnir, we can't keep this speed; our plant is coming apart. We see nothing on holographics but Machines; no commandos, no ships. If you are what you claim, the Machine counter-strikes will fall on Zion. The docks and

city are breached; the slaughter will be of us, not the Machines. You must not break the peace.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, chatter on another band, wait for my signal. Do not descend; the strike timer is nearly gone.

Mjolnir: HQ, this is Mjolnir, go ahead.

HQ: Mjolnir, recces in position, strike wings warm, we are ready for strike.

Mjolnir: HQ, be advised I have contacted Pheonix of Zion. As expected, Zion is crippled, and has no defensive capability. Retask reserve ground force Bravo to defense of Zion docks. Advise when Bravo is moving. Hold strike wings and recces for the signal.

HQ: Mjolnir, we copy that. Retasking ground force Bravo, holding strike forces.

A woman in a dark room, face flooded with light from screens, speaks to her headset.

HQ: Recce command, hold for signal. I repeat, hold for signal.

A trooper in full power armor, autocannon unslung and ready, waits in the dark desert. Around him are a half dozen other troopers, their armor blending with the desert like chameleons. Small, blinking lights pick out large boxes strapped to a massive set of conduits running from the Matrix to the City.

Recce Command: HQ, copy hold for signal; digging in.

A hand signal passes from the Recce commander to the other troopers; they find nearby cover, and wait with rifles ready.

A fighter and Zion ship orbit quietly, just below the cloud layer.

HQ: Mjolnir, strike forces holding, Ground Bravo is in motion; transport ETA is 5 minute 30 to Zion city breach.

Mjolnir: Roger that HQ. Hold for strike signal.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, be advised that a reserve ground force is moving to the Zion docks breach. They will establish and hold a perimeter; Machine counter-strikes will not reach the city.

Phoenix: There are still tens of thousands of squids ready for combat. You expect your reserve force to hold back what Zion itself couldn't?

Mjolnir: Reserve force Bravo has one hundred troopers, and seventy cannon turrets; the Machines will not reach the people of Zion. Hold while the ground forces transit.

A fighter and Zion ship orbit quietly, just below the cloud layer. A counter blinks red in the corner of a HUD, the numbers frozen.

Ground Bravo: HQ, we are in position, deploying turrets at perimeter, should be ready in three minutes zero. All is quiet in Zion docks; no sign of populace. Maybe they heard we were coming...

HQ: Ground Bravo, acknowledge you are building perimeter. Prepare to hold the city breach against HK counter-attack; will try to warn of incoming.

Mjolnir: HQ, advise on status of reserve force Bravo.

HQ: Mjolnir, Bravo is deploying around Zion dock breach; Bravo command estimates perimeter in 3 minutes.

Mjolnir: Roger that. HQ, patch me through to all bands.

HQ: Understood....patch completed, you are live.

Mjolnir: All forces, this is Mjolnir. Rolling Thunder. I repeat, Rolling Thunder.

The armored trooper turns, and signals another trooper. The conduit explodes in a massive fireball. Around the perimeter of the Matrix, four more fireballs are seen at once, towers in the centers toppling to the sides.

The Machine city, in the far distance, dims greatly. Pheonix: Mother of god, what was that....?

Recce Command: HQ, uplinks are down. Holding at Matrix perimeter.

Mjolnir: Recce Command, penetrate the Matrix; sweep for backup uplinks; destroy as found. Weapons free.

Recce Command: Mjolnir, understood. Moving out.

The team of troopers gathers and bounds towards the glowing towers of the Matrix. Each bound carries the troopers fifty feet straight up, and many hundreds of feet forward. Small hoverpads can be seen glowing on their backs. Occasional Machines that come to investigate the explosions are blasted by cannon fire.

A squadron of 20 fighters, in flights of 2, launch from a steel-lined cave, plasma jets lighting a trail behind them. At well over Mach 5, they head straight for the Machine city in the far distance.

Strike Wing Aleph: HQ, inbound to city. Engage machine defenses in 30.

Strike Wing Aleph: Pilots, listen up. Weapons free. Fire at will. Punch a hole for the bombers.

Twenty fighters, moving fast, close on the Machine city. Machine defenses wake up; cannons begin continuous shelling towards the approaching fighter craft.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, look below; the first fighter strike is approaching the city defenses. They will punch a hole in the defensive line for the bombers.

Phoenix: Look at that shelling; how do they expect to survive long enough to hurt the Machines?

Mjolnir: Point defenses are a wonderful thing. A wonderful thing.

Strike Wing Aleph breaks into flights, spreading into a double line with each trailing fighter behind and left of the front runner. Turrets begin rotating independantly, swiveling rapidly. The double line approaches the outermost Machine bombs, with a thickening cloud ahead.

As the bombs reach a range of 2 km, turrets on the fighters open fire, making broken lines of automatic plasma cannon fire intersect Machine bombs. The resulting explosions form a disjointed wall, much like the old WWII footage of flak guns around bombers. The fighters punch deeper into the cloud, with steadily increasing explosion density around them.

Strike Wing Aleph: Keep formation; trust the point defenses. Another 20 seconds and we'll be on the cannons. Warm up the guns and bombs, we have a delivery to make.

Fighter craft, their turrets continuously firing, are creating a clear zone several hundred meters deep around each flight. The Machine cannon, firing continuously, are unable to close the size of the zone; the fighter turrets are too accurate, and too fast.

Strike Wing Aleph: Here we go; nuke the bastards.

The leading fighters drop rockets from wing hardpoints. Rockets ignite, leaping forward towards the Machine cannon. Machine bombs ignore the rockets, concentrating on the ships. The rockets, as a ragged line, reach the cannon in a second, and detonate.

Overlapping EMP detonations shut down the Machine cannon for nearly 1000 meters across.

The fighters, mopping up the last of the bombs with the point defenses, continue forward over the collapsing Machine defenses.

Machine defenses at the edge of the hole begin awakening.

Strike Leader Aleph: Good work, pilots! Wingmen, expand the hole. Pointmen, let's clear a path to the city.

The second rank of fighters breaks apart, half turning toward each edge of the hole. As they reach the edge, they begin firing rockets into the Machine defenses, crippling the Machines as they wake.

The point fighters continue forward, reforming into flights of 2.

Strike Wing Aleph: Here we go; I got HKs on the scopes. Break formation, take them one on one. Lets get some.

Fighter flights break into single ships, turning to meet the large number of squid rising from the city's edge in columns.

At 3000 m, the fighter craft open fire with main guns; six guns around the nose of the fighter craft spew plasma into the columns. Fireballs abound.

Squid columns break and reform, trying (with some success) to avoid the plasma streams of the dodging fighters. The result is a set of giant furballs as each fighter weaves and dodges, making passes across and through the wildly moving squid columns.

A large squid column forms for a pass at a fighter, which plays chicken before breaking off, leaving a rocket in its' place. The EMP detonation decimates the column.

String Wing Aleph, wingman commander: HQ, this is Aleph wingman command. City defenses breached, joining Aleph pointman over the city proper.

HQ: Roger Aleph wingman, bomber ETA is 1 minute 10.

The furballs continue, fighters spewing plasma death at Machines. Machines that close on the sides and rear of the fighters meet the sudden death of point defenses. Those in the front meet the swifter death of main plasma cannon.

Bomber Wing Able: HQ, now passing Machine city perimeter defenses. All quiet. What's the word on the battle plates?

HQ: Able, battle plates one to four will arrive in 2 minutes 50; you'll have a way home.

Able: HQ, thanks. Beginning strike run in 1 minute 12.

Forty bombers, each three times the size of a fighter, but with the same sleek look, streak over the mountains around the city. Their gun turrets swivel, looking for targets. The squid columns, down to a small fraction of the initial surge, are still dealing with the fighters of Aleph, high above the bomber wing.

Able: Alright, lets drop some electric death. One km pattern bombardment, single stack formation. Carpet the city, boys.

Bombers, travelling in groups of 4, spread into a single, even line with 1000 m between the ships. At roughly Mach 0.85, their bellies open well before they reach the dim city lights in the distance. They begin dropping free-fall bombs just before the edge of the city.

Bombs detonate shortly after the bombers drop them, generating large, overlapping, EMP blast waves in a uniform pattern across the city.

When the bombers reach the other side of the city basin, their bays close, and they pull up hard, flipping about in only a few hundred meters of altitude, and reform into flights of 4.

They scream back towards the perimeter at Mach 4, plasma jets open wide.

Able: HQ, load dropped, returning to base for rearm. Looks like a clean strike; no lights on anywhere.

The city, flashing past below the fast moving bombers, is totally dark.

HQ: Roger Able, RTB for rearm and retask. Good work.

Aleph: HQ, HKs destroyed. We are holding on-station. Be advised we are low on missiles, and have lost 2 ships in the furball.

HQ: Roger, Aleph. Hold on-station for wave 2. Able says no lights on in the city; can you confirm?

Aleph: HQ, Machine city is totally dark. Scanners show no motion, no emissions. Looks dead. Will continue passive scan on-station.

Mjolnir: Aleph, go to active scanning. Keep the airspace clear for wave 2.

Aleph: Roger, Mjolnir. Going active...still nothing. Still looks dead. Will keep looking for something more to kill.

Able: HQ, approaching perimeter, are the battle plates in position?

HQ: Able, battle plates arriving now. Report no contact.

Travelling low over the terrain, a set of 4 dreadnoughts slowly move into position over the Machine city perimeter defenses. Each is hundreds of meters across, bristling with gun turrets on all surfaces. There is no visible cockpit or window. Only a handful of blinking lights picks it out from the dark terrain below.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, look there. The dreadnoughts have arrived. They may not have much to do for a bit, though.

Pheonix: Mjolnir, what are those things; they're huge.

Mjolnir: Dreadnoughts. Heavily armored, with roughly 400 independant turrets. Half are autocannon, similar to your turrets. The rest are plasma cannon. Each autocannon has a separate magazine; about 100,000 shells. The whole defense is automated. Those four dreadnoughts can hold that hole against everything the Machines threw at Zion. The troops call them battle plates, since they resemble terribly vicious stoneware.

Dreadnought One: HQ, in position, weapons are hot, IFF is green. We show no threats on the scanners.

HQ: Dreadnought One, copy that. Hold the line for wave 2. Bomber wing Able should be passing overhead in thirty.

Bomber wing Able, in flights of 4, rockets over the dreadnoughts. The turrets do not react, for the bombers have a valid IFF signal.

Mjolnir: HQ, please advise on status of wave 1 strikes.

HQ: Mjolnir, all strike wings report clear perimeters. Dreadnoughts are in position at all strike zones. Bomber wing Bravo should commence bombing in fifty. Charlie is dropping. Strike wings Beta and Gamma report heavy contact over their strike zones, but still holding, light casualties. Reserve force Bravo reports all quiet, perimeter established. Recce command reports sporadic contact with drone Machines in the Matrix, but no backup uplinks. Orbital sensors show no new emission blooms.

Mjolnir: Thanks, HQ. Get wave 2 in the air. Retask Bombers to tunnel clearing for strike zones. Send in wave 2 once wave 1 is clear.

HQ: Understood...Wave 2 is launching now.

Bomber Charlie: HQ, payload dropped, coming out. Strike looks clean; still have emissions from scattered sources; probably underground.

HQ: Roger Charlie, will direct Foxtrot to search and destroy.

Mjolnir: HQ, retask Strike Aleph to deep recon. Single ship flights, even global coverage, max speed, active sweep. City looks dead. I will take over Aleph station watch.

HQ: Retasking Aleph for recon. Keep safe Mjolnir.

Mjolnir: Thank you HQ.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, follow me. We are moving over the city.

Pheonix: Lead on.

HQ: Mjolnir, Aleph breaking station for recon; will advise if they find anything.

Eighteen fighters, orbiting in flights of 2, break apart and head off to the points of the compass with a burst of plasma jets. Each is moving Mach 6 by the time they are out of sight.

Pheonix: Mjolnir, what the hell just happened to our holographics?

Mjolnir: Active scanning sweeps by wing Aleph. Causes enormous feedback in holographics if you're not shielded. Also announces you to the world if anything is listening. Forgot you aren't shielded.

Pheonix: Just don't do it to us, again.

Mjolnir: I'll try to avoid it.

Mjolnir: We are coming over the perimeter of the city; the mountains were a secondary shield for the Machines, if we used ground troops. Of course, bombers just fly right over. The city itself is remarkably small, but very dense. If it hadn't just been killed with several thousand EMPs, it would be quite brightly lit, by Machine standards. Used to be able to find it easily by satellite, even with the clouds.

Pheonix: The city is big. How many more of these are there?

Mjolnir: Just the one. The great flaw of the Machines is that they always seek optimal solutions. Only one city for administration and control. Only one Matrix, for power and processing. Only one farm for processor node replacements. Only one factory complex for production of the HKs, drones, and so on. Each was very efficient, but it also means that we had only 3 strike zones; no need to destroy more of the Matrix than the uplinks.

We had planned to have Neo keep the Core from the Matrix, and leave the uplinks in place. When Neo died, we decided we had no choice but to toast all

the uplinks. If the Core got into the Matrix, we'd have to kill a billion humans with EMPs. Instead, we destroy the uplinks, leave the Matrix isolated, and try to extract as many people as we can once the fighting's done.

HQ: Mjolnir, be advised wave 2 is approaching strike zones. Bomber Dog will reach city perimeter in twenty.

Mjolnir: HQ, thanks. Will keep out of the way.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, climb to just below the cloud layer. If you get caught in the splash of the second bombing wave, you'll be down permanently.

Pheonix: Climbing now. The city is dead, why more bombing?

Mjolnir: There are many miles of tunnels, multiple sub-levels below the surface. Not all of that may have been hit with the bombing run. We have one chance to get all the Machines; any surviving Machines might be able to rebuild, launch a counterstrike. We might not win a war of attrition, even with the EMPs, plasma cannon, and power armor. The second and third waves will clean up anything that still works down in the tunnels.

Pheonix: Wow. Where were you when we needed a defense of Zion. With this stuff, we could have held the docks forever.

Forty bombers, in flights of four, crest the mountain range behind the dreadnoughts, and swoop down into the city.

Bomber wing Dog: HQ, entering zone 1 tunnel network; splitting into flights and dropping.

HQ: Bomber wing Dog, good luck and godspeed. Catch you on the surface.

Bomber wing Dog: Alright pilots, lets pound the ground. Into the tunnels, and kill it if it glows.

Individual flights seek out tunnel entrances and shoot down underground. As they fly through the tunnel network, bombers launch missile and free-fall EMP weapons into chambers and branches. The detonations fill the spaces precious seconds behind the bombers.

Mjolnir: Zion could not be saved, much as we hate to see so many die. Previous iterations, the Matrix would be unstable and nearly shutdown for nearly twenty hours after the fall of Zion. The Core would be unable to use the Matrix, no matter what we did. We were planning to launch this attack then, during the chaos that follows a fall of Zion. Neo went and altered the pattern; the Matrix was back on-line in a matter of minutes. By the time we realized this fall wasn't like the previous six, Zion was already lost. Took us a week to figure out how to handle the new situation.

Pheonix: Why let Zion fall. You blew the uplinks anyway. Kill the uplinks, save Zion, and still crush the Machines. Why let Zion die for a few hours of chaos?

Mjolnir: The Core is not to be underestimated. With nearly a billion nodes available, it could coordinate a counterattack that would find and exploit any weakness in our strategy. The Core must be kept from the Matrix. If the Core reached the Matrix, we would have to kill the Matrix; EMP it to darkness. A billion humans would die. The quarter-million of Zion are nothing compared to the billion in the Matrix.

If we lose this campaign, Humanity falls.

Phoenix: But....

HQ: Mjolnir, sensors show massive emission blooms from around strike zones 2 and 3. Looks like HKs and drones. Moving to intercept wave 2...wait, we also show a bloom moving towards Zion.

Mjolnir: Quiet, the Machines are finally starting a counterattack. Stay near the clouds, and don't get involved. Without an IFF transponder, you will be annihilated by our own guns.

Mjolnir: HQ, warn wave 2 bombers; get strike wings Dalet, He, and Vav in the air, full burn to protect the bombers. Warm up wave 3 and the reserves. Give reserve force Bravo some warning. All dreadnoughts are now at fire at will.

HQ: Mjolnir, copy that. Ground Bravo and bombers have been warned. Dalet, He, and Vav are already in the air. Dreadnought command has gone to full auto, weapons free.

Mjolnir: HQ, thanks for the update. Will hold above zone 1; anything coming towards us?

HQ: Mjolnir, sensors report no blooms moving towards zone 1; could be underground movement. Sensor nets around zone 1 have been silent for twenty minutes.

Mjolnir: Roger that, HQ. Sensors going active.

Ten thousand km away, streams of HKs and drones of all types gather into columns as they approach strike zone 2; the factory complex. Carefully synchronized, the columns reach the defensive perimeter from multiple points, only one of which is the same direction as the human strike force. The dreadnoughts are waiting....

Dreadnought Five: HQ, sensors show incoming Machines; appears to be single column of 20,000 plus. Weapons are free, engaging at maximum range. Multiple columns of similar size approaching zone 2 from other directions, out of our reach. Recommend strike wings engage to cover bomber wing Echo.

HQ: Dreadnought Five, we see the same here. Strike wing He is enroute, ETA three minutes thirty. Bomber Echo ETA is four minutes ten. Happy hunting.

Thirty thousand Machines, most of them drones, reach the invisible boundary that is the range of the dreadnoughts' guns. Eight hundred gun turrets open fire at the column. None miss. The Machine column breaks apart and begins to evade. Fire from the turrets splits and recombines along with the Machines. A constant stream of Machine parts falls from the sky as the shells and plasma bolts strike HKs and drones. The Machine column, taking heavy losses despite their evasive moves, pushes towards the factory complex.

Dreadnought Five: HQ, be advised that Machine column is down to 5000 active units. Ammunition stands at 75 percent of max. Target system is green. Additional Machine columns have changed course towards us. We'll keep them off the bombers.

The final 5000 Machines die in a matter of seconds, their shattered hulls littering a track along the ground. Not one Machine got within 1 km of the dreadnoughts.

Three more columns turn from the factory complex to drive on the dreadnoughts. The dreadnoughts' guns, steaming from their sustained fire, still turn looking for targets.

Dreadnought Five: Look alive crews, we got another 100 k inbound in fifty. Pilots, raise our altitude, I want all the turrets in play.

Four dreadnoughts glide upwards, hoverpods glowing. The bottom turrets wake up, preparing for action.

Dreadnought Five: Here we go. Machines in range in five, four, three, two, one, bingo....

Sixteen hundred turrets open fire on the front ranks of the Machine columns. Again, a continuous stream of shattered Machines falls to the ground, smoking. Mixed shells and plasma fill the sky as the Machines split and reform columns, advancing on the dreadnoughts.

Despite the constant attrition, the Machine columns close on the dreadnoughts. Splitting into clouds and loose columns, the Machines cut down the loss rate to mere hundreds per second. Each turret on the dreadnoughts is firing continuously, smoking from the heat.

Dreadnought Seven: Five, we got a problem here; we've got 30 percent ammunition remaining. Half our gun turrets are showing heat warnings. Where's the strike wing to take some of this heat?

Dreadnought Five: Seven, hold the line. Cycle the plasma turrets off-line for cooling; run the guns dry and switch to plasma. Strike wing He is on the way.

Ten thousand Machines remain. Spread into thin clumps, the Machines dodge and weave as they close on the dreadnoughts. The closest are a few hundred meters from the dreadnought hulls, but dying quickly from the constant gun barrage.

Dreadnought seven, with only half the turrets firing, has Machines within ten meters of the hull. Dreadnoughts eight and six retask a few turrets to help the embattled seven. The Machines are cleared for a few seconds, before the Machines decide to concentrate the remaining few thousand Machines on Dreadnought seven.

Dreadnought Seven: Five, our cannons are dry, switching to plasma. Keep those bastards off our hull.

Dreadnought seven stops firing for a brief instant as the guns go offline, empty, and the plasma turrets (which were cooling) come online. A thousand Machines, given a brief moment of respite from the barrage, swarm onto the hull, swamping the turrets on the top. Cutting lasers begin stripping gun turrets from the dreadnought, as dreadnoughts eight and six sweep the air around seven clear of Machines.

Dreadnought Seven: Five, we are losing turrets left and right. The Machines are on our hull; repeat HKs on our hull are fragging our turrets. Request direct fire at Machines on our hull.

Dreadnought Five: Eight, Six, you heard the man; slag those HKs on her hull.

Dreadnought Eight: Retasking turrets, brace for damage.

Dreadnought Six: Retasking turrets, sorry bro.

Dreadnoughts eight and six reallocate several dozen turrets to sweep the hull of seven clear. Twenty seconds of sustained cannon and plasma fire sweep the hull of all active Machines. It also puts several thousand dents and holes in the dreadnought's hull....

Dreadnought Seven: Five, we are in a bad way here. Twenty percent turrets intact, no ammo for the cannon, hull has a couple hundred holes. I request to put the plate on full automatic, and abandon for eight and six.

Dreadnought Five: Roger that seven. Get out while you can, make for eight and six.

Dreadnought Seven: Clearing out; setting power core for EMP release upon damage...All crew are out, catch you in five.

Ten people in powered armor emerge from the bottom of dreadnought seven, dropping to the ground. Above them, a firestorm rages as the dreadnoughts clean up the last few thousand Machines. The people bounce along the ground, half towards each neighboring dreadnought. A rogue HK pops below the 'plates, and heads for one of the crew.

The HK makes it five meters before a turret blasts it to tiny pieces. The ten people clamber up into the neighboring battle plates.

Dreadnought Five: HQ, be advised that we show Machine assault down to maybe twenty percent of original strength. Remaining Machines are out of our range; request permission to move to engage.

HQ: Five, request denied. Hold the line. Strike wing He will be on station in ten. Bomber wing Echo is thirty seconds behind them.

DN Five: Roger HQ, will hold here for He and Echo.

Two hundred fighters fly over the dreadnoughts, just below the cloud cover. They close and attack the 32,500 remaining Machines in flights of two. An initial wave of EMP missiles drops half the Machines in a couple of seconds. The remaining Machines break into small groups, and engage the fighter flights.

The fighters, using both plasma and missiles, are causing heavy damage to the Machines, but they are also taking damage from the occasionally unlucky collision with a Machine. Things are not helped by the unwillingness of the fighter pilots to stray too far below the cloud cover; as long as the fighters are up top, the bombers can strike unmolested....

Bomber wing Echo: He, be advised we are entering zone now. Commencing attack on tunnel network. Keep those HKs off our back, and we'll toast a few when we get back up.

Strike wing He: Roger, Echo. Pound the factories, we'll hold the high ground for your return.

232 bombers, in flights of 4, fly over the dark factories, and take various tunnel entrances. The walls and infrastructure blur by the bomber canopies as they begin bombing the tunnels and chambers under the factory complex. Each bomber has a heads-up display that shows a complete map of the factory, and marks out various tunnels and chambers for each flight. As each area is hit, it changes color, letting the pilot know she need not come back in this wave. There are still many areas left in the original color....

DN Five: Strike wing Echo, bring those Machines over our way, and we'll be happy to take out a thousand or two.

He: Thanks, plates.

He: All right girls, let's herd these Machines to the plates.

Fighters, dodging to avoid Machines while firing nearly continuously, begin working their way towards the perimeter. The Machines follow slowly, as they are also dodging to avoid fighters and plasma. The giant furball slowly rolls through the sky over the perimeter. When the bulk of the fighters and Machines are directly overhead, the dreadnoughts open fire with the upper turrets.

The Machines are trapped between a hammer called He and an anvil called Dreadnought Group Ni. This will not take long.

Deep underground, power armored troopers wait around the hole from the Zion docks to the city proper. One hundred troopers in all wait for something to kill, along with 70 turrets, and one very well-armed transport. Troopers are sparsely deployed throughout the wreckage of the docks around the breach to the city, turrets are placed in the tunnels leading out from the docks, and the transport is next to the city breach. A handful of troopers stands at the edge of dock gate 3, forming a final line on that approach behind the 35 turrets. Ten troopers, officers all, wait next to the breach to the city; they are the final line between unarmored humans and the Machines that are coming....

HQ: Ground Bravo, be advised that we show 10,561 Machines, mostly HKs moving towards your position. Two columns, one approaching gate 3, one approaching the docks breach. Estimate arrival at docks in 3 minutes 30.

Ground Bravo: HQ, thanks for the warning. We'll be sure to give the HKs a nice warm welcome.

Ground Bravo: Look alive! We have inbound. All weapons free. You all know what we need to do; let's get it done!

Troopers unsling and check rifles. Turrets begin a slow sweep, lights on the back going from a dull red to a bright green. The transport's turrets wake up, guns rising to ready positions, and gunners checking traversal ranges. A lone trooper, supported by hover pads, floats directly above the city breach; on the shoulder of the armor are Captain's bars, insignia of the commander of Ground force Bravo.

Ground Bravo: Holos show Machines at 5 km, closing at max speed. Turrets, engage at max range, standard target priority. Troopers, kill anything that gets through. Contact in twenty. Time to rock'n'roll; kill 'em all, kill 'em dead.

Loose columns of Machines, glowing in the darkness of the tunnels, float along towards Zion. They fill the tunnels, leaving spaces barely big enough for dogs to pass. The flow continues unchanged until they reach 3000 m from the broken door of gate 3.

Twelve turrets snap to attention and open fire, shells filling the tunnel. Machines begin to fall immediately, knocked down by the accurate shooting of the turrets. Surviving Machines evade, working their way towards the door. The turrets, tracking individual machines, make their streams of shells intersect the Machines. Twelve turrets are killing tens of Machines per second; the close

quarters leave little room to maneuver, and Machines find themselves evading one stream of fire into another. Despite the losses, the Machines press forward.

At 2500 m from the door, the second line of turrets opens up, and the loss rate doubles. A few Machines manage to escape by skimming next to the wall of the tunnel with the turrets. Only the first row can fire, so the Machines gain a few seconds of existence. Knowledge passes between surviving HKs, and all begin hugging the walls of the tunnel. Unfortunately for them, walls above the turrets are just as easy to shoot as the space in the center.

Half the remaining Machines crowd the lower edge of the tunnel, minimizing their exposure to the blazing cannons. The mass of Machines advances, taking terrible losses, but closing within meters of the outer row of turrets. Half the outer row dies in ten seconds as the Machines cut them apart; lacking human crews, the turrets continue firing until the last second it is functional. The second row now can fire down the tunnel with near-impunity. The Machine losses mount again. The last guns of the outer row fall silent a few minutes later, empty or broken.

At 1500 m from the door, the final row opens fire. The Machines are within 300 m of the second row, and taking heavy losses with two full rows, twenty-four guns, pounding shells into their clusters. As the Machines reach the second row, 1800 m from the door, twenty EMP grenades gently arc through the air, thrown by the troopers at the dock door. The grenades explode in the middle of the Machines, a broken pattern of blue spheres bringing swift death. Half the remaining Machines are destroyed by the grenades; the remainder press forward in a single great mass, trying to let speed take them beyond the guns, and into the docks. The turrets concentrate fire on the column, and only twenty Machines make it to 300 m from the dock door. Ten troopers open fire, dropping the last Machines 280 m from the door.

The first counter-strike against Zion has been crushed.

A second column, dropping down the tunnel to the docks breach, has better luck. Thousands of Machines approach the breach, unknowing of the firestorm that awaits. Four hundred meters from the breach, the thirty-five turrets lining the breach walls open fire. Cannon shells intersect just inside the mass of Machines, using the small size of the tunnel as a guide for explosions. Detonations move up and down the Machine column, crippling two or three Machines for every one that is directly hit by cannon fire.

The Machines surge towards the turrets, closing faster than the cannon can kill them. The turrets last four minutes into the assault on the docks breach. They kill 4000 Machines. The remaining 1000 Machines pour into the docks, looking for humans, APUs, and more turrets. They find troopers, and a transport.

Ninety troopers open fire on the Machines, each dropping at least one a second. The transport, equipped with short-range weapons, holds back while the Machines begin to evade along the walls of the docks. When they were last here, they could evade human-pointed cannon fire along the walls, split the humans apart, and tackle them one-on-one. They try the only tactic they have been programmed with; pity that the humans know the tactic, and these humans have

power infantry.

Trooper rifles, firing explosive hyper-velocity shells, aimed by radar and HUD crosshairs, each drop a Machine per second. The misses leave smoking craters in the walls and churn the rubble. Were anyone standing in the docks in anything less than power armor, they would be stunned and deaf for days from the noise. Fortunately for the troopers, they all have power armor, and know how to use it.

The few remaining Machines, desperately trying to avoid dodging into a stream of shells from yet another trooper, circle and weave throughout the docks. They slowly diffuse towards the city breach; a single HK in the city itself might kill much of the population before it could be destroyed. The troopers know this, and this is why there are ten troopers who are not currently fighting. They watch the city breach, waiting for the occasional HK to break through and try for the city.

Two minutes into the Machine assault from the breach, ten HKs do break through. The luckiest get within 40 meters of the city breach before the trooper rifles turn them into scrap. Seven minutes after the Machines reached 400 m from the docks breach, the last Machine dies in a cross-fire of five troopers; dust wafts to the ground.

Troopers reload rifles, and repair crews bounce out to the turrets to see what can be saved.

The Machine counter-attack on Zion is done.

Mjolnir: HQ, sensors show inbound Machines, numbering 50k plus, all HKs. Can you confirm?

HQ: Mjolnir, we confirm 52,461 HKs closing on zone 1 in five columns. Three columns predicted to cross perimeter dreadnoughts. Looks like the columns formed inside the sensor net dark zone; we believe they killed the sensor feeds twenty-five minutes ago. Suggest that you bug out while you can; leave the Machines for wave 2.

Mjolnir: HQ, what's the ETA for strike Dalet and bomber Golf?

HQ: Strike wing Dalet will be on-station in twenty. Bomber Golf is on the ground; bomber Dog has not finished yet. Dog return to base estimated as 3 minutes out.

Mjolnir: Bomber Dog, this is Mjolnir. What's your status?

Bomber wing Dog: Mjolnir, nearly done with the tunnels. Give us another 3 minutes, and we will be back on the surface, ready to run for home.

Mjolnir: Roger, Dog. We'll give you those 3 minutes. Don't stop for the flowers, we have 50k Machines inbound.

Bomber wing Dog: Understood; we'll be out ASAP.

Mjolnir: HQ, Dalet and myself will stay on-station. Dreadnoughts will hold the line for bomber Dog.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, stay at the clouds, try not to attract attention. Let us handle the Machines.

Strike wing Dalet: Mjolnir, this is strike wing Dalet. We are ten from you. Which columns do we take?

Mjolnir: Dalet, take the two on the far side of the zone; let the plates handle the three on this side. Full burn to intercept at maximum distance from the city. We'll fight out there, and then fall back to the plates as we must. Follow me.

Strike wing Dalet: Roger that; we are right behind you. Do you need a wingman?

Mjolnir: Negative, Dalet. Keep your formations and watch your backs; I'll try to keep out of the way. Here we go...

200 fighters, moving in flights at Mach 6, crest the mountains and continue full throttle across the dark city. A lone fighter drops from just below the clouds, settling in to place just in front of the center flight. As they pass the far border of the darkened Machine city, they split into two groups. Each breaks a little to the side, closing on a dense column of Machines visible only as a dark cloud on the horizon. The lone fighter breaks with the northern group...

Mjolnir: Dalet A, prepare for concussion zone assault on the forward elements. Max range strike. On my mark. One, two, three, mark!

404 missiles launch from the fighter group, speeding towards the Machines at Mach 8. Ten seconds later, the sky is lit by the brilliant blue explosions of 404 EMP warheads. The Machines, seeing the oncoming missile strike, spread themselves thin to minimize damage. The EMP detonations, targetted to cover the most volume possible, still manage to destroy several thousand Machines.

The Machines reform into five columns, breaking apart to flank the approaching fighters...

Mjolnir: A, punch through the center and break back to the city. We can catch them if we must.

All 101 fighters continue straight on, adjusting course only slightly to keep centered on the lone fighter in front. As they pass the central Machine column, plasma fire and a handful of EMP detonations obliterate it. A few dozen Machines struggle up from the falling debris, and run to the other four columns.

The remaining four Machine columns turn inwards, reversing to pursue the fighters. The fighters, through the Machine line, break into four groups and each takes one column. Plasma fire from the fighters scatter the Machine columns, but cause few casualties. Machine columns reform and break as the fighters close, spewing plasma.

Mjolnir: Break into flights; let's make this a real furball.

Flights of two fighters break formation, heading for clumps and columns of Machines. Plasma fire and the occasional EMP detonation fill the air as the fighters strike and turn. The Machines, being slower but slightly more maneuverable, break and reform their groups, trying to get close enough to grab the fighter hulls.

As the fighters become more separated from each other, they start to fall back towards the city, slowly herding/leading the Machines to the dreadnoughts.

A lone fighter punches through the furball, leveling out just below the clouds. The firefight continues below.

Mjolnir: HQ, how are the plates doing at the perimeter?

HQ: Mjolnir, Dreadnought One reports low ammunition on all dreadnoughts, but massive enemy casualties. Dreadnoughts three and four report significant hull damage, but they are holding. Dreadnought group estimates full annihilation of Machine columns in 2 minutes 40.

Mjolnir: Thanks. What about bomber Dog?

HQ: Bomber wing Dog reports all tunnels hit; they should resurface in 20. They are ordered to head straight for base, at max throttle.

Mjolnir: Good. Please advise when bomber Dog has cleared the perimeter.

HQ: Will do, Mjolnir. Stay safe.

The lone fighter, noting the interest of a few dozen HKs, accelerates, turns hard, and launches a missile at the Machine formation. The detonation turns the Machines to scrap. The fighter drops its nose and dives, spewing plasma into convenient Machine groupings. It is soon lost in the general melee still taking place.

Machine numbers are down to 30 percent of the original force, and they are still well outside the city itself. The fighters are nearly out of missiles, and are relying on plasma weapons and superior speed to take down clumps. Enough space has opened to allow the fighters to make passes, dropping a few dozen or more Machines per flight, per pass. The Machines, unable to keep up with the fighters, are consistently being drawn into a crossing pass, which lets a fighter flight plow through with all twelve plasma cannon blazing. Few Machine groups take more than one such pass to be dispatched entirely.

Mjolnir: Dalet A, head for the perimeter. Let's bring these Machines to the anvils.

Mjolnir: Dalet B, fall back to the battle plates. I repeat, fall back.

The fifty surviving fighters of Dalet A, and the forty fighters of Dalet B turn and run for the perimeter. The plasma jets of the fighters quickly outrun the hoverpads of the Machines. The few thousand remaining Machines reform and follow at their best pace.

Mjolnir: Strike wing Dalet, reform and prepare to fight over the perimeter. Check IFF transponders.

Strike wing Dalet: Mjolnir, all fighters report green IFF status. Time to crush them on the anvils.

91 fighters reach the perimeter at Mach 4, then break apart and begin orbiting in flights. Below them, the dreadnoughts are mopping up the remaining Machines with sporadic cannon fire. The dreadnoughts look battered, but nearly all turrets still seek targets. The ground is smoking with the remains of Machines.

The remaining Machines approach the perimeter and head straight for the fighters. The dreadnoughts open fire at maximum range. The air is filled with shells and plasma. Machines drop by the thousands. It is over in 30 seconds.

Mjolnir: Dreadnoughts, thanks for the firestorm. We were getting a bit winded with those Machines.

Dreadnought One: Mjolnir, thanks for the targets. We might have gotten bored down here. Be advised that Bomber wing Dog is approaching the perimeter.

Mjolnir: Thanks dreadnoughts.

Mjolnir: HQ, sensors show all clear at zone 1; bomber Dog is outbound, passing my position now....

Bombers, in flights, pass under the fighters and over the dreadnoughts. The leader drops his wings in acknowledgement. The group pushes the throttle to the stops, and accelerates away with a burst of plasma jets. The entire group is out of sight in seconds.

Mjolnir: Please advise on status of other strike zones.

HQ: Mjolnir, all strike zones secure. Combined sensor net shows no activity at any strike zone. Dreadnought Seven was abandoned, but still holds the line on automatic. Fighter group He reports moderate casualties, but no Machines remain. Dreadnoughts 9-12 report light hull damage and roughly 50 percent ammunition remaining. Strike wing Vav reports light contact, no losses. Recce command reports spikes in Matrix activity, but no emissions detected; Drone contact has dropped to zero. Wave 3 is ready, but still on the ground. Wave 1 bombers have been rearmed, but are on standby. Strike wing Aleph reports no contacts, with 50 percent of their coverage done. Reserve force Bravo reported significant contact at Zion breach; ten thousand HKs approached. Ten made it to the city breach. The troopers got those. All quiet since.

Orbital reconnaissance shows no emissions, but we do not currently have coverage over the poles. Elements of Aleph should finish a polar run inside of 40 minutes. Shall we recall the troops?

Mjolnir: Not yet. Get the bomber wings back and rearmed. Stand down wave 1, and put wave 3 on standby. Stand down reserves. Keep the dreadnoughts in position, but dispatch a repair unit to seven. Recall Strike wing Dalet and He. Retask Vav to zone 2. I'll stay at zone 1 until Aleph completes its' sweep.

HQ: Understood, relaying orders now.

Mjolnir: Pheonix, do you copy?

Pheonix: Mjolnir, we read you fine. What's the story?

Mjolnir: There is no Machine activity detected anywhere. Recon of the polar regions, where our sensors are sparse, should be done within an hour. The Machines never put anything that far off the equator, so there shouldn't be anything to find. Assuming that comes up clear, we might actually be done.

Pheonix: Done?

Mjolnir: Yep. Done. As in, no more Machines. No more HKs, no more Core. No more war.

Pheonix: What about the Matrix?

Mjolnir: The Matrix is reported to be intact; the people should be fine. The Core never made it into the Matrix; there wasn't another uplink. The Central Core died with its' city. The uncoordinated assault of the Machines supports that.

We will need to work on bringing people out of the Matrix in batches to help rebuild the world. No Machine will need them as compute nodes anymore. We will also need to clean the sky. But those projects can wait a bit. First we need to be sure we got all the bastards.

Pheonix: So you're saying **all** the machines are dead, gone? Every last one of them?

Mjolnir: We can't find emissions from any Machine, anywhere. Our casualty count exceeds the estimates by about 10 percent, so we probably got them all. Amazing how good an estimate you can make with 600 years to refine it. We still have an hour to wait, so I'm going to take a little nap. Talk to y'all later.

The lone fighter begins circling just below the clouds, over a dark and blasted landscape.

Here it ends.