**Black Crusade 10.1**

**The Last Dawn**

*I know you are here, Corax.*

*The shadows hide you, but I feel your hatred and my sons told me of the raven feathers you left behind after your massacres.*

*This is pathetic, brother.*

*Are you unable to remember the black sands of Isstvan V?*

*You nearly very well killed me there, I won’t deny it, but by the fault of Curze, you failed.*

*It’s ironic, isn’t it? The Primarch who believed destiny was impossible to change saved my life and changed the outcome of the battle. One death must be paid with one death; if Ferrus and I had died in the battle of the Drop Site Massacre, the bargain I passed with the Gods would have been sealed and the doom of our arrogant sire assured. Instead the Night Haunter intervened, all the while pretending he was the weapon the Emperor wanted him to be. Truly Konrad lived his life and went to his death blind, ignorant, and stupid.*

*But for all his failures, the Lord of the Night acted.*

*And you have failed.*

*You failed again when you followed me and my Legion into the Eye. By breaking your chains and releasing your true self, you finally were able to gain skills which would allow you to stand as my equal. One might almost say it was your second chance.*

*But your attempt on my life was not successful, and now my moment of vulnerability has passed.*

*Twice the Pantheon was surprised by your resourcefulness. I hope you enjoyed this luck; you won’t get a third chance.*

*Now we are going to play by my rules. The most devoted and powerful of my sons have completed the ritual of Holy Sacrament. Eight Dark Apostles and eight thousand eight hundred eighty-eight Astartes used their daemonancy skills and lore to create a ritual barrier which will prevent you from stepping into my presence. And you can’t move against my Apostles before removing the Legionnaires, who have all been dispersed and rendered unremarkable to your senses of raven.*

*You can’t kill an entire Legion, Corax. You are more powerful than you were several millennia ago, but your power is not that great and there are rules you must respect, as long as you continue to stay loyal to this decaying corpse on the Golden Throne of Terra.*

*You could have made a formidable Champion of the Pantheon, but you refuse their blessings and patronage, even as your Legion is mutilated and pathetically weak.*

*Like the rest of our deluded brothers, you fail to understand that Mankind’s survival demands we bow to the will of the Gods.*

*Only by embracing the Primordial Truth can we thrive and reconquer an Imperium where all believers will be able to rule under Their eyes.*

*You won’t stop me.*

*I am going to break the armies and fleets assembled at Cadia, burn this empire of lies and falsehoods, and take the Noctilith of the Ymga Monolith to transform it into Octarite.*

*The rats of Anarchy are going to pay their war effort with their souls and lives. Weaver will be cast down, deprived of her light, and tortured by the Pantheon for the rest of eternity. Your legacy and the one of our eight blind brothers will be destroyed and forgotten, dust under our armoured boots.*

*I am going to open the Cicatrix Maledictum and extinguish the light. I am going to free Excess from Khorne’s Prison, kill this pathetic horned shard, and usher the era of Undivided Chaos.*

*I am Lorgar, the Word Bearer. So I have promised, so it shall be.*

*Let the Galaxy Burn.*

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“*It is certainly a guarantee today at the end of your first year, the first question on your exam crystal-slate will be when the Noctilith Wars began. If you don’t want to receive a zero and fail your historical class – and likely be expelled for evidently having learned nothing of importance during twelve standard months – you will answer 188.310M25, as Operation Stalingrad and the 5th Black Crusade began, separated by an entire galaxy. Should the question of ‘how’ be asked, it is of course going to take longer for you to reply, I’m afraid. And no, ‘because all heretics hate Her Celestial Highness’ isn’t going to amuse your teachers. If you stay coherent and logical, your first point must be to write of the martyrdom of the* Will of Eternity *at Commorragh, and how the creation of Aethergold strengthened the foundations of the Imperium in these difficult times. Don’t forget the decade preceding Operation Stalingrad however; the actions of the Imperial Guard and many other successes can’t be understood without relying on proper logistical preparation and war training...*” Attributed to Star Marshal Alexander Macharius, 669M41.

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**13th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**KOR PHAERON**

'**THE DARK CARDINAL'**

**‘THE BLACK CARDINAL’**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITORIS MAJORIS**

**AUGMENTED TRANSHUMAN**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THIS ABOMINATION IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**WARNING: THE TRAITOR IS COWARDLY IN THE EXTREME AND HAS BEEN NOTED TO FLEE AS SOON AS EVENTS TURN AGAINST HIM**

**REWARD: 1 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF 'PURIFIER OF CALTH' AWARDED, GRAND RELIGIOUS OVATION, NUMEROUS LAND HOLDINGS IN THE REALM OF ULTRAMAR, 5 DEFENCE STATIONS, ETC...**

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“*Great undertakings demand faith, determination, and sacrifice. Never forget that*.” These words were attributed to the Primarch Lorgar of the Word Bearers, Great Crusade-era.

“*Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt*.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

**The Eye of Terror**

**High Orbit over Sicarus**

**Abyss-class Super-Battleship *Trisagion***

Thought for the day: Know your destination before you set out.

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

Paristur was speaking with Kor Phaeron about the latest failures to obtain more Octarite for blessed purposes when the rats decided to strike.

His pacts only gave him one second of warning before the daemonic communication devices allowing them to communicate with the major command centres over Sicarus began to scream at once.

Once the first series of shrieking and shouting was over, what replaced them was perhaps worse.

“The Basilica is overrun! Masters! WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS NOW!”

“They have gotten inside! They have gotten inside! Repel them by the Pantheon!”

“How did the rats manage to breach these gates? ARRGH!”

“This station has been claimed by the mighty-mighty servants of Malal! Praise Anarchy brute-things!”

Kor Phaeron uttered one word and the device which had relayed these heretical words was immediately destroyed in a blast of sorcery.

Unfortunately, more and more voices resonated, all giving tales of disaster and defeat.

“They have taken the Blood Dome! They have taken the redoubt! By the truth of the Great Architect! This is an infestation!”

“We do not have enough ammunition to repel them! I need more cannons, or failing that, orbital lances fired on the Bloodied Plains!”

“My slaves are dying of a bubonic plague! Presence of the plague-rats confirmed!”

“The bells are tolling and my mortal troops are unable to stand its maddening effects! Request a Host deployment immediately!”

Past the initial moment of stupefaction, the Word Bearers rushed to their sections and began to coordinate the efforts of the armies on the ground to eradicate this onslaught of heresy and rats.

But as the lieutenants of Kor Phaeron updated the hololithic-daemonic maps, Paristur could only grimace.

The situation was absolutely awful.

“Angra Mainyu is going to be underwhelmed in short order if we don’t land one of the Great Hosts on Sicarus.” This admission brought him little joy, but the first massive summonings had only brought a few minutes for the –too rare – Word Bearers and the millions of mortals ordered to protect the sacred temples.

“Yes. Of course, Angra believed *Erebus* had dealt with the rodent problem.”

The name was uttered with undisguised hatred, but Paristur didn’t comment upon it. It was very justified in this case.

The Keeper of the Faith of the Seventeenth Legion snorted after speaking.

“If this is total victory is like, I don’t want to see what his next ‘exploits’ will be.”

“It is obvious Erebus screwed up,” Paristur didn’t add ‘again’, but he was sure Kor Phaeron heard it nonetheless. “The rats weren’t vanquished; they merely waited for our vigilance to falter and our forces to be redeployed for the Black Crusade before striking.”

The reports of routs and utter destruction visited upon Nurglite churches arrived mere seconds later, informing the two members of the Dark Council that the rodents had somehow built thousands of tunnelling machines, some as imposing and destructive as conventional Ordinatuses.

“I’m ready to bet the great ‘Hand of Destiny’ didn’t even bother sending his lackeys deep into the under-temples the moment he had crushed the vermin on the surface.”

“I’m not going to bet against that,” Paristur bitterly replied. Ekodas had told them over and over again how difficult it was to hunt the self-proclaimed ‘Skaven’ and their leadership in the subterranean galleries, and somehow, Erebus had successfully demolished their military strength in a single campaign?

No, it was exactly as he had feared: the furry heretics had multiplied until the tunnels were unable to hide their monstrous numbers, repaired their armaments, invented new devices an Ork would find too dangerous to use, and unleashed everything when the Sicarus garrison was too weak to hold their vermin tide.

“We need to land our troops and stabilise the situation.”

Kor Phaeron’s face showed how enthusiastic the idea greeted in his mind, but he didn’t disagree. Between losing Sicarus entirely and delaying for a campaign the beginning of the Black Crusade, the choice wasn’t difficult. The latter was a mere delay. The former would be the first step before they lost the entire system, for the heretical rodents would not miss the occasion to attack shipyards and their bases in the asteroid belts.

“Very well, I will go ahead and-“

“**You will do nothing of the sort, my son**.”

The Dark Apostle began to bow as he heard the first voice. As the order was completely uttered, the Empyrean screamed as an enormous fleet materialised one hundred thousand kilometres on the starboard side of the *Trisagion*.

If they hadn’t been preparing already a worthy armada for their offensive against the Cadian Gate and beyond, Paristur would have felt awe at the sheer military might represented here. The feeling nonetheless blossomed into his heart, but for a different reason.

At the heart of this fleet, standing side by side, were two juggernauts of the void, starships bigger than the infamous Gloriana hulls.

One bore no similarities with any warship built on the orders of the Seventeenth Legion. It was a gigantic pyramid shining in blessed blue sorcery. The name identifier *Tizca’s Revenge* was not really necessary; Paristur like all other Apostles could recognise the style of Prospero and no one but Magnus the Red would ever have the will and the skill to create something like that.

The second flagship, on the other hand, was a modified Abyss-class Super-Battleship. But where the Trisagion was instantly recognisable with its trident-shaped mass, this colossal temple to the Primordial Truth had been restructured to look like a Gloriana, albeit one with a gigantic prow cannon. Paristur didn’t need much deep thinking to know it was likely the gift of Kelbor-Hal to their father.

The name flashed in black and red, in daemonic and technological transmissions, and the Legion roared in approval.

The *Word Bearer*.

Their surroundings disappeared into the darkness, and under the blessed acclamations of the Neverborn, Paristur appeared into a room where he had never been before, accompanied by Kor Phaeron and seven other Dark Apostles of high rank.

Their father was already there, of course. Magnus the Red, Cyclops and favourite of Tzeentch, arrived nine heartbeats later in a pillar of blue-gold lightning.

They weren’t alone, as an eight-pointed pentacle in brass and fire daemonic runes was carved by invisible hands under their feet. Against the walls and over their heads, Champions of the Seventeenth Legion blessed by the Gods with Daemonhood were waiting fangs bared and elongate carmine wings. These were the Gal Vorbak of the first generation, there couldn’t be any doubt about it, drawn back from the domains of the Gods to serve again. Given how Erebus was whispering wards of protection and the glares they threw him, the rumours of how many had be betrayed by the Vile One were most likely exact.

For once, Paristur ignored it. There were more important things at hand.

“Father. Allow me to deploy my Host in support of Mainyu and I will restore our rule to Sicarus.”

“**I have no doubt you will my son...for a time**.”

“Father?”

“**I** **underestimated how hurtful and corrupting the rats could be to my plans**,” the illuminated Primarch admitted. “**But I have since thread on many paths and tried to gaze at many futures. There is no permanent victory against this plague of tails and fangs. There won’t be any as long as the fourth throne is empty. You might pile up the corpses of these heretics on mountains and drown the world in their unholy blood, they will somehow find a way to come back. It is in their nature to grasp what is not theirs to take**.”

“**In other words, what my esteemed brother is trying to say**,” Magnus said in a semi-polite, semi-ironic tone, “**is that you can likely hold Sicarus and stalemate the expansion efforts of your enemies imbued by Anarchy for a millennium or two...as long as you abandon the idea of starting the war against the Imperium**.”

The darkness vacillated, before everything vanished, and Paristur and the other Dark Apostles found themselves floating in high orbit above the homeworld they had settled after Horus’ death.

“**Nsvrrbthn! Bwons’ntos! Nsttsrm’on’mtoeneuaanht’hqn**!”

No Word Bearer had ever heard these words uttered aloud, but even without knowing their meaning, Paristur understood what they represented as the presence of the Three Gods turned towards them.

A large section of the Eye flashed a crimson red, and in the distance there was a tall, dark figure on a throne of skulls. Blood rains began to fall upon the planets, and the Bloodthirsters on the plains of carnage raised their axes and assembled.

A tear sundered reality before spitting out several Silver Towers of the Thousand Sons and multicoloured lightning. Hordes of Screamers and Flamers erupted and began to spread secrets and lies from the nine hundred and ninety-nine canticles of Change. The tear grew and grew, before it became an ever-mutating avian form carrying a tall sceptre.

Previously untouched, the third part of Sicarus celestial possessions gave away to an ocean of blessed rot and decay, a garden of diseases where the Grandfather lit His cauldron and prepared new concoctions to test on the planets where His touch would be gladly welcomed.

“**You know I am your servant**,” his Primarch began. “**You know what I aim to do**.”

The Chaos Marine felt the divine pressure rose to dangerous levels, and Paristur felt the runes on his armour beginning to disintegrate and the blessings decaying, twisting, or bleeding. He didn’t twitch or make a single gesture. The smallest offence, the smallest gesture, would undoubtedly lead to an eternity as a Chaos Spawn.

There was silence. And then the laughter of Tzeentch echoed, followed by Khorne’s rumbling and a song of soul-gardening from Nurgle.

“**You have our attention, Lorgar the Urizen. Speak**.”

The weight of Three Gods fell upon their sire, and despite knowing the sheer power of their father, Paristur felt awe as Lorgar didn’t even flinch while Erebus and several others were already trembling with exhaustion.

“**This Anarchy began with Sacrifice**.” The Minister of Chaos Absolute said. “**I will return the favour with Sacrifice. Let me erase the defeat of Commorragh. The blood, the souls, and the hope of the Anathema will be delivered on your altars. Places of worship of false idols will be yours to rule over. The Cicatrix will allow you to invade the Imperium and create your own realms in the very fabric or reality**.”

“**And in exchange**?”

“**Excess must be freed. There must be Undivided Chaos once more**.”

The laughter of the Gods was heard.

Ultimately, it was Nurgle who spoke back.

“**You have your pact, Lorgar the Urizen. Offer your Sacrifice**.”

Their Primarch raised his fists over his head.

And Sicarus began to burn.

**Sicarus/Skavenblight**

**Cathedral of the Maleficent Song**

**High Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster the Unstoppable**

“One small step for me-me, one giant leap for Malal!” Scrachit shouted while the former slave-things raised the flag of Clan Verminus in his great-large mighty glory. “I rename this place...err...Cathedral of the Barbbuster Anarchy! Praise Malal!”

“Respectfully Arch-Warlord,” one his impolite minions had the temerity to not appreciate-like his genius and to fail to applause-cheer like the others. “Wouldn’t it be better-greater if we renamed this church-location the Cathedral of Verminus Anarchy?”

“I thought we would call it the Cathedral of Skyre Anarchy!” an engineer shouted before shutting his mouth in a hurry-hurry, as bayonets were pointed against his throat. “No! Verminus Anarchy, my mistake!”

“But ‘Cathedral of the Mighty Verminus Horde’ sounds far-far better, Mighty Warlord!”

“Enough!” Scrachit Barbbuster decided to stop this mutiny before things went even more out of control with his plans. “This is my-my great decision, and don’t forget-contest it! I am the voice of the Council of Eleven, yes-yes! And it is my-my leadership which has seen-led us to great-superb triumph! Praise Malal!”

“Your flanking attack was ill-timed and the....Malal save me!”

The treacherous underling-thing had come-scurried to close to the ogre-thing when trying to plan a dagger in his back, yes-yes! The High-Warlord heard his screams of agony and ignored them-them.

“Now that the formalities-entertainment is done-done, we must press on,” the supreme leader of Clan Verminus spoke and all basked in his-his magnificence. “I must-must have picts of my glorious self standing upon corpses of brute-things, and vid-vid of myself directing the fire of the Warp Grinders.”

Not that-that he was going to mount upon one-one when they were firing, no-no! Scrachit had watched-watched and more had been lost-destroyed with their own warpstone reactors than from enemy fire-fire!

“Another incredible invention of Clan Skyre!” an engineer of said clan exclaimed. “Praise Malal!”

“Yes, yes Praise Malal! Today-today Anarchy conquers all on Skavenblight, tomorrow the galaxy! Death to the False Gods, Glory to the Skaven Race!”

In truth-truth, the slaves and daemon-things had not been that-that difficult to beat-defeat this-this time, oh no! The plan of playing dead-dead for a few cycles of reproduction had led-gained excellent results! Truly he was a master of strategy and war!

“Before I begin my great-great propaganda campaign to overthrow the Council and declare myself Anarchy Emperor of Skavenblight, where are we-we with the Spaceports! Faster we take them-them, easier it will be to send young tails-tails in orbit!”

“Resistance is heavy-heavy, oh mighty High Arch-Warlord!” A Stormclaw assured him, while a Horror-Lord of Clan Moulder threw the remains of a brute-thing into red armour into a vat of green jelly-things. “But the walls have been breached-broken! Our victory-triumph is inevitable!”

“Excellent-excellent!” The Unstoppable Skaven caressed his whiskers before adjusting his splendid-pretty red uniform. “We are going to-“

Red, green, and blue lightning struck the spire of the cathedrals they had just-just conquered.

Scrachit Barbbuster felt his jaw-jaw dropping. This wasn’t-wasn’t possible! Clan Treecherik had assured him-him that the wards of the brute-things would hold for a few thousands heartbeats after their great-great victory!

The spires were going to-

The Warlord looked at the spires and he grew even more-more perplexed. The spires weren’t falling. What was this saying of the man-things? Ah yes! It was a bluff-bluff!

“False alert-alert, my proud-proud soldiers!” The Verminus Council member laughed. “The brute-things have lost-lost! Now they are trying to launch-fire fireworks in the hope-hope we will scurry-scurry! But we won’t! We are the heralds-champions of Anarchy! Praise Malal!”

Fire poured from the heavens, a three-coloured fire of red, blue, and green. It missed him largely-greatly, but plenty of his Stormclaws were hit by it-it.

More lightning followed, and a great-great storm rose from the other cathedrals, but what caused Scrachit to widen-widen his eyes was while plenty of his Verminus assault forces were dead, as many were frozen, trapped in some sorcery-trap!

“SKAVENS!” He screeched, the familiar musk of fear soaking his senses. “SCURRY BACK TO THE ARMY WARRENS! THE BRUTE-THINGS ARE ATTACKING US-US WITH A RITUAL! DO NOT-NOT STAY THERE!”

There was rage-rage. There was sorcery-sorcery. There was rot-rot everywhere. Time...time was slowing-slowing. Why? Why? He had done-done everything for the glory of Anarchy and Malal!

“MALAL!” The High Arch-Warlord begged. “MOST ANARCHIC LORD! SAVE YOUR GREATEST SERVANT!”

“MALAL!”

“MALAL! MALAL SAVE US!”

A new blast of blue clouded everything, and a couple of heartbeat later, Scrachit Barbbuster felt nothing at all.

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**85th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**ALIVE ONLY – UNLESS YOU FIGURES HOW TO END HIM PERMANENTLY**

**LUCIUS**

**‘THE ETERNAL TRAITOR’**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**ABOMINATION**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF BETA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS ACCEPTABLE TO NEUTRALISE THE THREAT**

**DO NOT FEEL SATISFACTION AND PRAY THE GOD-EMPEROR FOR PROTECTION**

**DO NOT OFFER HIM A CHANCE TO DUEL**

**REWARD: 26 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 PARADISE WORLD, 1 STARFORT, OVATION OF THE IMPERIUM, ETC...**

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**87th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**MOTHAC**

'**APOSTLE OF TORMENT'**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-BETA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**DO NOT ALLOW LOYAL MEN AND WOMEN TO BE CAPTURED**

**THE HERETIC LOVES TO TARGET IN PRIORITY ASTROPATHS AND NAVIGATORS**

**THE MONSTER IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**REWARD: 25 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 HIVE WORLD, 10 PALACES OFFERED BY THE NAVIS NOBILITE, ASTROPATH SUPPORT OF THE ADEPTUS ASTRA TELEPATHICA, PROTECTION OFFERED BY OVER A HUNDRED SECURITY COMPANIES, ETC...**

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**Outer Sicarus System**

**Battle-Barge *Perfect Legion***

**Lord Commander Lucius the Eternal**

If he had to give a honest opinion about the Word Bearers before the Fall of Commorragh – which he would never had done, he wasn’t that stupid – Lucius would have said the sons of Lorgar were very funny Astartes-monks, with all their religious things and insistence to convert their slaves to ‘Undivided Chaos’.

Oh, the Lord Commander of the Emperor’s Children had no doubt the Gods enjoyed the souls of the slaves which were sacrificed onto the altars, and if they didn’t, their Neverborn allies certainly enjoyed the free meal.

But the moment you gained enough survival experience into the Eye, you knew the Gods didn’t truly care about the liturgy and the words. They cared about actions. They wanted blood, carnage, sorcery, obscene depravity, lethal plagues, virulent poxes, and mountains of living corpses. In one word, they wanted war.

This was one of the many, many reasons plenty of Captains like himself had largely seen the Word Bearers as religious simpletons parodying the Ecclesiarchy holding sway over the ignorant masses of the False Imperium outside the Eye.

Before today, Lucius acknowledged, he hadn’t realised how *frightening* that truly was.

“The Shipyards of the Truth are dismantled as we speak.”

“We have numerous impacts on the Illumination docks, Lord Commander.”

“Mechanicum forces are slaying the slaves by the hundreds of thousands! Tell them to stop!”

Lucius licked the blood on his blade, and found little comfort or satisfaction with the act. Much like every time he had done it since his patron had abandoned them.

“Damn you, Weaver.” The infamous traitor of Isstvan III hissed.

And sure enough, he utterly loathed the woman who had created this unpredictable changes sweeping across the galaxy.

But right now, it wasn’t Weaver he truly wanted to blame. Not when madness and folly appeared to be ruling the day.

The Sicarus System was in the process of being thoroughly sacked. If there was one other word which described the situation, Lucius didn’t know which it was.

Thousands of years of industrial-daemonic investments were going up in explosions or were dragged in chains towards the hulls of the Word Bearer’s fleet supply train. Asteroids older than the Long War imploded or were thrown into the maw of Sota-Nul’s harvesters. Shipyards were mangled or disintegrated. Overseers who had been the wardens of the facilities were thrown onto the altars where they had led countless slaves.

Lucius had seen thousands of worlds die as he was present during and after the Great Crusade. Yet there was something...visceral and horrifying occurring here.

What they had done to Sicarus itself was bad enough. The world was still there, but it was immobile...silent...frozen...out of reach, and made so by the will of the Gods. Lorgar had done what even other Daemon Primarchs would balk at: he had offered his chief powerbase in sacrifice to his patrons, abandoned his last forces on the planet, and unleashed what could be best described as a sorcerous stasis on an unimaginable scale. And it would remain that way until the Black Crusade ended, one way or another.

“Lord Commander, Dark Apostle Mothac demands to speak to you.”

Lucius gritted his sharp teeth, and impaled a daemonic servitor with the Laer Blade. ‘Demands’. Before Commorragh, no one save the Naga and Slaanesh demanded anything of him, and the Goddess had been more content to watch the spectacle. Now? Everyone and their cyber-mastiff was treating him with contempt and like he was a minor warlord under their armoured boots. Rallying six capital ships – including this old Battle-Barge – and close to six hundred Astartes, few of them of the Old Legion, was ignored. The only strength that made his enemies pause were the Knights of House Devine they had managed to save on the former worlds of their Empire.

“Open up the communication.”

The device which activated was redder than pink and more Bloodletter’s head than blessed by decadence, but it did the job as the familiar shape of a Dark Apostle in elaborate spiked armour appeared. The smell of blood and sorcery permeated the air.

“Lord Commander Lucius.” The Apostle of Torment began bluntly. “You will accelerate your preparations, or I will find another ‘Lord Commander’ to lead your warband.”

“My slaves and cultists are expediting the preparations as fast as possible,” the fallen Emperor’s Children Space Marine snarled. “But you are asking for the impossible!”

“No, the impossible happens because your forces were busy violating, raping, and doing whatever they usually practise in their orgies despite being ordered to do real work!” The son of Lorgar hotly retorted. “I will be as clear as possible, ‘Eternal’. The forces in your zone are to leave their bases within the next thousand heartbeats. If you refuse my order, I will cut your legs and impale your living body on the prow of your flagship to motivate the others and your serpentine master. Am I clear?”

“You are insane. What point there is-”

“This is a Black Crusade, Lucius!” The Word Bearer shouted. “It demands conviction, devotion, and sacrifice! Did you really think the Gods were going not to demand a price for the abyssal catastrophe engineered by Slaanesh’s defeat? Did you really think answering the challenge of the False Emperor would be all dungeon torture and sadistic orgies?”

A maelstrom of psychic energy was born on the edge of the system, and Lucius realised with horror it was the damned light of the Astronomican unleashed against endless waves of darkness, the Gods striking back against their sworn enemy.

“There is power in symbols, and in old times, conquerors burned their own sea-faring ships behind them to leave no choice to their warriors,” Mothac continued in a somewhat calmer tone. “We can’t do that of course, but symbolically, it is the same thing. Sicarus and everything we build are made barren, the threat of the rats negated at the price of our own garrisons and last assets.”

More asteroids exploded as darkness grew and more ships deployed around his warband.

“Even I know this is a double-edged sword.”

If the Black Crusade won, the threat represented by Anarchy would be completely suppressed, possibly forever. But if they lost...

“Alea jacta est.” Mothac answered in High Gothic. “By the will of Blessed Lorgar, we will win, or perish in the undertaking. Now move your forces into position, or I will begin this Black Crusade by destroying your warband! Oh, and our lateness has earned you a seat among the 8th Great Host of Erebus! Don’t thank me, Lucius!”

For a few seconds, Lucius truly understood why the False Emperor had tried to proscribe religion...there was no ‘logical’ discussion to be had with fanatics like this one. But under the guns of eight Battleships, there was only one answer he could give.

“Compliance. The *Perfect Legion* and its escorts are taking position.”