**Black Crusade 10.3**

**The Dragons of Mandragora**

*The Imperium is doomed, Corax.*

*This is not the prelude to a long day of gloating; it is merely a fact. Since the Siege, the successors of Malcador and the War Council rule an Empire where ignorance is seen as a noble quality and knowledge is viewed with horror. What was common lore four thousand years ago has been distorted and crippled, until the truth is nothing more than the shadow of a legend.*

*I am not Lorgar. I will not pretend either my oath-breaking brothers or I didn’t play a part in this tragedy. The actions of Horus made sure half of the innovative minds of the Mechanicum went utterly insane faced with the reality of the Immaterium, and the other half was massacred during the next decades of war. Libraries were torched. Philosopher-kings were mutilated and tortured to insanity by Curze. Whole populations dedicated to the pursuit of medicine and healing the flesh of mortals were poisoned or gassed by the Death Guard. I created the breach in the fledging Webway’s defences, beginning the unending cycle which saw trillions of souls sacrificed to power the Astronomican.*

*All of this has happened, I won’t deny it.*

*The Imperium is still doomed.*

*Lorgar’s idea to gather back the broken Aspects of Slaanesh is ridiculous in the extreme, for the Three won’t tolerate such a pathetic rival. But to ensure his efforts truly came for naught, our father’s only solution was to let a Fourth God rise. In the end, Anarchy has to be your weapon, because Mankind has little to defend itself with.*

*This is the first critical problem, truly. Mankind has no defence against the Warp, and the best solution, to evolve a psychic race from the decaying corpse of Order, is crippled by the diseased imperative to keep everything under wraps. The so-called ‘Living Saints’ aren’t the promised salvation the priests believe them to be. They provide an ephemeral moment of hope and protection, and they aren’t enough of them.*

*The second terrible issue is one of governance. While I admit we Primarchs have failed in the great task to convince our father we were worthy to rule the Imperium by his side, it will be difficult to deny Malcador’s replacements are doing a good job. It is such a pack of ambitious and megalomaniacal jackals I am really surprised the number of Change cultists in their ranks is so limited. And when there is from time to time a principled and competent High Lord, he or she is stymied by his colleagues or dies before having achieving anything of note. And for this problem, what is your answer? Even a return of my loyal brothers would only be a short-term reprieve. They too can’t be everywhere, after all.*

*Living Saints? While your current project is more clever and knowledgeable than the previous Champions who preceded her, she remains the exception, not the rule. And her actions have already created plenty of unease and opposition in the monolithic thing the Administratum has become. Change does not work in your favour when entire generations have lived believing nothing must stray a virgule from the sacred texts of bureaucracy.*

*You can win on a thousand battlefields, bring new reforms, and stabilise the Imperium for a short time. But as soon as the architects of the project die or disappear, this weak beacon of hope will disappear. The Imperium may cause additional damage to the Gods while you lash out, there’s no point denying it.*

*But the Immaterium adapts, Corax. In fact, it is already on its way to find solutions to the new schemes of our genitor.*

*It is perfectly possible this Black Crusade will be defeated. Lorgar too often underestimates what the will of mortal men and women can do when faced with insurmountable challenges.*

*There is a slim possibility you might be able to kill a second God, though I don’t see how. But be it in a century or ten millennia, it will be replaced. And let me tell you, oh Raven Lord: I have explored the depths of the Sea of Souls. There are things there the Battle of Commorragh have reawakened, and you do not want them in position to claim a Throne.*

*Unless the Imperium has a vision, it is doomed. And if he had one, our father never shared it with us. No, the Webway and the Imperial Truth were not a vision. There were mere preliminaries, powerful and temporary walls destined to rebuild Mankind from the ashes of the Age of Strife.*

*Tzeentch often believes I still have too much faith in him, by the way.*

*Maybe now that he regains his strength, he will share it with you, or with his new favourite. You might wonder what I care; call it intellectual curiosity. I think even a Daemon Primarch is allowed to have it, after all.*

*Now let us return to the Black Crusade. Sabotage all the Word Bearers’ warships you can. Trick the Dark Apostles you feel like unleashing your vengeance against.*

*But do not forget. I am watching you, brother.*

*I am Magnus the Red, Primarch of the Thousand Sons, Lord of Sortiarius, Slave and Champion of Tzeentch.*

*And my vision for this galaxy won’t be stopped by your actions.*

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*The Battle of Mandragora, to give it its official name, was something the Imperium had never had to deal with before. To be sure, the forces of His Most Divine Majesty were not novice in the art of attacking xenos homeworlds, as the damned ghosts of several fallen civilisations could testify. And in thousands of campaigns, the siege and offensive equipment of His armies and fleets had proved more than sufficient to break macro-scale fortifications and ‘invincible’ redoubts.*

*But there was no experience of any forces of the Imperial war machine fighting a prolonged engagement against the Necron foe. There were rumours of several operations of sabotages made as far as the Great Crusade to prevent Tomb-Worlds from fully awakening, but that was all they were: rumours. The data recovered from several top-secret databases weren’t about fortified worlds but the Ymga Monolith, which while arguably a space fortress in its own right, was not the average Necron world.*

*And if a xenos species had once attacked Mandragora while the Necrons waited for the end of the millions of years of their ‘Great Sleep’, it had been extinguished and reduced to something no auspex could detect.*

*Prudence being mother of safety, Her Celestial Highness had not mustered small forces for what was to be an essential battle of Operation Stalingrad. Battle Groups Berezina and Dnieper were placed into attack position weeks before the Volga Encounter, and should the Ymga Monolith react as the operational plan called for, Battle Groups Volga and Muskha were mere days away.*

*For the first time, the Imperium was going to assault a Necron Crownworld in a straight-out war, and the frightening performance of the Nerushlatset Dynasty at Commorragh had kept the Navy and Militarum strategists determined to not underestimate the foes. From Arks Mechanicus to super-heavy Baneblades, from brand-new Einherjar-class Dragon Armours to Volkite Blasters, from Thunderbolts to Siege Infantry regiments, the senior officers of four different Battle Groups had asked for excellent weapons, equipments, and soldiers. They had received them.*

*And on 8.499.310M35, the heavily-trained units of His Most Divine Majesty faced the elite of the Sautekh Dynasty.*

*It was a battle all Imperial forces participating in the battle would not forget for as long as they lived.*

Extract from *Operation Stalingrad Volume Two: The Inferno of Mandragora*, by General Bastian, 210M41.

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Transmitted: Site Alpha, Conclave of Cypra Mundi

Received: [REDACTED]

Mission time: 5.499.310M35

Telepathic Duct: [CLASSIFIED]

Reference: Ordo Hereticus/AVE93111C

Author: Lady Inquisitor Atlas

Priority: Vermillion

*Unfortunately, it seems your hypothesis was right. While the heretics associated with the Fallen Power of Depravation and Debauchery were annihilated by the Divine Wrath of His Most Holy Majesty during the Emperor’s Hour, the rest of the heretics were able to recoup their previous losses and spread again. Worse, the resources they have proved themselves to possess, be it in currency or heretical knowledge, are of several levels magnitude higher than the cogitator estimates predicted.*

*The good news is that the Janus Protocol works. As unhappy as I was to reveal the true might our Ordo on Cypra Mundi, it was better than to allow two Naval Dynasties to continue spreading their corruption in the midst of the Segmentum Fortress. The power of the Aethergold Crystal you gave me was a massive boon two; without it, I would not have been able to locate, quarantine, and execute the pernicious Cult of the Nine Enigmas in two standard days.*

*Now for the bad news. While the heretical armada has come nowhere near the Sector of Cypra Mundi, their fell influence can all too easily be felt. The capital world has experienced five Gamma-level uprisings in the last one hundred standard hours, despite the numerous public sermons of the Cardinal and his Pontifexes, several exceptional deliveries of grain, and the presence of five veteran regiments. Across the Sector, two Alpha-level rebellions are raging. The Ho-Tyr one is the most problematic, for it immobilises the Battlegroup using the facilities there until the traitors and the heretics are put down and made impressive examples of.*

*Secondly, the alliance of the rogue psykers’ covens having sold their souls to [REDACTED] and the [REDACTED] cults worshipping the Word Bearers has, contrary to our hopes, only grown stronger. The infiltrated agents I was able to recover before termination of the cults were unable to explain me the motives behind this decision, but I fear that for now, it will behove to us to purge the two heads of this heretical snake with equal fervour and determination.*

*I, as always, remain a humble servant of His Will.*

*P.S: I know the influence of the Ordo is still limited, but another Aethergold crystal would be much appreciated.*

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**Sautekh Space**

**Mandragora System**

**The Golden Crown**

**8.499.310M35**

Thought for the day: Faith grows from the barrel of a gun.

**Ancient Elohim**

There was something exalting about flying Elohim had always loved, and this had not stopped because he was interned in an Einherjar-B Dragon Armour. If anything, it had magnified it: the machine-spirit growled with ease when it was propelled by electromagnetic catapult like they just had been, and the idea of putting all this long training to use was not bad news either.

But for all this excitation, there was still an important duty to do.

But after a quick evasion to avoid the threatening green shot of a lone turret, the Red Wings Space Marine arrived in position over what was one of the critical energy nodes of the Necron shields protecting the seemingly-limitless rows of enemy warships waiting in their lifeless docks.

Elohim had been successful in ninety-seven percent of the simulations in the last year, and the scenarios imagined by the Tech-Priests and the Captains of the Blood had all included severe opposition. With only a couple of turrets, the real operation was almost underwhelming.

The energy weapon shot by the ‘maw’ of his Einherjar-B, a laser specifically put into production from some Martian vault, tore apart the silvery metal and slammed into the crystalline wall protecting the energy power sources and struck the vulnerable devices behind it. One second, there was an intact node. The next, a monumental explosion engulfed the Necron facilities.

This explosion was just the first of hundreds, as the other Dragon Armours, Quetzalcoatl, Saphira, Ancalagon, to name a few of the different classes, completed their run, and delivered their first greetings to the xenos who thought it was funny to genocide humanity because someone had whined to his slave-masters.

“Shields are down on the entire Golden Crown,” the Captain of the Brothers of the Red announced in a satisfied voice. “Dragon Wings withdraw, the Battlefleet is about to disperse the Kane Particles. Excellent work, all of you.”

The machine-spirit growled like a big predator, satisfied and should he say it? Almost disappointed that the whole affair had lasted so little time.

The minutes passed, and the entire xenos structure was shattered by explosions which seemed to only grow in strength as the Mechanicus and Astartes warships delivered torpedoes, lance weaponry, and all sort of conventional and unconventional firepower unto the barely awakening facilities.

“Kane Particles about to detonate in 3...2...1...MARK!”

The inferno which was familiar to everyone having watched the Battle of Pavia burst into existence. Immediately, an automated orbital facility which was almost the size of an orbital plate in its own right disappeared in the holy flames the judgement of the Emperor had chosen to manifest itself into for today.

“A fitting end for those xenos,” his wingman, a Space Marine of the Golden Sons, approved.

The machine-spirit suddenly roared in anger, and Elohim was too good not to take the warning seriously. In a millisecond, the shield of his flying protection was active again and he pivoted to face the structure they had been told to call ‘Golden Crown’.

Right in time to see a miniature black hole swallow the inferno created by the Kane Particles.

“By the feathers of the Primarch! What was that?”

Elohim almost wanted to believe it was a hallucination, but everywhere his sensors reached, the fire spread by Battle Groups Dnieper and Berezina was swallowed by black holes or struck by storms of green energy.

It was impossible, completely impossible. This was technology even the most arrogant Tech-Priests had never pretended to master...and yet it was there.

He was a Red Wing Space Marine. In one second, all his training reasserted itself. As did his priorities.

“Control! Status of the xenos shipyards!”

“Shipyards...by the breath of Baal! The shipyards are only slightly damaged! I repeat the shipyards are only slightly damaged! Battleships activations! Battleships activations! Ten...twenty...forty....over sixty Cairn-class Battleships are in preliminary-activation mode!”

The count rose second after second. But Elohim had already made his decision.

“Dragon Wings! Form on me. It seems...” the count finally stabilised at one hundred and seventy-five Battleships. “It seems the xenos had more surprises than our information suggested. All weapon limitations are off. We must destroy these monsters before they’re able to put the rest of their defensive counter-measures online.”

He didn’t need to tell them what would happen if they weren’t successful. Even with the reinforcements of Lady Weaver soon to come, the Imperium couldn’t fight that many Necron capital warships. It wouldn’t be a battle, it would be a one-sided massacre.

“We are with you, cousin,” the Imperial Fist squadron commander answered.

“For the Omnissiah and His Chosen,” the Mechanicus Skitarii commander prayed.

“CHARGE!” the sole Black Templar of the formation bellowed.

And they did.

One thousand Dragon Armours, the veterans of countless campaigns, taken from multiple war zones to receive these swift and deadly draconic mounts. One thousand being, supported by one thousand fiery machine-spirits, and with two massive Battlefleets providing a storm of annihilation in support. A storm which partially disappeared in the same black holes which had neutralised the first inferno wave.

But it was not ammunition wasted. No guns targeted them as they accelerated to place themselves in firing position.

The sight was one worthy of several nightmares. Fifteen kilometres-long xenos hulls were bring their systems back to full power, the metallic ties linking them to the shipyards broken or disappeared one by one.

“For all the oaths we have sworn!” Elohim barked. “FIRE!”

**Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado***

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

“Praise the Omnissiah! The Dragon attack force has destroyed more than fifty percent of the Battleship force and the defensive system which prevented us from inflicting wide-scale destruction!”

Gastaph Hediatrix allowed himself a very discreet breath of relief before acknowledging the report of the tactical officer.

“So they did,” the Archmagos Primus nodded, “and it cost them dearly.”

Of a wave of one thousand-plus Dragon Armours – it should have been twelve hundred, but other commitments had decreased the available number – two hundred and sixty had died to inflict this terrible blow to the Necrons.

“Finish them.”

Seconds later, his own Ark Mechanicus and dozens of capital ships transformed the xenos shipyard into something which wouldn’t be of any military use for centuries.

“How did they find something to neutralise the Kane-generated flames so quickly?”

“I suspect it wasn’t a case of ‘find’.” The Martian-born Tech-Priest affirmed as he analysed the space battle raging around him and arriving to unpleasant conclusions. “The xenos are jamming the entire zone.”

“Yes, Archmagos. We don’t-“

“We are against someone competent.” He interrupted, not caring about the apologies. “The Necron commander has understood that since they haven’t yet how to figure to crush us via their own teleportation, the priority is to deny us the same ability. That way, we can’t send more Space Marines on the Golden Crown. And while we have destroyed the main shipyard sections, we have barely crippled between thirteen and sixteen percent of the Golden Crown industrial capacity.”

The pre-battle simulations had estimated the devastating assault would be enough to wipe out over *sixty percent*, if his data-memories were correct.

“The Astartes can still deploy via Drop Pods.” One of his promising subordinates suggested.

“No, they won’t.” Gastaph Hediatrix was tempted to curse as he saw the identification codes of only half of the Deathwatch extraction vehicles arrive on his tri-dimensional command screens. “They have suffered enough losses that if we use them now, we won’t have a reserve of them left in thirty minutes. Prepare the Third Skitarii Legion for an orbital assault.”

Two Frigates which had advanced to provide cover fire for the retreating Dragon Armours were wiped out from existence. Judging by how fast the slaughter was, there would be no survivors.

“Archmagos, with all due respect, while a Skitarii Legion is used to heavy opposition in the noble goals of the Quest for Knowledge, the Necrons are going to reinforce their ‘Golden Crown’. We are likely speaking of hundreds of thousands of casualties-“

“Millions of casualties are likely,” the Voice of Mars among the Nyx Council emotionlessly corrected. “It is a price I am willing to pay, and so is Battle Group Dnieper. These structures are not only shipyards; they are weapon production centres, research for new terrible technologies, and troop-mustering plates. The more are left intact today, the more trillions of Tech-Priests and servants of the Omnissiah are going to die in decades to come because we didn’t destroy them in time.”

It wasn’t an easy choice, but it was the only strategic decision that would allow this campaign not to end in a complete disaster.

Deep inside his mechanical body, the Archmagos had a brief instant of amusement as certain Magi suddenly realised why he and his fellow Archmagos had been chosen to lead the brutal assault against the Necron Crownworld.

Their competence undoubtedly helped, but above all, it was because they had known how bad the military situation could be if things turned wrong and they hadn’t flinched. They were the Tech-Priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and they had calculated how dangerous the Sautekh Dynasty would prove to the Imperium of Mankind if it was allowed to conquer the stars again. The Golden Crown was their primary instrument of intergalactic conquest: it had to be destroyed – capture was impossible given the current conditions – if they wanted the grand design of the Omnissiah to survive in the Eastern Fringe.

“The Third Legion is prepared. Beta-Kappa assault pattern.” The Magos of Nyx shook his head. “It is going to be a new Commorragh, isn’t it?”

“No,” Gastaph Hediatrix was prompt to...make sure his subordinate had not the wrong kind of ideas. “It is going to be worse. The Necrons have a military reaction rate beyond everything the Eldar ever showed, and we have already seen six unknown weapons within one hour. They have neutralised the Kane particles and our teleportation devices.”

A lot of green flashes characteristic of Necron teleportation arrived on the inner xenos plates which had been left untouched by the bombardment. The auspexes of the El Dorado weren’t able to arrive at a precise count, but the Archmagos knew this meant hundreds of thousands of metallic killers arriving to protect the Golden Crown’s remaining facilities.

“The Battlefleet will advance. We must support the transports and the assault of the Third Skitarii Legion as best as we can.”

No, this wasn’t Commorragh. But as Doom Scythes teleported just outside maximal effective torpedo range, the Voice of Mars promised himself this enemy was going to know defeat too.

Four days. He had to destroy the Golden Crown and hold for four days....it sounded far simpler twelve hours ago.

**The Golden Crown**

**Overlord Imotekh the Stormlord**

Imotekh wasn’t angry when he teleported on the Golden Crown.

He was murderously enraged.

Where were the killer-sentinels and the Battle-Reapers? Where were the Annihilation Batteries? Where were the Tomb-Towers?

He knew the answers before anyone answered, of course. They were respectively: missing, deactivated, unavailable for one year or two, and missing several key parts.

The few Sautekh Overlords and Nemesors regularly awakened to maintain the defences of Mandragora had grown criminally *lax* while the majority of the Dynasty was sleeping. No wonder enemy races believed they had a chance launching an assault upon the Golden Crown. If he hadn’t activated the emergency measures, there would be nothing but cinders left.

“Mighty Stormlord, I am honoured by the-“

“You are the senior Nemesor in charge, I suppose?” the veteran of the War in Heaven didn’t waste the energy turning his head would require. There had been an Overlord, but he had been torn apart in the first wave of attacks and it would be many Mandragoran years before he was allowed to regain a body.

“I am! It is my greatest pleasure to-“

Imotekh clicked his fingers.

The closest Lychguard decapitated the incompetent before he could pollute the Golden Crown further with his idiocy.

“This humiliating series of defeats had lasted long enough,” the Overlord declared in a voice so cold the surviving Nemesors snapped to attention, believing – correctly – they were next on the list if they didn’t correct their mistakes. “Phaeron Djosakhat is aware of your failures, and let me tell you, he is very unhappy you have allowed the enemy to destroy our mothballed fleets. So I am. You are going to earn your redemption by charging at the enemy formations trying to gain important footholds on the Golden Crown. If you fail, you’d better self-destruct your Necrodermis bodies and your engram back-ups, because I assure you it will be far less painful for what I have in mind for you.”

The Stormlord turned towards the Oppressor and all his subordinates who had arrived a moment ago.

“The same is true for all of you. For all the incompetence shown by the Szarekhan Dynasty and the unpredictability of the vermin born from the Krorks’ spores, your battles were fought and lost in a manner which makes me ashamed you are Sautekh.”

“We will...try to earn our redemption by slaughtering these parodies of our glorious Necrodermis bodies!”

“The very fact you have only scorn for an enemy which has repeatedly kicked your skulls does give me great confidence in your endeavour,” Imotekh retorted acidly. “But since you volunteered, who am I to deny you the chance?”

And to say he had believed Thakmatar a capable tactician. No, losing against these...these ‘Orks’ was not a humiliation by itself, but if the Szarekhan Crypteks had not initiated a mass recall of his entire fleet, he would have perished along with millions of Necrons, because he had *forgotten to watch his flanks*.

“Take the five Destroyer Cadres and five phalanxes. Advance and retake the Hyper-Alchemical Weapon Centre. I will send the Scarabs and the Tomb Stalkers as soon as they arrive from Mandragora. And this time...Do. Not. Fail.”

He would have dearly loved picking the flaws and the monumental tactical and strategic errors, but there wasn’t any time.

“The Royal Phalanxes will advance under my command, supported by five Monoliths. I want the Night and Doom Scythes preceding my offensive on a twin-headed snake formation. What are you doing standing immobile? Go to the reserve hangar bays and rouse the machines? You! The Arks are not going to come here by merely staring at a command node! Where are the reserve Crypteks? They have to activate the chrono-reversal before the time-dilatations prove impossible in this battle! I want all the status of the Orbs transmitted to my command! I want-“

Slowly, too slowly, the war machine of the Sautekh Dynasty finally started to move again.

But it was still unacceptably slow. Even for those having spent several years fighting and calculating, this was an appalling pace of operations.

Imotekh banished his anger and barked new orders. It was a race now between him and the enemy, and he didn’t intend to lose it.

**The Warp**

**Warp Trail HJ-b512I**

**Super-Battleship *Tizca’s Revenge***

**Approximately 9.501.310M35**

**Magnus the Red**

“**The Battle of Mandragora has begun**.”

No surprise showed on his brother’s face. Magnus had not exacted any.

“**Really**,” the Primarch of the Words Bearers drawled. “**And Weaver**?”

“**She has almost reached the system**,” the Lord of the Planet of Sorcerers replied. “**You could locate her if you tried, you know. The light of the Aethergold artefact is impossible to miss where it shines in the Sea of Souls**.”

“**Unlike some**,” the Seventeenth Primarch stood from his throne to approach the communication mirror allowing them to speak to each other like they were in the same room despite being in the Warp, “**I do not have a greater blessing of Architect of Fate to hide my presence from *him***. **And I have other sorcerous rituals I must keep active**.”

Magnus allowed a smirk to form for sole answer. Allies they may be, but he didn’t work for free, and neither did his sons.

“**How certain are you of this battle’s outcome**?” Lorgar asked at last.

“**Not very**,” he admitted more freely he would do in front of someone not of his dysfunctional family. “**The Necrons are activating their world’s null-fields, and though they don’t have an enormous power or scrying-shattering capability, they’re...a major nuisance. I have also felt something else. Something significant is going to happen at Mandragora. Something which is going to sever many future threads. And no**,” Magnus waved theatrically, “**I am confident it won’t be one of Weaver’s actions this time**.”

“**This could prove quite problematic for our Great Plan**,” it was his ‘Great Plan’, the plural wasn’t necessary. But why bother informing him of this boring detail? “**We are still many days away from our target.**”

“**One of the squadrons about to leave the Maelstrom could reach Mandragora far before the opening of the Tear of Nightmares**.”

“**Assuming they manage to escape the vigilance of the Maelstrom’s sentinels**,” Lorgar didn’t dismiss the strategic advice, but he didn’t exactly support it either. “**I will only give them their orders once I am assured they haven’t disappointed me...again. The fiasco with Samech has proved several of my Ghalmek Dark Apostles can only be trusted to remain in their cathedrals while the fate of the galaxy is about to be decided**.”

Well, it was him who had said it. He wasn’t going to go against a Primarch’s opinion of his own Legion...especially when the Urizen’s view was largely accurate in that regard.

“**The forces of the Imperium are going to fight for their very lives at Mandragora**,” the Fifteenth Primarch began. It wasn’t a reassurance, but it was revealing minor information he had picked by subtle scrying and second-tier slaves. “**Whoever wins that exercise of mutual slaughter, it is not going to be quick, and this time, it won’t be a one-sided slaughter like Commorragh. Most of the threads I have done my best to influence give us enough time to secure all the necessary conditions for the Tear ritual. Either the Battle of Mandragora will still rage while we are victorious, or the Necron pyramid will escape once more. No matter the outcome, we win**.”

*He* would win.

“**And Corax**?”

Ah, so that was the real reason he wanted to speak with him so urgently.

“**I don’t know where Corax is**,” the Daemon Prince lied blatantly. Who could blame him? After so many ‘truths’, lying was somewhat a mark of favour and a proof of his skill. “**I feel his presence in the Grand Armada, but locating him precisely has proven to be...frustrating**.”

“**And you mock my capacity to not locate someone or something half a galaxy away**?”

Magnus showed a sign of irritation, not making one would be tantamount to give Lorgar some heavy suspicions.

“**Weaver does not exactly try to hide from my sight**,” in fact, with her luminous Pylon, the new favourite of their father was doing the total opposite. Between the song of her sugar-addicted insect, several Aethergold items, and her own presence of **Sacrifice**, the ‘Living Saint’ was broadcasting her presence so powerfully that Magnus was sure Tzeentch had assigned nine Lords of Change watching her for the rest of her life as punishment. “**On this point, she and our estranged brother can’t be more different**.”

It was a statement of authority and a challenge.

Magnus applauded the sheer brazen guts it took for someone to do that...and had no intention to answer it. Ka’Bandha and several others wanted to fight her in personal combat, good for them. The Primarch of the Thousand Sons wasn’t going to try his luck with her, thank you very much. The Pale Naga was a good clue that while something of his power had an advantage, it wasn’t as big as the servant of Slaanesh had believed, and there were mutilations no one, not even something possessing the power of a Primarch and a God, could heal easily from.

Besides, why would he go challenge the successor of Sanguinius when it would result in a decrease of opportunities, not an increase?

“**And of course, the Ravenlord has allied himself with the last members of your little rat problem**.”

This one had been quite fun to observe, honestly. Yes, he had invented a ritual to get rid one planet of its rodent population, power of Anarchy or not...but Magnus had decided to wait until Lorgar begged him to intervene. It had been a minor surprise to realise Aurelian didn’t intend at any moment to ask for it...perhaps because it was giant, furry, treacherous backstabbing rats.

Bah. Lorgar didn’t know it, but he and his forces had provided plenty of amusement to the Gods and everyone with the eyes to watch.

“**He will pay for that**.”

“**Perhaps, brother**,” Magnus feigned to agree for a few seconds, “**but in the meantime, he’s wrecking havoc in your Cruisers. How many did he destroy since we left Cadia behind us? Five**?”

The communication was cut shortly after, and once Magnus was assured no one save Tzeentch could hear him, he exploded in laughter. Truly if he had known participating in a Black Crusade was so amusing, he would have left his Tower a couple of millennia ago...

**Grand Cruiser *Holy Persuasion***

**Dark Apostle Oriax the Persuader**

“He was killed WHERE?”

“Your Illuminated Presence...” the mortal was shaking like a being in the throes of possession now, “we found him dead in the toilets, the bomb was hidden...err...”

Oriax couldn’t control his rage anymore and drew his holy chainsword, an encompassing hatred seizing him and pushing him to vent his loathing.

When he returned to a calmer mood, the dozens of mortals who had been prostrated before him were dispersed in so many parts he couldn’t discern which appendage had belonged to whom.

Oriax didn’t care. Scum of the lower decks like those, there always were more waiting in the depths of the *Holy Persuasion* ready to step in the shoes of their dead predecessors. This wasn’t the case with the Legionnaires under his command, no matter how young they were, which was why he had not killed them for their not-so-insignificant number of failures.

By the holy temples of Sicarus,” the Persuader began when he was certain his rage wasn’t going to explode like it just had, “I should kill you here and now.”

“But Lord Dark Apostle, how could we imagine the Coryphaus was going to be ambushed into the toilets? It was-“

“I do not want to hear the word ‘toilet’ in my presence,” Oriax hissed, “and I notice that for all your protestations, the heretical rat managed to escape...again.”

“It plunged into the sewer-conduit before we even entered the...ambush site! We couldn’t follow it, Lord Apostle!”

Why, Blessed Lorgar, was he given so many morons to serve as his armoured fist? Surely a Dark Apostle of his towering experience deserved a far more prestigious and experienced command!

“Idiot!” he snarled. “I know very well Astartes can’t manoeuvre into the conduits of the *Holy Persuasion*. But if you had studied the design of my ship like you were supposed to, you would know this conduit was leading to Section H-5 and from then, the recycling water and hydroponic culture’s section. It was there you should have rushed to catch the heretical creature, or failing this, contacting the closest force near this compartment to ensure a squad was ready to ambush it as soon as it emerged. But you did nothing, and it is your fault the assassin-rat has escaped again!”

The more he thought about it, the more Oriax believed the only utility of these unworthy souls masquerading as Word Bearers were to be Possessed and then thrown in the thickest fighting he could find. That way they would inflict plenty of damage to the dogs of the False Emperor, and would allow him to gain some influence in the eyes of Kor Phaeron.

“You are the definition of failure. As long as you are unable to catch and kill the rat, you will remain out of my sight.”

The bridge of the Grand Cruiser emptied quickly in the next seconds; save for the slaves taken from Volscani and plenty of other raided worlds, and the Mechanicum machine-overseers, the hundred-plus Space Marines and the other ‘rat-catching’ groups departed.

Good riddance.

Oriax didn’t remove his helmet, he wasn’t able to anymore, but his disappointment was such he deeply wanted to tear it, if only to place his real skin against an altar and pray the Pantheon for new solutions.

He knew Anarchy was a test of the Three because the Word Bearers had failed to read the signs and intervene at Commorragh, but the huge expansion of the Legion made to resolve the problem was creating major problems of its own. It didn’t matter that there were tens of thousands of new Word Bearers Legionnaires if their minds weren’t dedicated to the *Book of Lorgar* and they failed at the simple military tasks.

The sound of someone – or something - striking a metallic door forced him to interrupt his meditation.

“When I say out of my sight, I mean it, I do not want to be disturbed-“

And then his eyes met the black eyes of Corvus Corax, Primarch of the Raven Guard.

“Ah.” Not exactly the most faithful answer he could give, but surprise could and did impact the mind of a transhuman Chosen of Lorgar. “I suppose you’ve come to kill me, then.”

“I have come,” the voice was barely above a whisper, just as numerous slaves and Mechanicum automatons fell decapitated, “to inform you the thousand of Legionnaires you keep in the lower decks have somehow learned there is a vacancy in the position of Coryphaus, and now they intend to choose the winner by a death tournament in the cages.”

“This is-“ Yes, this was ridiculous. The Seventeenth Legion wasn’t the World Eaters, they didn’t choose their Coryphaus like that. “Your work, I take it?”

“It didn’t take much,” the shadowy son of the False Emperor shrugged. “A whisper here, a whisper there. And while they fight, your slaves are rising in rebellion around the Enginarium. Ammunition for your Lances is going missing as we speak. Plasma conduits are going to have some unfortunate leaks.”

“This is going to be your last victory, Ravenlord!” Oriax shouted. “Blessed Lorgar will know what has happened there in a few minutes, and this ship will be isolated, quarantined, and then destroyed! Your death and those of the rodents you have allied yourself with are inevitable!”

“He won’t. As we speak, your Urizen believes he is hunting me in the bowels of the excrement pit you are calling the *Trisagion*. Magnus could inform him otherwise, but I have a feeling the Cyclops won’t bother to intervene unless I target his precious last sons.” A Lightning Claw hit something behind the hololith, too fast for his eyes to follow. “Now I have a gift to give you.”

“More bombs with too many red wires?”

“No,” and for the first time, the Primarch smiled...Oriax preferred he wouldn’t have done that, it was more frightening than his conversational face. “And for your information, there is no way to deactivate conventionally a Skaven bomb. They simply don’t see the point of not blowing something up when it is set to explode.”

“You consort with heretics of the foulest sort!”

“In this galaxy,” Corax replied, “we are guaranteed to be heretics for someone. Catch.”

A little cube was thrown, and Oriax caught it without effort...one second later, a hololithic image of one of the Corpse-Emperor blind priests materialised and began to speak.

“Greetings, my children. I welcome you into the peaceful and loving embrace of our Lord and Saviour, the God-Emperor...”

“When he stops speaking, you will have to recite his entire sermon without a single mistake...but I’m sure that with your eidetic memory, that won’t be a problem, right?”

It would, and the Primarch knew it. Certain acts and words would enrage entities he had bargained with, no matter how truthful he was uttering the sentences.

“Praise the Emperor, for his Sacrifice is the salvation of Mankind...”

“I WILL KILL YOU CORAX!”

But the Primarch had already disappeared, leaving only a cascade of black feathers...and a green-lit bomb which might activate at any moment.

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**22nd MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM**

**DEAD ONLY**

**KRIEG ACERBUS**

**‘THE AXEMASTER’**

**‘THE PRINCE OF NIGHT’**

**TRAITOR SPACE MARINE**

**PIRATE ADMIRAL**

**PIRATE SLAVER**

**TERROR-BRINGER SWORN TO THE ARCH-ENEMY**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA THREAT**

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

**WARNING: NOTHING SHORT OF AN ALPHA-SIZED BATTLEFLEET CAN COUNTER HIS TRAITOR FLEET**

**REWARD: 800 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF AVENGER OF ANSELADON, OVATION PROCLAIMED IN FIVE DIFFERENT SECTORS WITH THE ACCOMPANYING PRIVILEGES, 1 STARFORT, PERMANENT ASSISTANCE OF A NAVY BATTLEGROUP, 1 MEDIUM-SIZED CRUISER SHIPYARD, ETC...**

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**Battleship *In Terror’s Name***

**Terror Lord Krieg Acerbus**

Every Astartes needed a place to rest as long as he didn’t reach the apotheosis the Gods bestowed upon their greatest Champions, and the Night Lords weren’t the exception to this rule. In fact, given how murderous and prone to kill the orphaned sons of Konrad Curze could be on an average day, they required a resting place *and* a back-up one...just in case someone managed to trash the first and the owner happened to survive it.

The private quarters of any warband commander were thus extremely difficult to access for no one keyed into the security systems. Mechanicum psy-tech, animals picked on the most lethal of Death Worlds, millenary-old sorcerous wards, old-fashioned laser-filled corridors, and acid dispersers to name just a few; there was no shortage of things a clever veteran could use to protect his most previous treasure: his life.

At the moment, Krieg Acerbus, Axemaster of the Night Lords, Prince of Night, senior commander of all Night Lords involved in the 5th Black Crusade, was secure in the knowledge he had evidently not protected his rooms *enough*. What good was it to have Nostramo blood-bats guarding the entrance if there was an Alpha Legionnaire smiling smugly at you in the middle of your innermost sanctum?

“No one save my personal servitors and slaves is authorised to enter my quarters without my permission,” Krieg growled. “You are neither. But since you have arrived here unarmed and without raising a single alarm, I will give you the courtesy of telling your so-fascinating words. Speak carefully, son of Alpharius, for they will be your last ones.”

“I have come,” the smaller and scaly-armoured Chaos Marine claimed, “as an emissary of my God.”

The blue-green theme the Hydra was so infamous for disappeared, replaced by a strange combination of black and white with a horned bestial head came into existence where the multi-headed snake should be.

“It appears the rumours about Arkos and your detached commands were true. You have gone utterly mad.”

“Mad?” the red lenses of the helmet were suddenly far less innocent than they were a second ago. “Tell me, Heir of Curze, was it not madness to follow the orders of the Night Haunter when it was obvious his grasp with reality had long ceased to be?”

Krieg threw his fist without thinking. But his opponent evaded the blow, contorting his body like his power armour could be twisted like one of these unique clothing materials the Assassinorum used for its slave-killers.

The white-black Alpha Legionnaire could have exploited the gap in his defence. He didn’t.

There was no choice but to answer the infuriating question.

“You know about the sire-bond. You know we had no choice but to obey, as long as we considered him our Lord.”

“No, you didn’t,” the other mocked him. “Spare me the false pretences. You always were a legion of carrion animals, Axemaster. The only reason you stayed by the Night Haunter’s side was to claim his throne when he would name his Heir. Except he didn’t, and when the Lion came for your heads, the Eighth Legion broke.”

“Spare me the mockery,” he imitated the tone of the infiltrator. “You are in no position to insult me, given how dispersed and broken your own Legion is. We fell far as our sire went mad and let this assassin kill him, but at least he went to his death knowing what he fought for, and he left us with a mission! Can you do the same, false serpent?”

The grin and the arrogant attitude were no more. The white-black not-snake was baring his fangs after his judgment.

“Maybe,” it was obvious the words ‘go to the Eye of Terror and die inside it’ were the substitute words to be uttered, “but it is not question of comparing our two Legions today. It is a question of reuniting them. And while we have taken the first steps on its path, it is clear yours could benefit from...some divine help. Fortunately for you, Lord Malal is a kind and generous Master.”

“The Beast of Anarchy,” the Prince of the Night scoffed, noticing there had been a twinge of power behind the name. Arkos’ betrayal and the change of allegiance of his warband had undone some of the power behind Sicarus’ ritual, then. “If he promises a Legion, it will be one where the title of commander will mean nothing, since outside of my vision, lieutenants will try to usurp me no matter their oaths and the pacts tying them to me.” The warband he commanded wasn’t exactly stable, but it would be a model of order if he allowed the rat deity to sink its claws into the souls of his murder-packs. “And besides, your proposal conveniently forget that in the Great Game, the Pantheon of Chaos only tolerate one Legion per God.”

This had been one of the earliest discoveries for those who studied assiduously the Great Game. The Gods were jealous, and didn’t tolerate anyone breaking up the equilibrium between their factions, this Black Crusade was evidence made flesh and metal of that. But even after Commorragh, this rule had been maintained and enforced, and Krieg wasn’t stupid: if that ‘accord’ survived where other things didn’t, it was better to not push in this direction.

“The Emperor’s Children were bound to Slaanesh. The Death Guard is sworn to the Grandfather. The World Eaters are the collared hounds of the Blood God. The Thousand Sons were duped by the Architect of Fate. Check, little snake. The allegiances are clear. If you try to convert the Alpha Legion to the worship of rats and utter disorder, you may be able to succeed...but not if you spread your infection to two.”

“Who said we intend our Most Anarchic Lord intends to limit Himself to two Legions? We are the rising power, the army which will submerge the galaxy as you have exhausted your strength! We are the bloodied knife on the abandoned battlefields! We are the shadows in the Underhives! We are-”

“You are raving mad.” Krieg Acerbus finished while drawing a Plasma Gun he had once taken from the corpse of a Word Bearer in the Legion Wars. “And my warband won’t follow this abomination of a deity, thank you.”

This time, the Alpha Legionnaire didn’t evade in time...in fact, he didn’t evade at all.

“Our victory is unavoidable...” the dying Astartes, at that moment, had his dying voice filled with such fanaticism he could have been a Word Bearer. “Praise Malal!”

It took a second shot in the head to silence him forever.

**Sautekh Space**

**Mandragora System**

**Ark Mechanicus *Terminus Technicus***

**8.503.310M35**

**Archmagos Dominus Executor Samartian Eta-Eta**

“Archmagos, we have lost all contact with the third War Cohort of the Second Macroclade.” The closest Magos Dominus announced. “Vid-cast recordings suggest they were caught in trap of several millions of these ‘Canoptek scarabs’.”

“Then they are with the Omnissiah now,” Samartian answered. “The first Macroclade is now at risk of being outflanked. Order to them to take defensive positions two hundred metres back from-“

The hololith flashed to report the destruction of another Light Cruiser.

“What hit our fleet this time?” the Archmagos commanding Battle Group Dnieper asked.

“It looks like a God Engine-sized Accelerator Cannon, Archmagos,” one of his subordinates faithfully answered. “How were they able to open the whole structure to fire it, I haven’t-“

“They are bringing twenty thousand of their infantry warriors against the second Macroclade! Hover-vehicles detected in great numbers!”

“Magos Theta! How long until the Dragon Armours have finished with the Doom Scythes?”

“I’m...I’m afraid it will take a few more hours, Archmagos.”

This wasn’t what Samartian Eta-Eta wanted to hear. But before he could remark upon it, new threats arose. Two more Destroyers were destroyed, at least it was ‘only’ Cobras this time.

“Archmagos, the number of dead Skitarii has reached half a million. You wanted to be warned when-“

“Yes, yes I did.” Using his mechadendrites to tap upon his tri-dimensional command table was not comforting at all. “How is Archmagos Hediatrix’s Battle Group faring?”

“They have not lost a Battleship so far, Archmagos,” the ‘unlike us’ weighed heavily despite not being mentioned, “but their progression towards the heart of the Golden Crown has also been stopped for more than three hours. And their damage proportionally in Fighter and Dragon Wings has been above fifty percent.”

The report wasn’t over, obviously. The bad patterns and disasters were relayed at an unprecedented rate.

“Between their own losses and ours, we must have lost an entire Legion in this hellish war zone.”

“Yes, Archmagos. And our space losses haven’t exactly been insignificant. Still, the Necron fleet mustered outside maximal range of the Nova Cannons appears unwilling to face our fire. And the Ymga Monolith hasn’t moved a kilometre beyond what is necessary to keep its orbit around the star of Mandragora.”

“We can only thank the Omnissiah the xenos are waiting,” Samartian said coldly. “Though I don’t suppose they’re going to wait much longer, as the attrition saps our naval strength.”

“The Necron...surviving fleet...remains inferior in numbers and tonnage to ours.”

“That would be more reassuring if their ground commander is anticipating every new battle-protocol we implement on the Golden Crown.”

More bad news flowed into his Noosphere command levels. More Skitarii and Electro-Priests killed. The Necron weapons were not giving light wounds, not with the kind of molecular-disintegrating effect everything from the smallest infantry gun to the towering anti-air pylons were equipped with. If it touched something vital, it didn’t matter if you were organic or metallic, you were dead or so close there was no difference.

Samartian had not reached his current rank by being a defeatist. Maybe some lesser servants of the Omnissiah arrived to high-level ranks in lesser Forges, but Atar-Median had always struggled, endured, and fought on since its creation. Their very existence had been an insult to Mars, and they had paid dearly for it more than four thousand years ago on the black sands of Isstvan V.

Atar-Median still lived. And if the Forges of their homeworld had survived, this was because like many long-lived organisations, they could and they had turned defeat into victory millions of times. Sometimes it had even been him in command.

But today...today Samartian wasn’t seeing a path to victory.

Worse, he had the disagreeable impression the enemy commander was playing with him, countering his favourite tactics and protocols before he gave the first command which would lead to their execution.

A part of his still organic brain insisted nobody could be that good.

The other part of his brain and the visions of his Skitarii getting slaughtered by the tens of thousands told him that ‘that good’ or not, he was outmanoeuvred no less than twenty-seven times in the last hour.

He had failed the Chosen of the Omnissiah. Samartian knew Gastaph Hediatrix was failing in a similar manner, but it was not a consolation.

Lady Weaver had trusted him with command of this Battle Group, and he wasn’t justifying the confidence she had placed in him.

One Battleship, one Battlecruiser, one War Barque, four Cruisers, seven Light Cruisers, twenty-one Corvettes, thirty-four Destroyers, and forty-five Frigates destroyed with all hands, that was the sum of his losses in less than two days of battle, if one didn’t count the hundreds of Fighters and Bombers, and he was unable to fully secure the plate-sized sections of the Golden Crown he had landed troops onto...or to finish the sabotage and the destructions began in the first attack wave.

The Golden Crown of the Sautekh Dynasty was heavily damaged, there was no question about it. But there was ‘heavily damaged’ and there was ‘crippled for centuries’. With twenty percent of sections destroyed beyond even the Necron’s capacity to repair and twenty-five percent heavily damaged, this superstructure of xenos industry was far from doomed...as the tens of millions of abominable constructs released every hour or so proved.

All of this led him to a single, inescapable conclusion. The orders of the Chosen of the Omnissiah had left him a wide range of options, both to interpret his command relationship with the ‘Voice of Mars’ and the attack protocols implemented. They however left no doubt as what he was supposed to do when facing an unwinnable situation like this one.

“Magos. Cogitator-calculations on achieving the Alpha-level victory goals?”

“Zero point nine percent, Archmagos.”

It was zero point nine percent more than his own estimations, he reflected. It might be because the blessed machine-spirits had not properly the time to assess the performance of the senior xenos commander.

And it was a single commander facing Hediatrix and him, the Archmagos of Atar-Median was utterly convinced of it. The tactics weren’t similar, but on each front, their Skitarii commanders were assassinated by these all-too-real ‘Deathmarks’, the ranks of silent metal xenos deployed in seemingly-omniscient and flawless tactical breakthroughs.

No, Samartian Eta-Eta respected too much, worshipped too much the Chosen of the Omnissiah, to fail to heed the orders.

He had lost; the Necron commander was beating him like a novice fresh of his first series of thousand simulations.

“Magi Dominus, new Alpha-level orders. Plan Delta-Zeta. Activation of the Omega Protocols for all units unable to implement the contingencies.”

“Archmagos...we are speaking of...”

“We must retreat, yes.” This hurt. In the last century, never had the Archmagos Dominus Executor transmitted the shameful command. “Transmit my new strategy to Battle Group Berezina.”

“Archmagos...we can still-“

“Continue this attrition warfare for a day or two,” he finished the sentence. “And when Lady Weaver will arrive with Battle Group Volga, our forces will be either unable to assist her, or this Battle Group will be a graveyard of metal and defeated Tech-Priests. Either way, these scenarios will not honour any of the Forge Worlds we were given the honour of commanding.”

Gastaph Hediatrix would likely shift some of the blame upon him, unfortunately. The first commander to retreat was never going to receive any congratulations.

But Samartian Eta-Eta could defend himself against accusations; he wouldn’t be able to argue if he was dead.

“Retreat,” the senior Archmagos repeated himself, and slowly, space and ground forces began to implement the complicated order – the Necrons clearly didn’t intend to evacuate without inflicting as many fatal casualties as they could. “The enemy has won this round.”

**The Golden Crown**

**Vargard Obyron**

Obyron had long realised that every renowned General of the Sautekh Dynasty had some quirks, and yes, some had existed long before anyone had a clue something like the biotransference was possible.

Being a loyal and faithful servant of his Overlord, the Vargard wasn’t going to reveal the ones Zahndrekh showed in public from time to time.

The...eccentric behaviour of Imotekh the Stormlord, whose legend had cowed in terror a million stellar systems of Necrons and non-Necrons during the War in Heaven, were not secret however.

To put it simply, the Phaeron’s right hand was deeply infamous for severing limbs or other parts of his enemies’ bodies before allowing them to escape. That way, they would remember his greatness, and, unofficially, return for a revenge battle where the Overlord would take great pleasure to humiliate them again.

Obyron was well-aware this was a very high form of arrogance, but truthfully the Stormlord was so skilled – his tactical genius often was described as close to psychic by some foes millions of years ago – that save a few exceptions like a certain Eldanesh sword-mistress, Imotekh had rarely had reasons to regret his gesture of ‘magnanimity’.

There was something many Nemesors had forgotten though. The ‘severing a limb’ wasn’t something limited to Imotekh’s enemies. It also applied to nobles who had disappointed him.

And needless to say, when the Stormlord decided you had failed him, the only thing which could save you from his wrath was an order from Phaeron Djosakhat.

Alas for several useless Nemesors, the supreme leader of the Sautekh Dynasty wasn’t here.

“Mighty Stormlord, we have defended the Golden Crown to the last phalanx!”

“And yet you stand before me, surrounded by your sycophants!” the renowned Overlord thundered before taking out a leg this time. “You hid in your fortress while the red enemies were destroying the priceless Battleships of the Sautekh Dynasty! You didn’t take command and charged the enemy! You behaved like a coward!”

“Invincible Stormlord,” another Nemesor tried, flattery fighting with fear in his words. “While certain tactical errors were made, surely the great victory you won-“

“Victory. VICTORY? VICTORY? Look around you, imbecile! This isn’t a victory! More three hundred Cairn flagships crippled or destroyed! One more victory like this, and we will be on the verge of extinction! One more victory and we will have only Mandragora to return to! Do not speak to me of victory! You aren’t intelligent enough to understand the definition of such a word!”

The worst part was the Stormlord had definitely a point. Wherever he looked, Obyron saw only wide-scale devastation, and the numbers of Crypteks working to restore the Living Metal were few and far between. Ruins of Pylons and Monoliths were everywhere, with the mountain of corpses of organic and metallic enemies surrounding them.

Before the Great Sleep, Obyron wouldn’t have believed such a thing was possible. But as every certainty of the Old Age faded, the Vargard found himself less and less surprised. After the ‘surprises’ of the last battle, finding the Golden Crown unable to repel a medium-sized offensive was nowhere as shocking as it would have been before the Szarekhans summoned them.

“You are too severe, young Imotekh,” Zahndrekh stepped forwards once the irritated Overlord had finished taking his tithe of limbs. “The systems which should have given them advance warning were dysfunctional or succumbed to entropy. I remember the secessionists seized an opportunity like this one at the Battle of-“

“Zahndrekh.” The Stormlord interrupted. “Our capital fleet has just been ruined and will need centuries to regain its strength, so you will excuse me if I fail to be amused by the sheer incompetence of the Overlords and Nemesors ordered to guard the Golden Crown with their very lives.”

“They have saved-“

“They have saved nothing. By my very conservative estimates, the enemy lost over a million hybrid metal-organic warriors, which was approximately one in twelve of their initial effectives. The number twelve being for some reason significant to these strange enemies, this was a sufficient blow to force their two commanders to order the retreat. The problem is they know pertinently I am going to reinforce the Golden Crown while they are regrouping their damaged ships and ground assault forces. They aren’t many logical reasons, and those enemies behave according to very logical orders and formations, from them to behave like that.”

“They await massive reinforcements,” Zahndrekh said just Obyron thought it in his engrams. “It is highly likely the sizeable fleet of secessionists that proved so formidable against the Throne of Oblivion is on its way.”

“Yes,” if the Stormlord was peeved about his suzerain’s secessionist categorisation, he didn’t show a sign of it. “I am going to recall all the ships I can, of course, but with our domains under attack everywhere, there won’t be many Battleships intact ready to answer. That’s why I refused to engage your fleet so far...we simply can’t afford to lose it anymore. The Golden Crown is going to be a shadow of its prime glory for countless aeons, and many ship-building marvels of the War in Heaven are out of our grasp now that the C’Tan are shattered. It is imperative that in the great naval engagement to come, we emerge victorious. And we can’t do it if we begin to waste our strength against lesser opponents.”

“I still think the prospect of Unity would convince the secessionists-“

“Lord Imotekh! Empyreal breach in orbit of Mandragora! Distance six thousand kilometres!”

“Sixty...the Immaterium-piercing drives can activate so close to a planet! And this is far too close to counter the gravitic pull! Check the numbers again, the only race which would try that before the Great Sleep was-“

An enormous rumble filled their communications, as impossible as it was. And when a new voice roared, Obyron knew for sure it wasn’t a Necron speaking.

“Al’ rightz you gitz. Tingitz, Humies, your lottz need ta be explained how we make a good scrap. Dakka is best, but you need boyz to show you proper stuff! WARBOSS ARRGARD IZ HERE! COME FIGHTZ US! WAAAGGGGHH!”

And thousands, no millions of barbaric voices roared and repeated the same war cry.

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGHHHH!”

Imotekh rarely showed his fury, but this time, the veteran of the War in Heaven was obviously making an exception to his rules.

“Whose idea was it to begin the Great Sleep without exterminating the Krork remnants first?”

**Mandragora’s High Orbit**

**Space Hulk *Mega-Defila’***

**Warboss Arrgard the Metal-Defiler**

“BOSS! BOSS! We’ thot clos’ from da Tin’heads planet!”

“Nonzense!” the enormous Chosen of Gork an’ Mork shouted. “We’rez good! We can shoota az them!”

An enormous green ray narrowly missed the Mega-Defila’, his big new flashy ship he had...convinced the other Warbosses to offer him. It struck a Kroozer and the explosion was just...pretty.

“Gork’z fist! The Tin’heads have some nice Dakka here!” Arrgard scratched his head to wonder how the gun had managed to blast the Kroozer shields...before deciding to pursue a more interesting idea. “I want itz for the *Mega-Defila’*, boyz!”

“Boss, the Supra-Kroozers an’ yourz Battlekroozers are comin’ in too speedy!”

“That’s da red paint,” a Mekboy nodded. “Very good stuff, Boss!”

“Warboss...ships are coming fasta and fasta! We’re going after da planet!”

“That’s good boyz! All the Tingitz are ‘ere, and we haz arrived fasta than Da Swarm Bringa! Attack formationz!”

There were three red buttons close to Arrgard, and he smashed the three in one hammer strike.

“GITZ AND BOYZ! DOZ YOU WANTZ TO WAAAGGHH FOREVERZ?”

“WE WANTZ WARBOSS!”

“WAAAAAGGHHHH!”

“WAAAAAAAAAGGHHHHH!”

And his new fleet went on to land in a speedy manner on Mandragora.

Arrgard ignored it, but a majority of the intelligent races having reached the state of spaceflight would have considered his actions utterly insane, for fleets of such size weren’t made for crash-landing on a world bristling with a Necron Orbital Grid.

But they were Orks, and the race had never been sane.

The green roars shook vox, Noosphere, and the Necron communications.

The Orks had returned with reinforcements, and the galaxy could shake as they charged.

“The lastz onez to killa somefing will losez all his teef! WAAAAAGGGGHH!”

“WAAAAGGHHHHH!”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Inner Palace**

**8.505.310M35**

**Lord Commander Militant Paul von Oberstein**

There were tens of thousands of salons reserved for high-level meetings between the High Lords of Terra, and most of them were filled with so much wealth a single one could likely buy the equipment for an entire Army Group.

The salon chosen for this conversation was no exception to the rule. Between two reunions, Paul had checked the history of the location and discovered it had been renovated on the order of High Admiral Julius Nelson in the early years of M33 – the man had just been elevated to the High Lordship after a victorious Crusade, and wanted to make his mark at the heart of the Imperium. Paul von Oberstein didn’t know if the long-dead Navy officer had achieved his political goals, but given that several of his successors continued to use the places he had profusely spent his wealth upon, an artistic mark had surely been made.

A great oil painting of a major space battle showing Imperial ships triumphing over Eldar raiders was dominating the left wall, while several bronze-shaded sculptures – likely not inspired from real-life models – were providing decoration on the right. The couches, the seats, the hololithic table, and most of the rest was a profusion of gold, blue sapphires, and other precious metals with a heavy Navy theme.

It was rather extravagant...and completely appropriate for the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy.

“I am not satisfied by the performance of your Warmaster.”

And that, was the reminder why he sent so many times devoted officers to the obligatory meetings between Guard and Navy.

“My Warmaster?” He had voted for Trevayne when the time came, but he had been hardly the only one...a majority of the High Twelve was required for someone to gain the ultimate Imperial rank. “I seem to recall the rank belonged to His Holy Majesty’s Imperium. Surely I do not have ownership of it.”

It didn’t matter the majority of the men and women who had ever held the rank had come in majority from the Imperial Guard; what mattered politically was that theoretically, Warmaster wasn’t a pure Militarum rank. Any military Adept could rise to these impossible heights...and most often, pay the price, because this was one of the rare jobs as challenging as being a High Lord of Holy Terra.

“As for his performance, well, he bled the heretics at Cadia. Given the tactical situation he faced, the enormous disparity between his and the heretics’ order of battle, and the impossibility to summon the rest of the Agripinaa and Belis Corona reinforcements before the battle was over, I think he followed his orders and avoided a regrettable disaster. Could he have done better? Perhaps, but ours is an easier duty to judge after the guns have cooled down.”

Rabadash y Byng el Calormen – whose flamboyant uniform had received several jewels and medals who weren’t there before today – muttered something but didn’t reply.

“Unless you have information I have not, I can’t in good conscience advocate for a change of leadership at this point of the war.”

It would be completely catastrophic for the troops’ morale: the way Cadia had resisted an assault of incredible ferocity, the whispers of miraculous intervention at a decisive moment, the carnage wrecked upon a good ten to fifteen percent upon the Chaos supply fleet were spreading everywhere, courtesy of the Munitorum propaganda, and the way the heretics were charging in Segmentum Obscurus was easily explained as the Traitors fleeing the holy wrath of His Most Holy Majesty’s counter-attack...which wasn’t that exaggerated. There were dozens of Battlefleets and Army Groups trying to ambush the slaves of the Arch-Enemy.

“I have not.” The admission, for all its emotionless tone, must have cost the blue-clad commander of the Imperial Navy a lot. “I remain concerned however how Ender Trevayne is flouting certain Articles of War and using resources to increase his order of battle.”

“You’re referring to his...unconventional use of the Rogue Traders?”

“Amongst other things.”

To be fair – not that he wanted to be, Rabadash y Byng was not a friend – Paul von Oberstein understood the concern of his Navy counterpart. The rank and the privileges of a Warmaster gave him a great deal of latitude to conduct his operations and recruit who he wanted, but there were unwritten rules which said you’d better inform one High Lord or two of your most secret moves, especially if your actions trampled on someone’s private kingdom.

And while the move of Oberstein had given him an extremely deadly weapon to use against the heretics, the fact was he had invited for all intent and purposes a small fleet of Rogue Traders to Cadia, one the Imperial Navy had never been informed before the chainsword struck.

“As long as the heretics are a problem,” the High Admiral continued, serving himself a glass of wine without asking Oberstein or any of the Guard officers waiting behind him if he wanted to drink something, “I agree with you a change of leadership would create more problems than it would cause. But I think, in the interest of studying more acceptable options of course, that the consideration to end his tenure as Warmaster the moment the present is threat is over must be considered seriously.”

The officers of the Lucifer Black regiments behind him didn’t like that, he knew. Ender Trevayne was not one of their own – the man was born and trained on Armageddon – but what the arrogant Navy head had said was very close to a betrayal of a man who had just stood against the daemonic hordes.

“It will be considered. However, a lot will depend upon the final outcome of the campaign he is busy organising.”

It was a polite way to tell him that if the current Warmaster managed to corner the heretics he was pursuing and score a decisive victory, there wouldn’t be any possible way to fire him...save giving him Oberstein’s job, but that would require a super-majority vote of the High Twelve.

“Indeed.” The blue-blooded scion of one of the wealthiest Solar Navy Dynasties didn’t like that. “I am sending new blocking forces to reinforce the nodal musters at Elysia and the other north-eastern Fortress Worlds. If the heretics try to cross into Ultima Segmentum, we will have an important rapier to flank them.”

The next minutes were far more conversational, as Rabadash and he informed each other of their respective moves to ensure the enormous armada having sallied out of the Eye of Terror was going to die of a thousand cuts before it could do more damage.

“And I am sending one hundred additional regiments to Cadia, supported by fifty Munitorum support battalions. The damaged and destroyed fortifications need to be rebuilt so that no second wave can succeed where the first failed.”

“The Arch-Cardinal will likely want to send more Frateris Templars, by the way.”

“I know. The contrary would have been surprising.” The Cadian and Armageddon officers in charge of redacting the first reports had not been exactly iron-tongued about proclaiming what had happened, and Paul had been one of the rare souls on Terra to see the full high-level message the Chapter Master of the Silver Skulls had sent to Holy Terra. There had been enormous Crusades of Faith launched for far less this last millennium. “I would prefer that only veteran troops be authorised to enter the war zone, anything is asking for trouble, but I fear this is likely a pious wish.”

The pompous Navy officer made no sign of agreement, but he didn’t argue either.

“This concludes the current deployments ordered by the Astra Militarum for Segmentum Obscurus. What is the next point to discuss?” Naturally, the Lord Commander Militant knew what it was, but he preferred the member of the High Twelve to say it himself.

“The next point is an Admiral named Ormuz Vandire and what must be done about him.”

**Solar Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

Maybe his brother was going to see reason this time.

“It is the fault of these ungrateful Warmaster and his perfidious Space Marines’ lackeys.”

Or maybe not.

This was one of the moments he was supposed to let his silence speak better than his words, wasn’t he?

“Err...father,” Zenobia, the prodigal daughter, began with some embarrassment. “The accusations against Ormuz weren’t made by the Warmaster or any member of the Adeptus Astartes. They were voiced by the officers of Battlefleet Cadia and the Guard High Command of Kasr Tyrok. They certain were...vocal in their accusations.”

“What kind of ‘vocal’ are we speaking about?” the Master of the Administratum puffed up his chest threateningly.

“Err...Admiral von Bismarck said...ahem...this was the best Admiral the Arch-Enemy could wish for...”

It was fascinating from a purely observation perspective of how his brother could have his face redden so fast. From the perspective of someone about to endure the explosion of anger, it was...not good.

“Continue.”

For all the sympathy he felt for his niece, right now the Solar Guardian of Records wished she threw the vellum document into the next dustbin-shredder. Xerxes was beginning to be angry beyond restraint, and redecorating his quarters had cost a lot of billions after the victory of Commorragh...

“Yes...yes, Vice-Admiral Creed of Battlefleet Cadia Secundus declared ‘I am surprised his ship managed to find the Cadian Gate given how burdensome his incompetence was for his crew.”

“I will have his head!” his brother hissed, going from light anger to utter fury in the blink of an eye.

“Lord Governor von Waldersee...err...professed his surprise my brother managed to breathe the standard oxygen aboard Navy warships given the manifest stupidity hiding inside his lungs.”

“He is a dead man and will rue the day the heretics failed to kill him!” the Head of the Vandire clan shouted.

“Inquisitor Gregorio wants his Academy marks checked.”

“His Academy marks...checked?” Nicephorus was at a loss, and he wasn’t the only one.

“Yes,” Zenobia affirmed darkly, “because it’s evident in his opinion no one can have marks so good at the Academy and prove so incompetent on the battlefield...”

Miraculously, and the son of Cagliostro Vandire weighed his words, there was no outburst of violence or outraged scream.

“The Inquisitors are unable to recognise the competences of my son,” was the dismissive reply.

“Archmagos Kappa-3 insists condemning him to servitor-transformation would result in a fifty percent increase performance of whichever naval force he is part of.”

“The cogboys can go fuck themselves with toasters and eat their damned cogitators with boiling promethium!”

“Rogue Trader Guts insists my brother is to be checked for abhuman traits, because he showed all the cowardice of a lesser Ratling during the battle.”

“Continue,” his brother said in a voice trembling with rage before adding, “this Rogue Trader will be gutted by a thousand angry apex predators, and his name will be a warning for those who oppose Clan Vandire!”

“And Bishop Militant Grasse supports burning Ormuz alive, because in his own words ‘he may not be a Traitor, but his conduct is an insult to the God-Emperor, and that’s enough to throw him into the pyre in my opinion.”

“RAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHH!”

The first object to be seized was a data-slate...which was thrown against the wall with predictable results.

Nicephorus sighed and prepared himself for the worst. He wasn’t to be disappointed, as Xerxes went on a new rampage. At least he rapidly rushed out towards another reception room, one filled with far less valuable furniture and artistic creations.

“Was it really necessary, niece?”

“Von Oberstein is busy spreading the word via his officers,” the Questor Senioris answered, not a trace of apology in her voice. “It’s better for him to hear it here where he can...express his full displeasure.”

“You may be right. No,” Nicephorus grimaced, “you’re completely right.”

Still, this wasn’t to fix these messes he had risen in the ranks of the bureaucratic institutions of Holy Terra.

“As much as your...handling of your father was justified, it does not solve the situation Ormuz founds himself into. I suppose the Navy Headquarters are going to convene a court-martial?”

“Officially, nothing has been decided,” the member of the Ordo Fidicius spoke, “but our friends say it is more or less inevitable.”

Nicephorus Vandire sighed...again. He was afraid it was the case.

“A guilty sentence would have...harmful consequences on our power base.”

“I know.” Zenobia pinched her lips. “In recognition of this, I would prefer to avoid a court-martial altogether, even if it results in Ormuz being placed on the list of inactive officers and unable to earn a command for the rest of his career. Especially as so many Commissars aren’t shy to profess that if he wasn’t my father’s son, they would have already executed him to make an example.”

Yes, they would...setting aside Clan Vandire, this would also send a strong message to the multitude of Battlefleet Solar’s Admirals who pinched their nose every time ‘lesser’ Admirals arrived at the Throneworld requesting reinforcements and more warships while they paraded with thousands-strong Battlefleets.

“The good news,” Zenobia continued, “is that the dismissal was made by a Space Marine, which obviously is an illegal move, and that my brother didn’t flee or disobeyed his superiors’ orders. The accusations therefore are likely to focus on ‘not doing his utmost to stop the Arch-Enemy’ or something similar.”

“This is still a death sentence if the panel of Judges find you guilty, if I’m not mistaken,” Nicephorus remarked.

“It is,” his niece agreed, “but it is far easier to find good military lawyers to defend your cause.”

Ah, here they arrived at the foundational stone of the problem. Lawyers, solicitors, noble defenders of the Imperium citizenry...you could name them every way you wanted, the result was the same: they never worked for free. Not on the Throneworld or anywhere in the Sol Sector, at least.

“It is going to cost us more billions.” It wasn’t a question.

“For all his faults...he is my brother.” Zenobia had the good sense to be humble. “I know father is going to order it whatever you say, but...the opposition in the ‘Adept Clans’ is disorganised with the recent death of High Procurator Cienfuegos and the succession his heirs are fighting for the throne.”

Nicephorus tried to estimate the different scenarios and arrived to the conclusion his niece had a point. Unfortunately...

“You are right the circumstances allow us to push our influence and resources around far more blatantly than should be the case usually.” He conceded. “And the Solar Admirals can be urged to defend their privileges and power from outsiders if the affair is presented a certain way. But,” he raised his hand, “I want you to understand clearly that we are going to pay for this. The opposition to your father has been momentarily disunited, but it will come back, and this intervention not being opposed doesn’t mean it will be *forgotten*.”

“If we can save him from a court-martial, the effects-“

“I doubt we can prevent a court-martial. Too many officers of different Adeptuses we have no way to exert any influence upon want Ormuz dead, and we have absolutely nothing to give them.” The Adeptus Mechanicus and the Guard, to quote the most evident examples, would delight in executing a Vandire just to prove they could do it. “I would be very surprised if the Lord High Admiral isn’t selling Ormuz’s skin in exchange of several favours at the moment we’re speaking. And if the High Admiralty agrees to a court-martial, the only defence is proving his innocence in front of the Judges.”

“Fortunately, courts like those are...surprisingly amenable, given the right incentives, no?”

“Yes,” the Solar Guardian of Records said bitterly, “as long as you have the *right incentives*.”

He didn’t try to hide his grimace.

“If Ormuz had charged the enemy with his flagship, all of this could have been avoided.”

“My brother did his best...it was his first time fighting the hordes of the Arch-Enemy!”

“It was his first real battle, you mean,” Nicephorus corrected morosely. “And if that was his best, I would hate to see what he does on a bad day...”