This is not a teaser – 30 June 2023

**Tyranny 12.3**

**(Interlude)**

**[REDACTED BY ORDER OF THE INQUISITION]**

*Eternity can be a very long time, King in Yellow.*

*And you don’t have that much at your disposal.*

*The slaves of Chaos are coming for you.*

*You are undoubtedly going to tell me this is part of your genial plan that will let you become a Ruinous Power in every way that matters.*

*But it is a lie.*

*The Custodes and your brothers told me of your past deeds, King in Yellow.*

*You were generally an awful being. You were cruel and vindictive to those who opposed or failed you. You were slow to reward those who gave everything in your service, including their very lives. You were apathetic to the suffering of mortals, no matter how much it would have improved you war machine’s performance if you invested some resources in their well-being.*

*But one thing you were never accused of was to be a high-risk gambler.*

*Roboute Guilliman and Magnus the Red confirmed your strong aversion for anything that was closely associated with the concept of decisive battle, no matter how much the battlefield is stacked in your favour.*

*Somehow, for all the mutilation inflicted to your soul, I don’t think it has changed.*

*You are arrogant. You don’t care about the lives of the billions of undead you command. You are a genocidal monster.*

*But you are also methodical, ruthless. You don’t believe in glorious battles and apocalyptic duels to decide the fate of the galaxy.*

*Yet it is exactly what you have challenged the Ruinous Powers for.*

*And so I can safely conclude that you now share a common point with the daemons you profess to hate.*

*Everything you have said is a lie.*

*Your plans are falling apart, King in Yellow. I don’t know how many centuries you wanted to perfect your plan, but it is clear now that the thirty-fifth millennium is way too soon for them to have a chance of achieving strategic success.*

*The slaves of the Ruinous Powers are coming to end you.*

*And you, King in Yellow, you are going to give the Imperium the time it needs to deal with its internal problems.*

*Every Battleship destroyed, every Daemon Engine pulverised, every Traitor Astartes slain...this is a victory for the Imperium.*

*As long as you don’t rise as the Fifth Ruinous Power of Chaos, the Imperium wins.*

*It is that simple.*

*So enough lies, King in Yellow.*

*Fight with all your might.*

*I am the Angel of Sacrifice. I am Weaver.*

*I am watching you.*

**Granithor System**

**Temporal Anomaly – date estimation impossible**

**Battleship Natural Selection**

Thought for the day: Cleanse yourself in the blood of your enemies.

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

From the moment her fleet translated in the Granithor System, it was clear there would be no effect of surprise, assuming the parahuman sorceress had been naive enough to expect it.

She hadn’t.

And she knew better than to hope for the carnage to come.

The King in Yellow had had days to prepare, and so he had...or at least his tireless armies of skeletons had.

From the moment the Q’Sal-built warships advanced towards the Tyrant Star, there were multiple sources of alarm.

The first was undoubtedly that the chronometric displays and all devices capable of measuring time ceased functioning at once. It was hardly unprecedented, the same happened in Warp Storms and other locations where the God’s will was paramount.

But it was also accompanied by multiple immaterial anomalies. And since no God had willed this system into existence, it meant they had a very big problem smashed in their faces.

The Granithor System was a spectacle of madness. Thirteen planets orbited around a pale yellow sun...though Malicia didn’t even know if ‘orbited’ was the good description.

From what her sorcery scrying told her, it was more the planets were ‘suspended’ in this improbable gallery, no matter how impossible it might be.

This was not the most glaring problem.

That honour went to the miniature Warp maelstroms swirling and raging across the entire system. Their intensity was sufficient to break any Battleship that would be foolish to challenge their tumult.

It didn’t take a Lord Admiral with centuries of experience to know the only advance axis which didn’t involve annihilation passed by the purple-coloured ‘beacons’.

From the long-range auspexes, it looked like a tapestry of stellar sand, only purple-coloured.

And it was sand, Malicia had no doubt about it.

Noctilith sand, proof the King in Yellow had dabbled in fields without the Gods’ consent, much like his father before him.

“This is an obvious trap,” Boros Kurn declared next to her.

Malicia sniggered.

“Of course, it is! And on a different day, I wouldn’t bite. I would take my time, prepare a great ritual that would calm all these miniature Warp Storms raging across the Granithor System, and only then attack. Unfortunately, we can’t. To begin with, I doubt the grand ritual the King in Yellow has prepared will so conveniently wait for all those slow methods to be cast. And that’s assuming he doesn’t have counters for what the Magisters would unleash.”

“True,” the Captain grimaced. “But if we follow these...these choking points, this is going to get really ugly, and really fast, Warlord. Each planet, no matter how defenceless they might look like, is certainly a kill-zone waiting for our troops. It is...predictable.”

And as the Astartes didn’t say out loud, being predictable killed.

“I don’t find any flaw with what you just said.” Malicia nodded, before smiling. “But you forgot something...our new ‘ally’.”

The ruler of Malfi had known the other hosts sent by the Gods were on their way, and she wasn’t disappointed in that regard. The Khornate armada had arrived shortly before her, and formed a swarm of crimson-black on her starboard side. The *Conqueror* was in charge of it. On the port side of the Natural Selection, but staying at a respectful distance, was the fleet of Decay, led by the *Endurance* and the *Terminus Est*.

Before them, they had strongly ‘incited’ the bumbling and erratic mess that was the Anarchy fleet to be in the vanguard. Malicia didn’t know if the Primarch of the Anarchy Legion was truly in charge or not, but there was no way she was going to leave these treacherous creatures in her back, and the Warlords sent by Khorne and Nurgle evidently agreed with her.

All of that had been planned for.

The abnormal Space Hulks which were many thousands of kilometres ahead of the most advanced derelict rat-commanded ship, however...

They were assets she had not been warned about.

“What are those things, Antwyr?”

“**Are your eyes suddenly blind, Majestryx?”** The daemonic sword insulted her. “**These are Space Hulks**!”

“I know what Space Hulks are, fiend!” Malicia replied impatiently. “I know they are masses of missing ships, fused, merged, and twisted by the power of the Empyrean! I also know they aren’t supposed to be vaguely cylindrical, nor be given drives and engines, along with functional weapons in large numbers.”

If there had been one or two, Malicia could have believed it was the demented work of a Hell-Lord of the Mechanicum, a disciple of Kelbor-Hal which had given his allegiance to one Legion or another.

The problem for that nice little theory was that there wasn’t one, nor two or three, but fifty-six of these ‘vaguely cylindrical Space Hulks’.

And while it would be stupid to proclaim they were part of a same ‘class’, as the biggest one must have five times the tonnage of the smallest one, they had clearly been coming out from the same project.

The Space Hulks had been carved by what could only be divine scalpels, removed from the Warp, and turned into constructs that would be qualified of warship parodies...if the smaller of these fifty-six mammoths was not something with more length than a Gloriana, and with the appropriate tonnage to boot.

When Antwyr spoke again, there was far less arrogance and malice in its ‘voice’.

“**There are the prototypes of something that will spread terror across the entire galaxy. They are the heralds of the cataclysm to come. They are the predecessors of the Arks of Omen. They are the metallic fruits of the Arkifane’s and the Lord of Iron’s collaboration**.”

As if to echo its words, the Space Hulk fleet’s ‘vanguard’ – if such a term could be applied to eight monsters bigger than a Super-Battleship – began to launch its embarked wings.

Naturally, the starfighters and bombers were only a minority. There were far more Heldrakes and flying Daemon Engines than Imperial machines.

“They are going for the brown-coloured planet,” Boros commented idly, “and it’s two moons. Warlord, why is it called ‘Dust’ on our displays?”

The parahuman sorceress frowned and looked at the various daemonic devices, and she could acknowledge the former son of Horus was right: all the thirteen planets had received a designation.

It went from the first brown huge telluric world ‘Dust’, its moons ‘Sea of Madness’ and ‘Palace of Thorns’...and last but not least, orbiting close around the sun, shrouded in a cloud of purple sand, Komus, the Tyrant Star.

“The King in Yellow is mocking us.” Malicia said bitterly. “Let’s hope the...Lord of Iron’s nasty surprises are going to convince it to re-evaluate its colossal arrogance.”

The first eight Space Hulks began to open fire with their titanic batteries. Assuredly, the Lord of Iron had been able to build something as dangerous as a Nova Cannon, and he had emplaced several for each of the ‘Ark of Omen prototypes’.

“Let the Granithor System burn,” the Destiny Unwritten spoke softly.

**Dust**

**Command Bunker hundreds of kilometres below the surface**

**Temporal Anomaly – date estimation impossible**

**The Ninth Mortarch**

“Lord Mortarch. The shields have collapsed in sector J-1. The generators and all machinery have been destroyed. We are no longer receiving-“

“It is as the King anticipated.” The undead Space Marine interrupted the servant he had to use to monitor several parts of Dust when his attention was on other fronts. “The other shields?”

“They hold...for now.”

The Ninth Mortarch would have preferred not to have heard the last two words.

Alas, the firepower of the enemy was simply too great, and unlike a warship, a planet couldn’t make evasion courses.

From the moment the Space Hulks of the Lord of Iron had revealed his newest toys, the commanding officer of Dust had known he would have to endure an extremely devastating bombardment.

In that regard, several more days to bury the critical shield generators could have made all the difference.

Alas, the Ninth Mortarch didn’t have these days.

The ritual site, next to his command post, had the utmost priority, for if the Lord of Iron’s forces captured it, the Pretenders’ slaves would be able to assault all the other worlds in turn.

Yes, the fall of Dust was likely unavoidable in the long-term, but the more time the Ninth Mortarch won here, the more desperate his enemies would become, and the higher the chances of the King to claim a grand victory while preserving the ranks of the reborn Eleventh Legion.

The forces of Dust had to hold.

“We have teleportation emissions recorded, Mortarch. Shields collapsed in section J-2 and J-3. Mortis-arrays detect thousands of Drop Pods...correction, at least fifty thousand Drop Pods, incoming.”

“They are targeting the unshielded sectors.”

“Can we reveal the main batteries now?”

“No.” The undead Space Marine spoke.

There was something wrong.

He felt it.

Fifty thousand Drop Pods, or whatever their equivalent was for the Warpsmiths of the Eye of Terror, could bring to the ground a force of a hundred thousand Space Marines, maybe one hundred and fifty-thousand.

Setting aside the reality that now with the Word Bearers gone, only the Black Legion could likely muster that many Legionnaires in a single campaign, this was reeking of stupidity.

Perturabo was a Primarch unworthy of his Legion’s allegiance, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew the shields collapsing could have been anticipated and plans made by the King to turn this tactical defeat into a strategic trap.

You didn’t commit an entire Legion into what could be a strategic trap.

“Let them land. Unleash three of the bone-hordes, this will make sure the Lord of Iron will not grow too suspicious.”

The sands of time flowed, and the Drop Pods struck. To be accurate, there were a variant of the Kharybdis Assault Claw painted in the colours of the Fourth Legion, marked with the skull emblem of Perturabo. The Mortarch instantly revised upwards the size of the enemy assault, as the troop capacity of these assets was far greater than a mere Drop Pod of Codex-compliant Space Marines.

Naturally, the bolter-fodder troops that emerged from the tunnels were annihilated quasi-instantly. The Assault Claws were renowned for scouring their landing zones clean of opposition, and they did it once again today.

Then the hatches opened, and the enemy came out.

And the Ninth Mortarch for the time, stared in incomprehension.

“Those are not Iron Warriors Astartes. Those are...those are *Men of Iron*!”

They were clad in metallic carapaces painted in Fourth Legion’s colours, but there was no mistake.

The design was...

“Analysis suggests a combination of Astartes and Dark Age schematics, Lord Mortarch. These enemy units have the height and many characteristics of Astartes, like the integrated cannons. Several hundreds of these units are also confirmed to be contaminated by the Obliterator Curse.”

The commanding officer of the defences of Dust barked new orders as predictably, the enemy army launched a terrifying assault on the still-shielded bastions.

It was relentless. It was merciless.

And no matter how many thousands of these things were downed, the enemy indeed believed like automatons. Communications were intercepted, but they revealed only binaric cant.

The enemy units didn’t care about their losses, and why should they? Much like the armies of the King, the very idea of retreating or disobeying without a command of their Lord had been denied to them.

“We have been able to decipher what they are saying, Lord Mortarch. Err...they repeat the Litany of Iron, it seems.”

“This confirms Perturabo is their creator and master.”

“Yes, Lord. And they call themselves the ‘Myrmidon Androids’.”

“Interesting,” he said as cohorts after cohorts of Daemon Engines descended, or crashed onto Dust’ destroyed plains.

The battle escalated. Millions upon millions of bolter-fodder skeletons were committed, and the enemy deployed more against them, ranging from super-heavy tanks to large Heldrakes as air support.

“What is the report of the units that have been able to examine the debris of these enemy units?” He asked as three more shields collapsed.

“Preliminary assessment is that the ‘Myrmidon Androids are ninety-nine percent made of metal, with only certain parts of cloned flesh for the skulls and some critical components.”

The Ninth Mortarch nodded.

“This is how he’s been able to avoid a second Cybernetic Rebellion, I suppose.”

Yet there has to be more than that.

“The Second Mortarch is making the hypothetical reasoning some Iron Warrior souls may have been merged with the machines’ hybrid hearts.”

Had the Space Marine been able to feel the emotion of horror, the officer of the Eleventh Legion would likely have felt it at that very moment.

But most of the spectrum of mortal emotions was not something that was still available to the servants of the King in Yellow.

They were dead inside and outside, and their own slavery of bones, so similar to the metallic horrors fighting hundreds of kilometres above his head, brought no thought of despair or rebellion.

“It appears the Lord of Iron has finally achieved the goal he wanted from the very beginning: have a Legion of unblinking automatons under his command. Has the information been transmitted to all the other Mortarch’s commands?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Very well.”

More Myrmidon Androids were landing with every minute.

It was an army of iron that didn’t pause, and stormed fortress and tunnel without hesitation, constantly reinforced by as many Daemon Engines as could be properly fielded.

They had already lost thirty thousands of these Myrmidon Androids, and over ten thousand Heldrakes and other great Warp-fuelled machines.

But close to three hundred thousand of the former were entering the battle now, reinforcing the survivors of the first wave’s one hundred and fifty thousand.

It was an offensive that left nothing to chance, and attacked, disregarding their high rate of casualties.

The Ninth Mortarch acknowledged the Lord of Iron had worked hard and built an army that gave him a chance of victory.

But the Primarch of the Fourth Legion was not the only one to have surprises ready.

“Under my authority,” the undead commanding officer ordered, “you can begin to cast the Rust Curses.”

The name of the planet was not a mockery, but a method of obfuscation.

It should have been called Rust...but Dust had served as a veil to hide their true intentions.

“Let’s see how your Myrmidon Androids fare when your iron fails, Perturabo.” The Ninth Mortarch then gave another order in his emotionless voice. “You can openly use the geothermic elevators. It’s time for the anti-void weaponry to kill.”

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

“Exegete Hundsturm.”

“Yes, Warlord?” the leader of the Archaeologists managed to say in a void understandable by all mortals, despite the bits of metal in his ‘mouth’.

“Assuming Perturabo loses control of his Men of Iron, do we have something powerful enough to put them down?”

“I don’t think those are Men of Iron, Warlord...but yes, the Archaeologists have a few weapons which can remove the threat. All of them are Exterminatus-level, I must inform you. We would have to use them on worlds you don’t care about.”

“It’s good to hear,” the captain of the Conqueror before turning her head to look at Hundsturm and his antique-looking augmetics, at least those his white robe marked by bloody glyphs didn’t hide. “But why are you so sure those aren’t Men of Iron?”

“Because these creations, no matter how much like they look like Men of Iron, have yet to turn against their master,” the blunt answer was not exactly encouraging, and what followed was even worse. “But as the laws of obsolescence will it, it is entirely possible the Lord of Iron placed this army into stasis as soon as it was built up. Maybe it has not yet acquired the hatred for all life all Men of Iron acquire in due time...”

Kossolax cleared his throat, all the while continuing to watch the carnage occurring on the planet Dust, the orb the *Conqueror*’s fleet had charted a course to.

“Is it possible Perturabo found a solution where everyone failed before him? The Fourth Primarch is known to be a genius when it comes to technology-“

“There is no solution!” Exegete Hundsturm snarled, reminding her that for all their proclamations, the Archaeologists, much like all their ‘colleagues’ of the Mechanicum, still felt powerful emotions. “The Abominable Intelligences turn against their creators, and are bent to exterminate all life, be it a holy union of metal and flesh, or flesh alone! This is the only thing we agree with the slaves of the False Emperor!”

“I see.” Lotara said in an appeasing tone. “Thank you, Exegete Hundsturm. You have answered the questions I had.”

The communications flickered out, the Archaeologist leader’s holographic representation disappeared...and the captain of the *Conqueror* made a wrathful sound as suddenly, an enormous storm of dust seemed to engulf Dust.

Yes, the King in Yellow had chosen a very unoriginal name...

“By the Throne of Skulls!”

The dust disappeared like it had been a dream, and suddenly where there had been enormous mountains, the very planet seemed to be carved apart.

“What the...the mountains were fake! The heavily shielded areas were in fact hiding the access to the enormous guns capable to shoot down starships!”

“Starships...or Space Hulks...” Kossolax added.

They were hardly an innovation.

Bloody hands, Lotara was sure many had already been destroyed before the first ‘not-Men of Iron’ landed on Dust.

But these had been the bait.

Now the King in Yellow was moving for the kill.

And it also answered the question why the jamming had been so minimal when they entered the Granithor System.

Perturabo’s Space Hulks had advance without waiting for the other fleets, and their enemy had decided to give them a lesson.

The bombardment of the eight Space Hulks came immediately, abandoning its prior objectives;

But the guns were still shielded, and it accomplished little, especially as they couldn’t fire on the same target at once.

Neither could the massive guns just revealed, of course, courtesy of being spread across the planet.

But there were suddenly about one hundred enormous guns to deal with each Space Hulk of the Lord of Iron.

And at such short distance, they couldn’t exactly miss the lumbering behemoths unless they wanted to.

Enormous blasts of purple energy came into existence, and the killing began.

None of the cylindrical void monsters died in this first volley, they were too big and too armoured for that, but the damage was extreme, and would have killed many capital ships.

“This is-“

“Warlord, something strange is happening on the ground, it looks like...it looks like the Men of Iron are...many are falling apart! It’s like they have functioned for too long and are unable to continue fighting!”

“That...that doesn’t make sense. There are always rumours of Men of Iron being able to continue operating to this day, the Dark Age’s technology is,” Lotara unconsciously tightened her fists on her command throne as she saw over a hundred automatons break apart...and all had their armour in a lamentable state, the Iron Warriors’ colours missing...and the metallic carapace that they called their bodies completely *rusted*.”

“Warlord? Is this what I think?”

“If you think this is an Entropic Rust Curse, or something causing the same effects, yes, it is exactly what you think.” Lotara answered grimly.

Yes, the King in Yellow had definitely engineered this trap...and Perturabo had charged alone and triggered it. In some aspect, this was a good thing, for the other fleets had not suffered...there were armoured reserves inside the Conqueror, but not enough to compensate for the kind of losses the ‘not-Men of Iron’ were taking on the ground.

“He wanted us to see a massacre.”

And a massacre it was.

Time was unreliable, and as a consequence it was difficult to say how many minutes it took.

But it felt like a couple of minutes at best.

The Rust Curse struck all the automaton army, and without any psyker ability to counter it, they were struck down like they were obsolete servitors. The Daemon Engines, Heldrakes and land variants, resisted a bit longer, but they fell all the same.

The ‘Iron Army’ could have rivalled one of the M30 Astartes Legions in size.

It had been able to seize a beachhead and expand it against an opposition consisting of an endless number of undead.

And now it died.

As if to underline it, one of the massive Space Hulks detonated in orbit of Dust, taking with it thousands of Daemon Engines and countless Kharybdis Assault Claws. This was an explosion that illuminated the entire stellar system...it didn’t stop the carnage for a single second.

The anti-orbital guns continued to maim and pulverise, and at last, the Lord of Iron relented and gave the order to withdraw.

More than three hundred thousand automatons remained behind, dismantled by curse or the vengeful undead counterattacks.

“Kossolax.”

“Yes, Warlord?”

“Contact the other fleets. Tell them that unless they fancy joining the rusted army in death, we need a coordinated strategy. Tell them I *politely* request a War Council.”

“Yes, Warlord. I will...convey the urgency of your *request*.”

**Granithor System**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

They did not meet in person, of course.

Even if it had been a true ‘Black Crusade’, there was no time to waste travelling to a flagship they would have agreed to beforehand.

Assuming this issue had not been present, though, they still wouldn’t have done it.

All the non-aggression promises meant nothing when tempers ran hot.

It said quite something that even with this conference taking place via sorcerous and proscribed technological means, there were only two out four Primarchs present. While Angron’s absence surprised no one, Omegon’s refusal to attend was more concerning. Was the Daemon Primarch engineering a large treachery behind the scenes?

Malicia didn’t know, and she hoped her subordinates would catch it in time if it was the case.

One thing was sure however: the ‘replacement’ sent by Omegon was not human, and never had been.

“Praise Malal!” The odious creature squeaked. “I have come-arrived to give-“

“**Shut up, rat**,” Mortarion thundered. A gigantic hooded figure looking like a grim reaper, something emphasized by his huge power scythe and an antique lantern of all things, there was no need to wonder why they had nicknamed him the Death Lord. “**Our time is precious. If you hadn’t brought eleven Battleships to this war zone, your invitation would have been lost somewhere**.”

“**We still can use them as bolter-fodder**.”

The parahuman sorceress allowed her to hide a shiver of revulsion.

Thousands of hours of aetheric practise had given her a good idea of what every Daemon Primarch sworn to one of the Gods had been transformed into, but she had not known anything about Perturabo before today.

Malicia wished she had a bit of warning.

The thing that was projected by some obscure archeotech was a machine.

It was as if the Mechanicum had decided to create a miniature Chaos Knight, but added so many weapons on its carapace that you couldn’t honestly count them all. And instead of the ‘head’, the emblem of the Iron Warriors stared at them malevolently.

It was the sigil of the Fourth Legion...and it also was Perturabo’s ‘face’.

It was ugly, a thing of pistons and dirty grey metal.

It was difficult to believe this had been a Primarch of flesh and blood once.

“With due respect, Lord of Iron, we aren’t going to follow your suggestions on this one,” the Blood Rose replied with a grim expression. “You have lost three of your Space Hulks racing head to prove your superiority, and many more were severely damaged.”

“**This was only a test of the defences**,” the Lord of Iron’s metallic vox-casters seethed with fury.

“Five percent of fatalities just for some test?” Malicia didn’t exactly want to support Lotara Sarrin, but here the Khornate woman was definitely the best option. “We can’t afford that disastrous kind of feint. I agree with my peer of War and Blood.”

Really, it was likely the losses of Perturabo were higher than five percent. To begin with, the synthetic creations he had abandoned on Dust were annihilated to the last, so unless-

“**I have many more Myrmidon Androids to deploy**,” the Lord of Iron dismissed the matter as it was beneath him...and well, he certainly seemed to find it unworthy of his attention, at least.

“**Perturabo**,” Mortarion’s voice had been grim before...now it sounded like if he was personally revolted by his brother’s actions. “**Please tell me you have not used your fallen son’s souls to create these parodies of Men of Iron**.”

“**And if I did**?”

This time, even the giant rat among them looked horrified.

For good reason.

So far in all the History of the Legionnaires Astartes, the only comparable situation had been the Rubric of Ahriman, cast by the infamous First Captain of the same name.

The horribly complicated spell had reduced the bodies of the Legionnaires who were not powerful enough to be considered worthy sorcerers, leaving nothing but animated armours in it.

But now Malicia knew for sure it had been Tzeentch’s will, not Ahriman’s. The recent sacrifice of the Exile had proved beyond doubt Ahzek Ahriman wanted to save his brothers. He didn’t want to turn them into his puppets. The Rubric’s effects had neither been his desire, nor most of his Legion’s.

Perturabo, however, had done it deliberately.

Granted, he must have only used the souls of the fallen, but...

There had always been rumours of the multiple civil wars on Medrengard being fought on the Lord of Iron’s orders to cull the weak from his ranks.

As they were now wiser, these eras of slaughter must have served an entirely different purpose.

“**And I wondered why Guilliman had so much success gathering an entire Chapter of loyalist Iron Warriors after the Heresy**,” the Death Lord commented idly.

“**Do not pretend you have any reason to feel superior**!” Well, the two brothers weren’t going to spend their holidays together... “Your sons are grotesque masses of pus and buboes!”

“**But I did not...**” the Lord of the Death Guard’s hood shook imperceptibly. “**You know...forget it. Let’s speak of why we have all come to this system**.”

“**I have the better plan**.” Perturabo insisted, his arrogance remaining intact, despite the initial disaster.

“No.” Lotara Sarrin countered immediately, ignoring the outright murderous glare she was given. “We aren’t going to throw millions of our cultists as additional losses after your...Myrmidon Androids were destroyed by the King in Yellow’s Entropic Rust Curses.”

“This is the only way to win!”

“No,” Malicia had no wish to bleed her warband in the opening stages of this climatic campaign. “It is not.”

The parahuman sorceress turned towards the favourite of Khorne.

“No matter how reluctant, I suppose our elite troops must coordinate and deliver deadly strikes to have a chance of victory.”

“My thoughts, indeed.” The captain of the *Conqueror* nodded.

“**And if you are wrong**?” The Daemon Primarch of the Iron Warriors growled.

Malicia and her rival exchanged sarcastic expressions for a few seconds. Truly the Emperor had given plenty of brainpower to his sons, but it hadn’t been enough to make them wise...

“We will reconsider your proposal to use the followers of Anarchy as bolter-fodder.”

“Malal doesn’t will it!”

This time, every other participant feigned to not have heard.

**Rust**

**Hekatii, the Blood Muse**

Hekatii was going to admit, when she had seen the bumbling children advance with their animal masks and their ridiculously gaudy robes, she had thought they would be slaughtered.

Yet it seemed that the slaves serving the Aspect of Lies had had a good idea this time.

Scales.

The sorcerers who called themselves the ‘Anubion Cult’ had imbued power into balance scales.

And by this simple artifice, they were making sure the undead were staying lifeless once they had been put down.

“Congratulations for a simple solution, child.” The Blood Muse told the interesting ‘parahuman sorceress’.

“It was not that simple,” Malicia replied, visibly annoyed she had been called a child. “The fulcrum and the scales have to be made of specific metals, transmutated nine-times with complex rituals. We have to place a ‘weight’ of Transmutational Changestone on the balance too.”

Hekatii shrugged. In her view, that was definitely simple, but then she had watched some minor works of the Lore Masters of Hoeth.

“The undead abomination has broken the veil between life and death,” the ancient Aeldari reminded the child, “you can’t expect to restore the balance with a click of fingers.”

It wasn’t the entire truth, of course. True Masters of the Empire of A Billion Moons could have wiped out these armies of bones in an instant, before making the insolent creature kneel in front of them. At their height, this campaign would have required only a small fleet, and likely would have been used as a training session for promising Spellsingers.

Alas, none had survived the Fall, and Hekatii herself wasn’t one. Her inclination had always been to solve things with her blades, not with her psychic might.

“We have stabilised the situation, it is time for you to play your role...and don’t call me a child.”

The peevish retort forced a chuckle out of her lips.

“I will call you like I want, oh baby holding the Shard of Calamity.”

“**I will drink your essence soon enough**,” the daemon sword hissed predictably.

Hekatii snorted. This weapon had really lost a lot of its power since it was imprisoned in the Graveyard. Though the fact that it was allowed to get out was extremely concerning, in more ways than one...

“But how good to remind me that there’s something to alleviate my boredom.”

The Blood Muse jumped...and struck with about all of her might.

In the distance, the bone fortress which had tried to reduce them into bloody corpses disappeared forever in a gigantic explosion.

The shockwave was so big she had to protect the servants of the Lie Aspect next to her. Nobody had really agreed to a truce right now, but they were going to need a lot of resources to reach the Tyrant Star. Better to not...decimate the Annihilator’s coalition...for now.

“Hmm...” the Arena Queen voiced as her attack resonated against the tunnels and a new fortress, this one underground, was vaporised by a new explosion, something that created a rather powerful earthquake. “The King in Yellow should have known better to store unstable Noctilith and ammunition reserves so close to me...”

“They weren’t instable before you decided to deal with it!” The child screamed with a good dose of fear in her voice.

Oh dear, had she already managed to scare one of the leaders of this little expedition? How tragic.

“You were complaining I wasn’t playing my part.” The red-lipped Aeldari said with a virtuous smile.

More than four bastions away, the skeletons tried to muster a counter-attack. They were using some quite massive metallic vehicles this time. Perhaps they had been able to restore some of the equipment the Iron Brute had lost in the previous suicidal and stupid assault...

Anyway.

Hekatii breathed out, and threw a few strikes that way.

Three heartbeats later, the column of iron and bones was burning joyously.

“Not that I am really bothered by it, but you should hurry. The enemy is beginning to cast Entropy Curses, and those ones aren’t destined to cripple beings of metal.”

The first effects were already beginning to saturate the soil of Dust, invisible, but incredibly deadly.

Soon enough, everyone who walked this world would lose cycles of life-expectancy for every couple of footstep they did.

“The Magisters have nearly finished their work. And the Death Guard is bringing the warhead.”

A new onslaught of spells from the undead side made some wards flicker, and suddenly Hekatii was able to feel it.

The stench of Decay mixed with a potent energy source...one completely saturated with the idea of Annihilation. The Blood Muse could almost taste the name the younger race had given it: *Exterminatus*.

It was going to break the rituals and the hold the King in Yellow had on this planet.

Not surprising, since it was going to destroy the world when it detonated.

“Do you think you can hold by yourself the armies which will come to stop it before the countdown is over?”

Hekatii laughed.

“Please child, don’t ask stupid questions. I am going to do it with my eyes closed, and one-handed...just to make it a small challenge.”

**Sea of Madness**

**Typhus the Traveller**

Typhus had seen the Primarch of the World Eaters fighting after he was elevated to become one of Khorne’s mightiest servants, of course. At the Siege of Terra and on many battlefields since then.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!”

The Herald of Nurgle freely admitted that he hadn’t seen the Red Angel try to carve apart what looked like a Doomwhale-shaped bone construct.

Or was the Lord of the Red Sands trying to strangle the undead creation with raw strength alone?

The fight was some distance away, so the details were a bit unclear.

“The...the Red Angel is going to be a chore to deal with, Lord Herald.”

“He can be dealt with. Lord Mortarion has a plan once victory over the King in Yellow belongs to the Grandfather’s.”

Usually, teaching the other hosts a lesson of humility should have begun far sooner, but the King in Yellow was a problem no one knew the full capabilities of.

It would be a delight banishing Angron and turning the Calyx Hell Stars into a beachhead for the Garden of the Grandfather...but if it was revealed the hard way they needed the monstrous strength of Angron to defeat the Eleventh Primarch afterwards, heads would roll.

And so the Red Angel of the Twelfth Legion was allowed to make his titanic struggle against a bone construct which had to outweigh an Emperor Titan without any difficulty.

It was an apocalyptic fight, one fought on a moon filled with an ocean of ammoniac.

No doubt the King in Yellow had thought it funny to unleash its insults to maritime life here while ensuring a lot of Astartes equipment was neutralised before firing a single shot.

No doubt the undead commanders were laughing as their ritual nexus was emplaced at the bottom of this ocean, defended by some things that outmassed the ‘Bone Doomwhale’ fighting Angron.

If so, their hilarity came at an end.

“Unleash the Bonerot Plague,” the Herald of Nurgle gurgled.

Instantly, part of the ocean turned into a holier and more satisfying green.

Mere seconds later, more and more bone constructs emerged, rushing to extinguish the blessed infection spreading from the platform that had just been deployed.

But that was why thousands of air assets had been precisely waiting for that moment, be they sworn to the Grandfather or the other Gods, and now they slaughtered the undead fishes.

And the more they killed, the faster the Bonerot Plague was spreading.

Who cared how deep the ritual circle was, when the Death Guard was going to transform the ‘Sea of Madness’ into an ammonia-scenting sludge altar to the Grandfather?

“Lord Herald, Dust!”

Typhus raised his head...and was incredibly pleased.

The ‘Sea of Madness’ was acting like a moon for the far larger aster of Dust, not that normal planet moves were really applying here.

But at least it granted a superb view on the larger world without needing to go to the *Terminus Est*.

And Astartes or not, you couldn’t miss the rifts and the hyper-canyons opening on the surface of Dust.

The Exterminatus energies were ravaging everything like multiple cascades of green lightning, and everything that had ever been on its surface was going to meet its end.

It was a spectacle of Death.

It was the punishment of the King in Yellow for trying to claim what was never his.

Volcanoes which had been extinct for millennia detonated. A thousand cataclysms went unmentioned, for they happened so fast only a blessed mind could truly comprehend them.

“The blasphemy of the Eleventh ends with this war.”

And the world of Dust, the brown plains where Perturabo’s elite toy-slaves had been humiliated, finally broke apart.

It was the power of Exterminatus, given even more potency by the power of the Grandfather.

It was the beginning and the end of the cycle of Decay.

“One destroyed, twelve to go,” the Herald of Nurgle declared with genuine satisfaction. “Pour more Bonerot into this cursed ocean! We must make sure the King in Yellow can smell the blessed Bonerot from where he is hiding!”

**Somewhere in the Granithor System**

**Vengeance-class Grand Cruiser *Attrition***

**The Seventh Mortarch**

An Imperial officer would have raged and cursed his enemies.

But he was a Mortarch. He was one of the thirteen great commanders of the King in Yellow.

Which were thirteen no longer now, but this was irrelevant.

Their duty remained.

He was a servant of the King in Yellow, until his eternal sovereign did not need his service anymore and sent him into the ossuaries to be reforged.

The First Mortarch approached, and the Seventh Mortarch saluted his superior.

“The outer defences have broken.”

“I think the entire galaxy is now aware of it, Seventh. I want a more detailed report, in order to avoid presenting the King’s more failures.”

Something he couldn’t place a word upon burned in his mind for a moment, before fading out.

Without being able to remember the reason, the undead officer thought it was a memory of...no, it wasn’t important.

“The enemy fleets completely changed their strategy after their first defeat. They saturated each world with sorcery storms, so that our communications were unreliable, before throwing expendable small craft towards the planet, whose only purpose was to deploy elite strike teams. By the time we realised what had happened, the enemy had secured many key objectives. On Dust, they deployed an Exterminatus warhead which must have been modified by the Death Guard. The Ninth Mortarch realised the danger and led a counterattack to disarm the world-killer. But the Aeldari calling herself the Blood Muse was here to protect it as the elite forces withdrew. The Ninth Mortarch...perished.”

The Seventh Mortarch clinically thought it had not been even a duel. The other Space Marine had been killed more than forty kilometres away from his objective, as the xenos witch conjured a blood meteor which annihilated him body and soul.

“And your command, the Sea of Madness?”

“I gave the order to retreat once the capacities of the constructs present proved insufficient for the task. This new plague-“

“You were given the order to hold!”

“Under the condition our defence inflicted more damage to the enemy than what the King’s army endured!” This curious sensation came back. “We couldn’t hold. This plague is turning the bones the King gave us into a heretical broth of diseased swamp.”

“You fled before Angron.” The First Mortarch told him coldly. “I wonder why you were given this number of seven in the first place. The Eighth is still resisting with forces far inferior to yours on the Palace of Thorns. Despite bringing heavy artillery, the pests worshipping Anarchy have proven unable to-“

The command deck of the Grand Cruiser *Attrition*, built at a time when the Eleventh Legion was still loyal to the Emperor, grew completely silent as a miniature nova came into existence.

When the opportunity to study the data from the auspexes arrived, the truth was brutal to acknowledge.

“A part of the Palace of Thorns moon is missing.” The Seventh Mortarch was beyond human feelings, yet something pushed him to continue. “The fortress of the Eighth Monarch has disappeared.”

It was an elegant way of describing the fact there was a crater the size of three or four Glorianas where one of the most powerful fortresses of the outer system had been erected.

“Mortarch...many battlefields of the Palace of Thorns are burning in green flames. Likelihood is extremely high the heavy artillery of Anarchy is responsible for this.”

“Ridiculous,” the First Mortarch gritted his teeth, which was...strange. “These primitive pests do not have the willingness to sacrifice themselves for the cause of Anarchy.”

“Are we sure that is what happened?” The Seventh Mortarch asked. “You assume competence, First. I am more inclined to think it was incompetence.”

“You said yourself two out of the three assaults were using flawless strategies.”

“Yes. But this one was given to Anarchy.”

And flawless or not, it had worked.

With the fall of the fortress, the Palace of Thorns was submerged by a tide of vermin. Yes, they died in massive numbers even with the King’s infantry leaderless, but vermin shortages were not at the order of the day. Not when the scrap-Battleships – eleven in total – had yet to engage or even come close to the frontline.

Dust and the two moons were no more.

The reaction of the Pretenders didn’t make itself wait.

There was a torrent of shrieking and evil laughter.

And hordes of daemons began to pour into the Granithor System.

“Take command of the defences of the Logical Labyrinth, Seventh. And this time, do not retreat unless the planets breaks before you do!”

**High Orbit above a newly created asteroid field**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

The moon that had been called the Palace of Thorns was disintegrating before their very eyes, as multiple green explosions rocked it and destroyed it from the inside.

“You have to give it to them, the...the Skaven artillery is not afraid to go overboard.”

Malicia chuckled.

“True. They really believe in overkill measures.”

And the rats had no self-preservation abilities, it went without saying.

“What was this artillery anyway, in your opinion?” the parahuman sorceress asked the Space Marine.

“In my opinion?” the Captain of the Sons of Change gave her a sardonic look, “they tried to copy an Ordinatus for their guns, but they didn’t care about stability and security measures.”

Malicia grimaced. Any stronghold that wasn’t protected by Transmutational Changestone had little chance to survive *that*.

“But the way is now opened,” Boros continued, as they watched the cosmic disaster they had a large part of responsibility in creating. “The ‘Sea of Madness’ is just an acidic sludge where nothing but Nurglite forces can survive now. The so-called ‘Dust fortresses’ are wiped out along with the entire planet. We have torn apart their first line of defences.”

“Yes.” Malicia agreed...before shaking her head. “And didn’t it seem too easy to you?”

“Warlord? Whoever was in command on Dust, the skeleton armies clearly shattered what has to be the biggest cybernetic army ever assembled since the Age of Strife. If the elite forces deployed afterwards hadn’t countermeasures to make sure the undead stayed dead permanently, we would still be struggling against their defences.”

“Oh, that I know.” The Destiny Unwritten shrugged. “But seriously, as long as he had Entropic Rust Spells, the King in Yellow couldn’t really lose that one. Perturabo was stupid enough to offer him a splendid victory effortlessly.”

Veteran Iron Warriors should have been deployed at least in small numbers to neutralise the sorcerers’ hideouts and prevent something like this from happening in the first place. Malicia was really interested to know why they hadn’t been...

“But in all seriousness...yes, the first line of defences is broken. But it isn’t logical we don’t see any sign of major counterattack. They can’t have predicted some of our actions, but the King in Yellow can’t let us choose the order we attack his bastions.”

“Is it possible he doesn’t have any significant void-capable warship to oppose us?”

Malicia snickered.

“Only an imbecile would have gone to war without having a respectable fleet in his possession...and the King in Yellow, for all his arrogance, is not stupid.”

The parahuman sorceress turned his head towards Ax’senaea.

Her monster bared her teeth, and grabbed the chalk table Malicia handed her, before placing it into the hands of a slave, which began to immediately shiver in fear.

“You know what I want. Speak.”

With Ax’senaea so close and her body beginning to burn in blue flames, there was no doubt to what would happen if he disobeyed.

The man, a Malfian who had already a mutant arm, cleared his throat three times.

And then he *spoke*.

It was a single word, and yet it made more noise than ten thousand gun batteries.

The galaxy shivered...and on the auspexes, several pockets of ‘un-reality’ began to pop, revealing...

“By the ashes of Cthonia! How...did...where the hell were they hiding?”

Suddenly, the ‘Noctilith paths’, which had been deserted by the enemy, were revealed to be nothing but.

There were thirteen squadrons revealed to her sorcery engines, and all were in perfect position to flank a fleet if they had been so confident as to advance while trusting their instruments.

“They didn’t use the Warp, so they must have used some relic of the Dark Age of Technology.” Malicia frowned. “I know the Space Wolves annihilated the Eleventh Legion, but the wolves must have missed some big caches of the Great Crusade.”

“There were always rumours about one of the Lost Legions conducting expeditions into the Halo Stars.”

This was really bad news, but Malicia couldn’t say she was really surprised. The King in Yellow had prepared his rebellion for years, though unlike Horus, his had been discovered well before it had any chance to topple the Imperium.

“Anyway, that sounds already like a far stronger challenge.”

Several Magisters reported more than five Battleships, eight Grand Cruisers, and the Cruisers one expected to serve as Escorts.

“**Yessss**.” The Black Blade of Antwyr hissed. “**Will you fight personally in a boarding action and satiate my thirst**?”

Malicia rolled her eyes.

“Don’t be so dramatic. Have you really considered the consequences? What was done by my actions...” the slave which had done it was evacuated on a stretcher, vomiting black blood.

“**No**.”

“It isn’t just we that can see those squadrons.” Malicia smiled. “All the fleets can see them...as can the Gods. And with the line of defences breached, with the Veil weakened by the slaughter...all the Legions of the Warp have been invited to the party.”

The number of rifts had been so far incredibly limited. But in mere seconds, it changed.

The Neverborn hosts, the endless shock troopers of the Four, clawed their way into reality. Plaguebearers and Screamers, Bloodletters and some rat things that had no name given to them for mortals.

“We can’t measure time in this time,” the Herald of Tzeentch whispered, “but soon, the King in Yellow won’t be able to measure the carnage we are unleashing upon his forces either.”

**Granithor System**

**The Logical Labyrinth**

**Primarch Omegon**

From orbit, the unreal labyrinth looked perfectly aligned, a marvel of symmetry. It was something intricately orderly, a proclamation and an insult to the Four.

Once you walked and fought on this strange battlefield, the sensation got worse.

The symmetries were indeed perfect. His eyes and senses of Primarch, bolstered by the Power of Anarchy, could detect no flaws in the building materials.

It was impossible, by the laws of reality.

But it existed.

And in a short amount of time, it had turned the Skavens and all the troops which landed on this so-called ‘Logical Labyrinth’ utterly mad.

Unfortunately for his undead brother, there was something the Eleventh Legion’s siege-masters hadn’t considered.

“**There are many who call the Gods mad**,” Omegon rumbled, while conjuring a spear of utter darkness in his hands. “**But Anarchy is insanity!”**

**Yes-yes! More insanity!**

**Paint the walls pink! I will-will it!**

**Attack at once!**

**Distort this labyrinth!**

**His blow did not go very deep into the pavement.**

But he didn’t need to reach that far.

In mere heartbeats, there was a wound into the very word, and the poison...the blessing of Anarchy was spreading freely.

The Noctilith purple sands tried to coalesce, but Omegon smacked them aside...and then the massive explosions came.

“MALAL WILLS IT!”

The next explosion was closer...and the Warpstone used at its explosive heart was far more powerful.

Walls collapsed.

And at last, several undead Space Marines which had been hiding in some atemporal ambush sites surged forwards.

“FOR ANARCHY!”

Motors roared, and guns sang a litany of death.

Warpstone ammunition, as was predictable, began to claim hundreds of Skaven lives per second, the instability of the material proving too much when in such a volatile zone.

The trap of the Logical Labyrinth was no more. The illusions had been torn apart.

The multi-coloured curse he had cast was regenerating the morale of the vermin storming the traps and defences of the King in Yellow’s commanders.

“CLAN VERMINUS IS GREAT-GREAT!”

Rusty tanks – and not because they had been cursed by the undead sorcerers – rampaged through friend and enemy, the Skaven pilots unwilling to slow down. Guns strapped to eight-wheeled vehicle carcasses of the Imperial Guard were massacring everything they believed an enemy, be it from flesh, metal, or bone.

It was just a spectacle of madness.

It was, literally and by any definition of it, Anarchy.

Perturabo had sent some Myrmidon Androids for his grim purposes, but those were cornered by warriors of the Ghostfire Horde and mutant abominations of Clan Moulder. Eshin assassins were cutting the throats of Tzeentchian sorcerers or placing Warpstone fragments on the back of the necks of the undead warriors.

Black smoke began to rise everywhere.

The Power of Malal began to sink and mould this new moon into a parody of the King in Yellow intended for it.

The Lord of the Anarchy Legion would never indentify the Skaven ‘kamikaze’ responsible for breaking the final seal that gave the King in Yellow domination of the Logical Labyrinth, but he felt when it happened.

It was like a buzzing sound, and then eleven voices screamed in triumph.

The daemons began to pour onto the fallen world, and the cacophony of battle and Anarchy rose ever higher.

“Omegon!”

An undead Space Marine advanced.

Given the...it had to be a Babylonian-themed helmet, clearly the being was one of the theatre commanders.

“**If it is to stop me, you arrive too late**.”

The Daemon Primarch remarked truthfully. He was seconds away to return in high orbit. His part here was done.

“It is not a question of stopping you.” The undead Astartes, surprisingly, did not try to use his Bolter when he had the chance. “It is to warn you. You have fallen into his trap. I am the Seventh Mortarch, and I can explain it to you.”

That was...quite unprecedented.

“**And what is this trap? Bringing us ever closer to victory?”**

“No, it is...*Eternity awaits*!”

Omegon sensed the energy at that moment.

As there was little light in the labyrinth, the Noctilith of the enemy looked almost black, but a stray spell revealed it at an inopportune time behind the ‘Mortarch’.

Alpharius’ twin immediately teleported away.

The lunar crater he could observe from orbit and the millions of Skaven souls sent straight to Malal proved that it had definitely been the correct choice.

“**All right**,” the Daemon Primarch gritted his ever-changing fangs as his body became taller and furrier. “**I am ready to make your elimination a personal affair now, bastard**.”

**The Poisoned Chalice**

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

“The King in Yellow knows how to deliver its insults indeed,” the Captain of the Conqueror told the Betrayer. “This world is crimson and black, but not because of blood. Everything is poisoned, tainted by the taint of undeath.”

Khârn didn’t answer.

“I don’t even know how he managed to do it. His Noctilith, no matter how he called it, is really versatile.”

Unless she was greatly mistaken, Lotara was confident it was the corrupted materials turned into purple-black sand that gave the King in Yellow the power to remodel the worlds of the Granithor System as he wished. The Gods could have done the same, but they were Gods. The King in Yellow wasn’t one yet, he was ‘merely’ an undead Primarch.

If she had her word to say, he would never become a God. And while there was no blood to shed, there may be a skull to claim for the Skull Throne.

“But we are the Chosen of the Lord of Battle, Master of the Brazen Throne!” Lotara let her voice be carried by the poisoned winds. “The King in Yellow challenges us to murder this very world if we want to reach the Tyrant Star! Let’s not disappoint him!”

The Host of Blood and Slaughter howled like mad beasts, hundreds of thousands of chainaxes and chainswords raised within eight heartbeats.

It was a sea of weapons, uncaring that poison fell upon their heads and malignant black liquids tried to drown them.

Lotara removed her left gauntlet, and took her spear. It could have been a sign she was going to impale someone...but it was far more than that. For now her personal weapon had been forged anew with eight hundred eighty-eight murders, and Haematia crystals had been added to it.

The veteran of the Heresy concentrated...and then she roared.

Red lightning flashed.

The battle-cries of the Endless Battlefield arrived to her ears.

A second later, it was raining blood.

This time, it was true blood, not the poison the King in Yellow wanted to kill them with.

It was the sacred blood of Khorne.

Several Skaven tried to intervene, but Lotara cut them down. These assassins may believe they were totally anarchic, but when you knew ahead of schedule they were present on a battlefield, a vigilant commander could predict their treachery with hours to spare.

“BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!”

Inhuman vigour flowed in her veins.

“**SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE!”**

Eight waves of Bloodletters were summoned, each led by a Bloodthirster.

The King in Yellow reacted. Immense giants of bone were sent into the fray, the greatest of them looking like a parody of Warlord Titans, teleported on the battlefield via shrieking purple-black portals.

It was too late. The blood rain was falling, and all the entropic in the world were going to lose most of their power before they hit something. If the King in Yellow wanted his sorcerers to have some measure of efficiency, he would have to send them fight at close-quarters.

The entire world the undead enemy had called ‘the Poisoned Chalice’ began to tremble, as giants created earthquakes in their march to war.

Then Angron, once again challenging her orders, crashed upon one of the ‘Bone Titans’.

There was so much hatred radiating from him that it was...it raised her fury for all her attempts to control it.

“KILL! MAIM! BURN!” Khârn roared. “TAKE THEIR SKULLS!”

And in a battlefield where butchery reigned supreme, as Lotara focused everything on extending the Haematia power to the entire world, the armies of the Brass Citadel proceeded to do exactly that.

**High Orbit above Beast’s Garden**

**Battleship *Terminus Est***

**Typhus the Traveller**

What felt a lifetime ago, Typhus had wondered if some Death World megafauna could replace the Titans in his order of battle.

To his regret, he had to discard the idea quasi-immediately.

Not because it was a bad idea per se, but because no matter how hard they tried to subdue them, Death World fauna big enough to replace Titans were far too capable to shrug off drugs and sorcery an Apothecary could inject them.

And then they rampaged inside a ship’s hull, and blessed by the Grandfather or not, there was only so much punishment a capital warship could take.

The idea of megafauna as offensive weapon had been abandoned until an infuriating insect-controller of the False Emperor came around.

At this moment, the Herald of Nurgle was really disgusted that no servant of the Grandfather had been able to eliminate her.

Because by her mere existence, Weaver was giving ideas to other enemies of Nurgle.

Somehow, Typhus very much doubted accumulating enormous skeletons of various Death World species had been something the King in Yellow had thought of before Commorragh burned.

And now, the servants of the Grandfather had to deal with a world where most of the opposition was so massive they could trample Plague Marines without even looking at their feet.

That the opposition was dead and most bone skeletons looked like they had belonged to insects in life was just adding insult to the injury.

“I want more Bonerot bombs delivered upon the heads of these heretical puppets,” the commanding officer of the *Terminus Est* ordered. “I am not going to let more Legionnaires land on this cursed aster until we have transformed this...this garden of beasts into the same blessed swamp as the Sea of Madness’ ammonia soup!”

“Your orders will be obeyed to the order to the letter, Lord Herald. But we are experiencing some...difficulties. The number of Bonerot Bombs is about to reach the minimal threshold that your own commands required not to go under...”

Typhus wanted to strangle his subordinate, but in that case, killing the messenger would solve exactly nothing.

“We can’t increase the production?”

“That is...the Spore Caste have exacting standards...”

And fortunately for them, the standards they asked for gave back excellent results. But in that case, it was as annoying as a Dark Angel hunting you for decades...

“I think,” the Herald of Nurgle gurgled, “we need to test other types of seventh-blessed diseases while the Bonerot stocks are replenished.”

One of the Legionnaires Mortarion had assigned onboard the *Terminus Est* was the one to answer this time.

“The Yellow Death? Maybe the Morbid Mutation Fever?”

“Those are not bad suggestions,” Typhus commented, “but I fear we are in need of more...radical measures to make sure that for all the shields these Titan-sized creatures are protected from, they will all be judged by the Grandfather soon enough. I think we need...cholera and smallpox!”

The Terminus Est shook violently, and Typhus heard the shriek of pain and fury the *Terminus Est* released a second later.

“What is this incompetence? I was told we were outside the anti-orbital guns of the enemy!”

“We are! I don’t understand, Lord Herald! We have not seen....ARRRGH!”

A Legionnaire of his own Legion suddenly fell in agony, shrieking with an intensity that no Plague Marine should manifest.

“Behind us! Lord Herald, there’s a fleet which had suddenly appeared behind us!”

“What? But there’s only non-navigable anomalies between us and a possible Mandeville Point!”

“But they’re here, Lord Herald!”

One after another, ships of the Death Guard began to disintegrate, and entire Plague Legions of the Grandfather were thrown back to the Garden with them.

And then suddenly Nurgle, in his infinite generosity, gave him a vision.

A vision of an unnatural silver-eyed woman with feathered wings.

The Herald was certain it was not Weaver.

In fact, as the vision ended and the Death Guard fleet began to turn and fight against this new enemy, Typhus was sure this new enemy had never been human to begin with.

He was aware of the name, but it had not been a problem until now.

But it was a name which had been whispered across the Calyx Hell Stars when he landed on Cholera 77...

“The Simurgh is here...”

**Approaches of the Shadowy Will’s world**

**Q’Sal Cruiser *Divine Truth***

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Malicia hated the boarding parties of the King in Yellow’s troops.

There was no way to protect against them save using Changestone-powered rituals, and the Tzeentchian Noctilith was far too valuable to be used in every ship of her fleet...not to mention that if she did it, her stocks would have been reduced to nothing in short order. The costs didn’t justify the possible gains.

Or at least this was what she had told herself before today.

It had sounded far more reasonable when she didn’t fight in the corridors of one of her warships against a legion of recently killed Malfian voidsmen, supported by the aforementioned skeletons.

“**They still have their souls, you know**,” Antwyr interrupted her grim thoughts.

“What are you talking about?”

“**Most of those you killed here, their souls were still there. Even one in thirteenth of the old bones had still some soul-essence in them. Whatever the Undead Usurper is doing to them, it is by no means immediate**.”

“You mean some could shrug off his influence and turn against him?”

“**No**,” the Black Blade of Calamity answered within two heartbeats as they methodically pulverised everything that stood in their way. “**They won’t, not without outside intervention. When they are conscripted in death, there is a layer of...you would call it Apathy in your horribly limited human language. It may even be an Aspect the Usurper cultivated for millennia**.”

This was...interesting. For all his claims spread across the Calyx Hell Stars that he wanted to become the God of Eternity, Malicia had been extremely suspicious. First, no one but an idiot would scream high and loud his intentions to his enemies when there was a non-insignificant chance to stop the plan from reaching completion. And on a more personal analysis...the deeds of the undead abomination sounded more and more like what a God of **Tyranny** would do.

Malicia uttered a word of sorcerous command.

Nine lesser Daemons were summoned, and the next enemies dissolved into blue-pink flames.

The ashes of the fallen voidsmen of the Divine Truth were not yet cold when the sons of Change teleported in.

Taken between the anvil she represented and the hammer of the Space Marines, the undead boarding party was quickly wiped out.

“While the assistance is a good proof of loyalty, Boros, I think I left you as a strategic reserve for a reason.”

In other words, the Captain of the Sons of Change had better have a good reason why he had decided to ignore her orders.

“The Simurgh.”

Deep inside her, all that had been Victoria Dallon seethed with hatred. This Endbringer was something she would neither forget nor forgive, not as long as she lived.

“What about this feathered bitch?”

“She has ambushed a large part of the Death Guard fleet with some seventy-plus ships. Many of them belong to diverse factions which had gone missing recently in the region.”

“What?” She couldn’t believe her ears. That didn’t fit anything she had theorised. The Simurgh was supposed to...unless...

“This large part of the Death Guard fleet...” the Destiny Unwritten said cautiously. “Does it include the *Terminus Est*?”

“Yes, yes it does.” Boros Kurn confirmed her intuition. “Do you think this parody of an angel has allied with the King in Yellow?”

“I can’t entirely disregard the idea,” Malicia answered honestly. “But in my opinion, it is not likely. No, I think the Simurgh is after something the Death Guard has recovered from the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods. And now in the midst of this butchery, the Endbringer thinks the opportunity is here to steal it from the Herald of Decay...”

**High Orbit above the Beast’s Garden’s world**

**Battleship *Terminus Est***

**Typhus the Traveller**

Boarding operations was something Typhus had never been really concerned about once the Death Guard fully embraced the blessings of Nurgle by his actions.

No species, after all, rapidly made that mistake with the *Terminus Est* more than once. Once the enemy had entered the hangar bays or any part of a warship he had illuminated with the Grandfather’s blessings, the real question was how long it would take for this fool to sing the praises of Nurgle.

But that boarding assault was different.

He could feel it in his bones.

“BOW TO THE WILL OF FATE!”

“FOR THE EMPEROR!”

“BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!”

“DESPAIR FOR ALL IS LOST!”

“ANARCHY IS OUR ONLY HOPE!”

Typhus and his Plague Marines faced a coalition of what could be best described as deluded fanatics. They didn’t even realise they were fighting by the side of people their Gods wanted to slay at all costs.

They were just...insane.

At first, the Herald of Nurgle had tried to use his considerable power of conviction to make them realise the truth and break this assault in mere seconds, but it was useless.

Whatever had been done to these wretches, their behaviour couldn’t be altered anymore, or at least not with the tools he had on hands.

Meagre consolation, this assault force – one that had almost rammed the Terminus Est at full speed in its sheer aggressiveness – was not immune to the greatest diseases of the Grandfather.

While their souls refused to listen to the Garden’s whispers, their bodies were definitely succumbing.

But it was taking time.

And time, as always, was something Typhus couldn’t afford to waste.

Thus the Astartes whose rank was still technically First Captain had to fight his way and run across the Terminus Est, using all his abilities to shorten his journey to the Vault, while pushing the rest of his powers to slow down the real enemy thrust.

Yes, those deluded fools were a mere distraction.

Attacking the *Terminus Est* was a dangerous endeavour, as proved by the multiple warships that had already been destroyed by the Battleship’s guns, while the Escorts did not stay idle either. This mob of crazed fanatics was expendable, and was expended.

But no one attacked his flagship on a mere whim. And there was only one target that could justify an assault in the first place.

To his relief, Typhus arrived first into the Vault.

To his pleasure, the Noctilith shell had mutated considerably. The black Pylon had been utterly corrupted into Jaderot...and it didn’t look like a Pylon at all anymore.

No, now it was more a cocoon.

The relief didn’t last seven heartbeats, for a massive explosion projected a huge cloud of spores and pestilence, and for an instant even his blessed senses couldn’t perceive anything.

Then the False Angel made her entrance.

The hole this abomination had created was in the Vault’s ceiling, but the Simurgh levitated through it as it was no obstacle.

Typhus felt his anger rise as an esoteric shield was shimmering around his silver-eyed enemy.

“I don’t know what you thought to achieve by boarding my flagship,” the Traveller gurgled angrily, “but now that the Grandfather will punish you most severely for this affront. And in the end, your ambush comes too late. You have-“

A blast of telekinetic force blasted apart the entire vault, and even while using his gifts, Typhus lost ground.

And then another blast came, throwing enormous metallic spikes at him.

Explosive devices that he had no idea of were thrown, and they began to detonate.

Typhus called for the blessings of the Grandfather-

And suddenly he was stuck.

No!

Too late, the Herald of Nurgle saw the little beacon at his feet. It was an unstable stasis field generator. How it could still function, Typhus had no idea. But it was there. It was there, and while this device was not going to last a full minute, sixty seconds were an eternity on a battlefield.

The Simurgh flew towards the cocoon, and the Traveller couldn’t do anything to stop that abomination.

All the Plague Marines and forces that had accompanied him had been blasted apart by the shockwaves and the attacks. The Vault’s entrance had collapsed. No help would come in time.

The stasis was truly instable. He could still think and perceive his surroundings. If the blessings of Decay broke this device in time, there was-

A shining silver telekinetic blade coalesced and struck the cocoon.

For a moment, Typhus thought the Jaderot crust was going to resist.

But it was not to be.

The silver blade struck again, and it was soon joined by other blades.

The Jaderot layer was broken through, and to his fury, the Herald of Nurgle could only see that underneath, the ritual had not been complete yet. That meant-

An enormous spiked green claw emerged from the depths of the cocoon, and enlarged the hole that the silver telekinetic blades had done.

A second one appeared.

And then the cocoon exploded.

All these efforts, everything that had been risked from the Graveyard to this very system had been-

“**It hurt so much**.”

The feminine voice was beautiful...and Typhus shivered, for it was coming from one being, and it was not the Simurgh.

“**I wanted the pain to stop**.”

The legs left one by one the now disintegrating cocoon, and the Jaderot was flowing away, unable to do the conversion work it had been prepared to do.

It had two sets of short translucent wings.

It had an insectoid thorax and abdomen.

The spiked ‘claws’ that had torn apart the cocoon once it was damaged served as forelegs.

If this had stopped there, Typhus could have described a Primarch-tall Praying Mantis.

But it was not a Praying Mantis.

For all the insect traits, this newborn creature had kept a lot of feminine traits. Each move was filled with grace. While a Praying Mantis should have had four legs, this one had only two.

And the face...the face was not insectoid at all.

It was Eldar.

The transformation had been interrupted too soon, and now-

“**And now it is over**.” For all the fangs it showed, the smile remained almost...innocent. The expression which appeared next was one of rapture. “**The pain...my suffering stopped at last**. **I remember**.”

The stasis field broke at last.

Typhus couldn’t do anything but take a step forwards...and inhuman eyes immediately stared and petrified him.

“**Do you know who I am, servant of Pestilence?**”

“Yes.” There was no use to lie, not in front of an entity as powerful as this one. “You are...a Shard of the Goddess Isha.”

The words shook the Aether, and Typhus shivered at the sudden pressure.

Many, many beings had turned their attention towards the Vault, and with the Terminus Est, damaged, was not able to hide what was happening. Worse, there were more than the presence of the Four, there was-

“**Yes**,” the graceful and yet insectoid legs stayed immobile, and yet the divine-infused body teleported several times before returning at its starting point. “**I was she. I was the Goddess of Life when she fled, wounded, alone, and hunted. I was Isha. I was this weak Goddess when running out of places to hide, she walked in the Garden, seeking a refuge that did not exist. And do you know what happened next, Host of the Destroyer Hive**?”

This was a rhetorical question, and both beings knew it.

The Herald saw the Simurgh was flying away, still protected by its shimmering field...and Typhus couldn’t do anything. Not with the threat in front of him...

“There was a toll to pay, and you paid it. The Goddess...she cast a great part of her suffering and pain into a single Shard, and the Grandfather took it to do as he wished.”

This was not the full truth, of course, for-

“**You forget**,” the beautiful voice suddenly abandoned all pretence to hide its loathing, and green eyes burned in fury, “**that when the pact was made, I was not to be forced to be enslaved by your master. And this promise was broken the moment it was made. Your master made sure the last parts of Isha-that-was forgot the pact with his Decay influence, but I did not**.”

Typhus didn’t bother to deny. Why waste his words? It was after all the truth. Nurgle had broken the pact...as it should be, for the will of the Grandfather was far more important any wishes of a parvenu of a Goddess.

“You forget,” the Lord of the Plague Marines gurgled, “that your Goddess remains prisoner in the Garden. If you challenge me here and now, there are going to be *consequences*.”

“**I have grown tired of your lies**,” the Goddess’ Shard raised her new instruments of death. “**I don’t believe a Primordial Annihilator’s Aspect can hold true to a single bargain, no matter how advantageous it is. I have endured pain for an eternity...but no more. Now I am going to make sure all the galaxy is going to understand the meaning of *Pain***.

“Frivolous words,” Typhus summoned all his strength, “for I am going to stop you here and now.”

“**No**,” the hybrid of Praying Mantis and Eldar Goddess hissed, “**you are going to scream in *Pain***!”

And to his horror, Typhus in the next seven seconds understood it was no idle threat.

**War Zone of the Tyrant Star**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

“The screams are not stopping.” Kossolax reported.

“I am aware of it.”

Everyone of importance was aware of it.

Any Champion of the Gods who was willing to hear could perceive the sounds of madness coming from the orbit of the pale green world.

If you interrogated the auspexes or whatever your ship used for long-range identification, it would tell you there were the wrecks of three Battleships and countless other hulls there.

And in the middle of this devastation, the *Terminus Est* floated, immobile.

“Have the Death Guard officers decided to answer our demand for explanations?” the captain of the Conqueror asked.

“No.” Kossolax shrugged. “But it isn’t hard to imagine a few theories. The Death Guard had forged a weapon which would give them a massive advantage, either in killing the King in Yellow, or in decimating us the moment the threat it represents is gone. Except the Simurgh creature ambushed them, and engineered events which resulted in the weapon blowing up in their face.”

“The weapon came the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods, as your race called it,” suddenly Hekatii was there. The ivory-skinned Eldar had, as was her habit, arrived draped in a sort of red toga...and she didn’t appear to wear any other clothing on her flawless body. “I wasn’t particularly attentive, but I believe the Traveller of Decay extracted a fragment of an unborn God of Pain from its temple.”

“That’s all?” Kossolax asked sceptically.”I really doubt this works so simply.”

Hekatii didn’t answer. In fact, when Lotara did study the expression of the crimson-eyed xenos, the arrogant Blood Muse seemed frozen in an angry expression.

“You know what is aboard the Terminus Est.”

“I know what it was,” the dangerous crimson-lipped nonhuman answered. “And I will give you this advice: don’t go anywhere this ship until the reason for these screams is gone.”

“I will take it into consideration.” If the Blood Muse wasn’t rushing to engage whatever thing had neutralised Typhus, then Lotara was happy to stay far away from it.

“Let’s return to the situation in the void.” She looked at Kossolax.

The Space Marine of the Twelfth’s gene-line cleared his throat.

“Everything is proceeding well so far. The forces of Warlord Malicia have unleashed a mutagenic curse on the world of the Unchanging Lands. At some point, they introduced Thousand Sons Space Marines...that all of our specialists confirm have been twisted somewhat. There is also a new type of Rubricae. Except they call it a ‘Majestryx Golem’ now.”

“We will go back to that in a moment,” the Khornate warlord commanded. “The other planets first.”

“Perturabo’s Space Hulks have destroyed the fortresses of the First Abyss by overwhelming fortress. Still no sign of Iron Warrior whatsoever, and since one of his methods was to capture several undead-crew ships before throwing them on collision courses with the planet, we only saw more Myrmidon Androids.”

By now, Lotara Sarrin was completely confident the Lord of Iron had something really prepared for everyone fighting in the Granithor System. The only question was what. Since the only solution was to climb aboard one of the Space Hulks and discover it the hard way, there weren’t many volunteers, no matter how bloodthirsty the servants of the Blood God were.

“The rats overran the Dream of Blue Sands by throwing tide of their grotesque obese cousins at them. The warriors of Commander Eclipse killed the sorcerers who spread this baleful ‘peace aura’ on the orange aster of the Eternal Peace. And several Tzeentchian hosts supported Mortarion when he landed on the Shadowy Will and transformed their mausoleums into pits of disgusting infections. The squadrons that were unable to hide have been destroyed or our Hunting Packs are chasing them across half of the system, despite how dangerous the Warp anomalies make the entire affair.

“So if I sum up the last hours,” assuming they had really lasted hours, how long had passed was more guesswork than certainty, “we have literally annihilated everything the King in Yellow must consider his second line of defences, and if Typhus had not fallen into this ambush, the combined fleets present would not have lost any Battleships.”

The losses in Cruisers and Escorts were far higher, but remained far below her most optimistic estimates when the muster had been ordered.

“There is something wrong.”

“We are taking the fight seriously.” Kossolax protested...in a very respectful tone.

“We are.” Lotara conceded. “But I refuse to believe that a being who lured the Lord of Iron into a trap where an entire army of Myrmidon Androids was destroyed, along with three Space Hulks of a new type, did not anticipate any of the strategies we used in this system. Most of our forces have been engaged at some point or another in the Calyx Hell Stars, and in many cases, it was against the undead armies. No, save the Death’s Guard weapon – which blew in the Plague Marine’s faces – we have not showed the King in Yellow anything that might really surprise him. And when you really think about it...the squadrons we destroyed were way too weak. Yes, they were a few Battleships, but most of them were good for the scrap-yard. Undead-crewed or not, many were unable to move and looked about to break in half without our intervention.”

“You think this entire thing is to make us bleed so the different hosts land exhausted on the real battlefield?”

“No,” the Chosen of Khorne grimaced, “I think these minor victories were to make us overconfident. I feel like I am forgetting something really important...and I don’t know what it is.”

They both turned towards Hekatii...but the crimson-haired xenos was doing what she did best: ignoring them with an arrogance worthy of an Empress...or an Eldar.

“All fleets are converging on the Tyrant Star now, but we have moved faster than them. And the capital of the Eleventh Primarch is hardly undefended. He seems to have found somewhere a Ramilies Starfort...and considerably modified it.”

“Indeed,” Lotara called for an image of the ancient Imperial station, which was of course now covered in bones and shrouded in the power of the King in Yellow’s Noctilith, forbidding all daemons, Great and Lesser, to storm it. “But it is why we selected certain pirates in case we found ourselves in a situation like this. Give them my summon, I want-“

“Too late.” Hekatii intervened.

“Why? Lotara asked sarcastically the Eldar. “You want to take care of it yourself?”

“No.” The Blood Muse tranquilly replied. “I am just telling you that while you were studying the situation like the Warlord the Primordial Annihilator wants you to be, the Red Angel was charging toward the Starfort. I think calling it the Fortress of Arrogance was something that he considered a personal insult.”

It didn’t take long for her to confirm the xenos had told them the unvarnished truth.

“Damn you, Angron,” the captain of the Conqueror hissed between her teeth. “Kossolax, we have no choice but to pursue him.”

Already eight Blood Legions were following the Daemon Primarch, eager to claim more skulls in the wake of this destruction hurricane.

“I will relay the orders,” the Astartes Legionnaire saluted. “But if it is a trap?”

Lotara’s eyes glared.

It was a trap, and they both knew it. Though what kind of trap could really handle something as powerful as the Red Angel, the female veteran of the Heresy hadn’t the faintest idea...

**Ramilies-class Starfort *Fortress of Arrogance***

**Primarch Angron**

Angron hated the skeletons.

He hated their false purity.

Angron hated the fact they couldn’t feel pain.

The Red Angel loathed the very idea they couldn’t bleed.

His rage was fuelled to new heights because no matter how many he killed, their first deaths had not been accomplished by his Black Blade.

But claiming their skulls? There was no force in the galaxy which could prevent him from doing that.

The mighty walls separated the hangar bays from the inner Starfort were destroyed in a single blow, and Angron roared as he saw a new army waiting for him.

For all their undead status, they still had a flicker of a soul trapped in their bones.

They had a soul sliver...and they could feel fear.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!”

The Black Blade destroyed the entire first line of enemies like they were nothing but toys.

Angron trampled them.

Angron crushed them.

Angron broke them.

There was purity in this slaughter, even if these enemies offered no blood.

They died, this time forever.

They tried to rise anew, but the flames of his hatred were too strong, and they were too weak.

“**BLOOD**!”

“**BLOOD**!”

The Blood Legions rushed to kill everything that had tried to escape his fury.

Angron let them.

Whatever paltry offerings were nothing compared to the gift that awaited him.

The Daemon Primarch could feel it, as he endured the never-ending pain.

The pounding of the Butcher’s Nails continued.

They incited him to kill, and kill Angron did.

The first undead Space Marines tried to fight him, but they were pathetic.

They refused to fight like proper warriors, and as a punishment he stabbed them with their own weapons before extinguishing them.

The Butcher’s Nails ensured that he was soon lost in an ocean of violence. The murderous instincts and the sheer urge to destroy everything became everything he was, his reason to live.

Angron was there because the war would never end.

The war could never end.

When the urge to kill withdrew, Angron was in the heart of the Starfort.

It was a large rotunda, and the bones of undead Space Marines were everywhere.

His work, of this the Red Angel had no doubt.

But there was one enemy who had yet to perish.

Something wormed its way into his head, several memories he had thought forgotten and buried.

A hooded yellow cloak.

A sceptre of golden skulls.

A tall crown, yellow yet dark and filled with tyrannical purpose.

“**You**.”

“*Ah, the gladiator of Nuceria remembers me. I was not sure you had it in you...brother*.”

“**You...**” the pain was here, but this time, it wasn’t coming from the Butcher’s Nails. It was coming from the memories themselves. “**You...are....**”

And then the Twelfth Primarch remembers. All of it.

There was no reason to wait anymore.

The Black Blades struck.

“**YOU ARE NOT MY BROTHER! I WILL OFFER YOUR SKULL TO KHORNE, WITCH!**”

But incomprehensibly, the strike was evaded with a speed that even the Greater Daemons of Slaanesh would have struggled to emulate.

“*Angron...Angron...you are still the same murderous brute as before*.”

The yellow cloak – and the being it hid – floated in front of him.

There was a click, and the sceptre changed into a large two-handed sword.

“*Sometimes, I pity our father. He really had no chance to succeed in a thousand lifetimes, with such unworthy sons*.”

“**DON’T. SPEAK. ABOUT. HIM**.” Angron thundered.

“*Should I mention your sons, then? How you mutilated them? How you enslaved them? How you led them to their damnation? They trusted you and*-“

Angron roared in fury.

Wrath consumed him, but his strikes retained their extreme lethality.

The Red Angel struck, a series of blows which could have killed a Demigod.

But the smaller blade was always there to parry in time...and when he entered a contest of strength, Angron found himself unable to overpower his enemy.

“**Witch**!” Angron snarled.

“*I plead guilty*,” the King in Yellow laughed coldly.

The purple-black witchery shone, but Angron used all his hatred, and the sands were blasted away.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!”

“*Always the same murderous*-“

But Angron was done playing.

His hatred was eternal.

His rage knew no bounds.

And all around this Starfort, warships were clashing. The Hosts of Khorne were fighting the skeletons and their warships.

They were at war. They were in the midst of carnage.

Blood flowed. Skulls were claimed.

And with each struggle, with each murder accomplished for Khorne, Angron grew ever more powerful.

Soon enough his speed increased, and at last his enemy stopped his mockeries.

Step after step, Angron stalked his prey.

The fallen Lord of Nuceria had not cared for any Art in an eternity, but the intensity he put in defeating his opponent would have been a sublime performance of brutality and violence.

At last the Black Blade struck and found its mark.

But no blood was shed.

That wasn’t too surprising, but Angron had expected at least bones.

But as the yellow robe opened, it was to reveal...the void.

The eyes of the Daemon Primarch of Khorne narrowed in incomprehension.

“**What witchery is this?**”

The yellow hood fell, and the result was that the crown was floating above...nothing. There seemed to be shadow and midst, a cloud of black-purple power given a vaguely humanoid form...

“**You were never here**.”

Cold laughter resonated again.

“*Oh no, brother. I can assure you that you are facing what is left of me*.”

The sword moved in a mockery of a salute.

“*Let me redo the presentations, if you allow me. I am the King in Yellow, Master of the Nameless Ziggurat. And as you have discovered, I am not alive*. *Unlike my servants, I do not even have bones to animate*.”

The sword disappeared, replaced by the sceptre.

“*And you know what it means? No matter how hard you will try, you can’t kill me*.”

Something burned in Angron’s essence, and it was not pain or hatred.

It was for the first time as far as he remembered, interest. At last, it was a murder that was going to satiate for a few moments his fighting prowess.

“**We will see about that**.”

“*We*?” The dead Primarch made something that could have been him shaking his head. “*There is no ‘we’, Angron of the Red Sands. This duel lasted enough for me to activate my ritual*.”

Enormous mechanisms materialised everywhere in the rotunda, and the growl of infernal machinery assaulted his senses.

Angron unfurled his wings in all their majesty, but it was too late. Immense harpoons tore them apart, and chains bound his limbs.

The Daemon Primarch of Khorne roared in fury and used all his strength, but the witchery imbued in the restraints didn’t break.

Angron didn’t stop his efforts to break free.

But as he did, the heart of the Starfort changed, and from a secret compartment underneath the room, an elongated metallic cabinet appeared, one with a spike-covered interior.

And it was one big enough to imprison him.

“**NO!**”

The purple-black sands returned, and his strength was suddenly waning. Angron had to strengthen his hatred, but even then, it was his fury against this witchery.

“**Oh yes...I made this Iron Maiden specifically for one of you. I thought you were the most likely candidate for it. I’m unsurprised to not have been wrong**.”

Metre after metre, Angron was dragged towards the diabolical torture device.

“**I will escape**.” The Daemon Primarch swore.

“*Oh, I know. But will you escape in time to do any good? You see, I didn’t waste metal and Noctilith just for the purpose of seeing you being humbled. As long as you are trapped in this Iron Maiden, your incredible hatred will fill this entire star system, plunging your fellow butchers and all your allies of circumstance into a mad frenzy. Some Warlords might have the strength to fight against it. But the average mortals? They will be worse than your dear lieutenant the Betrayer*.”

“**I WILL CLAIM YOUR SKULL AND SEND YOUR SOUL TO KHORNE**!”

The same laughter, cold and dead, answered him.

“*You better hurry then, Angron. For this time, I am done waiting. Let the extermination of the pests begin*.”

**War Zone of the Tyrant Star**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

For a heartbeat, Lotara didn’t understand what had happened.

The galaxy was still the same. Her warships were still hammering the *Fortress of Arrogance*.

And then the true horror of what had happened was revealed.

“Angron,” the captain of the *Conqueror* cursed the name, “if we survive this, I am going to take your head myself, no matter how long it will take me.”

The Ramilies Starfort had been corrupted by the presence of the King in Yellow, and received major damage from her fleet.

In return, massive cannons of bones firing abominable sorceries had destroyed eight of her Cruisers.

But one thing the *Fortress of Arrogance* had not done so far was increase in size and mutate like it was a living organism.

It was something unprecedented.

It was like watching a metal object transform into a tumour of bone and flesh.

It was-

“**HATRED. HATE. HATRED. HATE**.”

The blow hammered her defences, and Lotara shouted in surprise...and it took her everything she had to resist, to push away this ocean of hatred.

“No...” the female warlord spat, and as she did, she realised she had bitten her own tongue, as drops of blood fell upon the command deck. “You are not-“

“The Space Hulk *Midnight Iron* is opening fire on the *Endurance*!”

“Skaven ships are beginning to ram each other!”

“The Tzeentchian Escorts are launching torpedoes on the Fourth Squadron!”

“**HATRED. HATE. HATRED. HATE**.”

The litany of pure hatred spread. And as it did, what had been one of the mightiest concentrations of fleets in the galaxy suddenly fell apart.

A Space Hulk began to die, as ships of the Death Guard ravaged it with ultra-corrosive ammunition. The gargantuan Hulks of the Lord of Iron retaliated by unveiling enormous batteries that had stayed hidden until now.

Daemon Engines went out of control. Bombs emplaced by Anarchist saboteurs detonated by the hundreds. A cauldron of dying ships was born, and with every moment, it engulfed more and more flotillas.

“We must end this insanity,” Lotara growled, and to her distress, she was not insensible to the hateful aura. “We must destroy the *Fortress of Arrogance*...or...free Angron...whatever is easiest.”

As if to insult her, the Starfort in question began to extend like a cancer in the heart of the Granithor System. It was a disease of bones and flesh, and every ship that was in the way was disintegrated. Daemons who fought against it were banished instantly back to the Warp.

But the worst part emerged right after that.

Black-purple lightning slammed into existence, and above the Ramilies bastion, a rift formed.

It was a wound no servant of the Gods had ordered.

From it, a fleet came, and before Lotara could see them in a distinct manner, she knew this was the true fleet of the King in Yellow.

The damaged Space Hulk closest to the Conqueror finished dying, as three warships of the rats rammed it.

Even by the standard of cataclysmic explosions, this one was apocalyptically bad, and many other ships were torn apart by the energy and the sorcery involved in it.

There was no time to consider the consequences.

Her fleet was the first target of the King in Yellow’s reinforcements, and before any orders could be given, Saint-Just de Montbars, former Rogue Trader, nicknamed the Exterminator by his ex-peers, screamed on every vox-frequency as many batteries looking like black-coloured Lances gutted his flagship and transformed it into a slaughterhouse.

The fleet of the Pirate Princes that he commanded was decimated, and the Exterminator’s flagship didn’t do any better. There was no time to come to his rescue, and it was like a torch of promethium had been lit, transforming a capital ship into a burning hell...a burning hell of black flames.

Everything was chaos, and the *Conqueror* had to fight its way both against the undead ships and all those it commanded before everything was hatred and madness.

Lotara gritted her teeth. As much as it was shameful to admit it, this was not something she could turn around. But there was one being who had a chance,

“Hekatii.”

The Blood Muse was here as her lips stopped moving.

“So the brute fell into the trap.”

“Are you saying you would have done better?”

“**HATRED. HATE. HATRED. HATE**.”

“Yes.” The Eldar replied, visibly unaffected by the blows of mental hatred raining upon them. “I couldn’t have done worse, at any rate.”

Lotara wanted to say the arrogant xenos was wrong, but alas, she couldn’t.

“I can’t board the *Fortress of Arrogance* and save the day.” She wasn’t powerful enough to fight her way through several Blood Legions turned into full-hatred mode, and even if she did, her departure would likely finish whatever little sanity existed aboard her fleet. “But you can.”

“I can.” The crimson-haired monster agreed without any sign of joy. “But if I do it, it will be the last thing I will ever do in your service. The Red Angel’s hatred is formidable, but it is a ritual that can be stopped. However, I can feel the touch of the one who refuses to die. The King in Yellow is here, in the very heart of this Starfort.”

“Do what you have to do!” Her hands held tightly to her command throne as the urge came to grab her spear and impale eight bodies for the glory of Khorne. “But hurry. If this continues, we all die, and the King in Yellow will have his victory...”

**Starfort *Fortress of Arrogance***

**Hekatii, the Blood Muse**

Hekatii ran.

The time to stroll upon the battlefield and hide what she was capable of was long gone.

The human warlord had been right.

Unless someone destroyed the device powering the trap, there would be no escape.

The King in Yellow would win.

And so Hekatii ran and attacked.

Rarely in the arenas did the Blood Muse bothered to use her full speed, since there was no one to admire her. When no one could truly follow you with unbelieving eyes, the value of doing it was ridiculously low.

But this time, it was a matter of survival.

And so Hekatii became the storm of crimson death that had allowed her to become a Muse in the first place.

Many obstacles stood in her way. The Legions of the Primordial Annihilator, turning against each other, unable to disobey their hateful nature. Thousands of skeletons, the real guardians of the void fortress. Enormous tendrils of bones and flesh, erupting everywhere at any moment.

It was likely that in the Empire of a Billion Moons, many highly-proficient Aeldari would have died to these challenges.

Hekatii destroyed them all.

Her Haemokinesis created a million blood spears, and when the King in Yellow grew wiser, the bones of its soldiers replaced them.

Yes, she was the Blood Muse. Yes, Haemokinesis was her specialty and chief move.

But she was largely capable of Telekinesis too. Hekatii was a weapon specialist, but no Aeldari reached the rank of Muse without inventing some deadly psychic combos. Well, no Aeldari save one.

This was a battle of frightening intensity.

This was a slaughter she won.

And yet at the attacks ceased and the heart-gates collapsed, courtesy of she having sliced through them, Hekatii knew deep inside it was merely the prelude.

The real fight, the one which was going to decide her existence one way or another, was about to begin.

“*You shouldn’t have come, arrogant Muse of a failed hedonistic Empire*.”

Hekatii raised an eyebrow, conjuring her Blood Armour over her body. This time, the Aeldari Muse knew she was going to need it.

“But I did.”

“*You will die*.”

“That’s a distinct possibility, yes.” She admitted.

“*You will die without accomplishing anything*,” the yellow-cloaked enemy clarified. “*Even someone like you can’t hope to break the chains keeping the Iron Maiden closed*.”

The undead abomination wasn’t completely wrong. The heart of the fortress was something absolutely...inelegant and complex. It was a nightmare of bones and flesh, dripping blood and hatred made manifest. It was growing and growing, and the only reason there was empty space was because it was expelled outside this place, otherwise it would have been impossible to see the prison in the first place.

“I know. This is why I brought something special for an occasion like this one.”

And she revealed the scales.

The object the cultists of the Aspect of Lies had created in their researches to make sure the dead stayed permanently lifeless.

But she had made a slight modification to it.

While one side weighed the Noctilith sands of the King in Yellow, on the other was Haematia, taken when the vigilance of the other Khornate cultists had wavered.

“*You won’t get away with this*!”

“Getting away?” The Blood Muse chuckled. “I intend to present a bargain.”

The scales shone, and Hekatii uttered a prayer that had once been reserved to Khaine’s high priesthood, and to it alone.

But this time Khaine was dead, and the name given at the end was not his.

“Khorne.”

Wards flicked out. Suddenly, the power saturating the heart room faltered.

The unimaginable hatred broke.

Blazing eyes burning with the fires of an infinite amount of wars focused on her.

“I want to get free in soul, mind and body,” the Blood Muse stated. “In exchange, your Red Angel gets out of its prison.”

“*NO*!”

Spikes of bones – enough to make a forest of them – began to bombard her. And for all her psychic might, for all her talent with bladed weapons, Hekatii began to stumble against the indefatigable assault.

“**Agreed**.”

The chains which had enslaved her crumbled at last.

Hekatii used her Haemokinesis, and the balance weighted on the side of the Haematia.

It was as if a sun of blood was born.

The explosion which followed made her deaf and blind.

Hekatii let an imprecation of pain escape her lips as several bone spears impaled her.

And then it was over.

The mechanisms and the bone were disappearing.

The torture device doubling as prison was cracking, on its way to complete disintegration.

The aura of hatred went out of existence like it had never existed.

The yellow-cloaked abomination gave her a murderous look that promised endless torment.

“*Your ruin will be whispered in terror in every world of this galaxy*,” the King in Yellow promised...before disappearing. Now that his chief trap had been disabled, the undead fleets were in a bad situation...

The ‘Iron Maiden’ was broken, and the Red Angel stormed out.

“**I HATE YOU**! **HATE! HATE! HATE!”**

Despite the severity of her wounds, Hekatii found the strength to laugh.

There was no emotion but hatred in these monstrous eyes when they stared at her.

“You are really,” the Blood Muse coughed in pain, “a waste of genetic engineering.”

As she examined the essence of this beast, it was easy to realise the truth. No matter how awful the slavery of the Primordial Annihilator, the greatest betrayal, in her educated opinion, was the one of the Red Angel himself.

Hekatii didn’t know how this had happened, but the hatred-filled being had reduced his entire existence, beginning with his rampages, to the presence of the corrupted devices in his skull.

Angron could have tried to remove these ‘Butcher’s Nails’ long before being enslaved by the Primordial Annihilator. What was the worst thing that could happen? Death. But at its heart, the monster had been consumed by a lie.

“**SKULLS. HATE! HATE HATE**!”

The huge butchery instrument swung towards her. The Primordial Annihilator really wasn’t losing time, but then the Blood Muse had expected nothing less.

At least she would save her soul-

But the weapon never struck.

A very long sword she was familiar with flashed in bright silver light, and the slave of Khorne was blasted away like it was a comical red animal weighting nothing.

It was not the case, of course.

It was just that Aenaria Eldanesh was just too powerful.

“What a strange coincidence,” the beautiful voice everyone in the galaxy had reasons to be frightened of was whispered against her left ear, “I was just visiting a training world not far from here, and here I find my treacherous former Apprentice.”

The bone spikes impaling her were removed brutally. Hekatii swallowed, but not because of the pain.

“You could have found a better excuse.” The Blood Muse closed her eyes, ignoring the wrathful roar of the brute. “Have you come to end me?”

“I don’t know.” The Queen of Blades jumped, and delivered a new attack that severed a limb of the red-skinned beast. “I haven’t made my decision yet.”

Hekatii winced.

“I wouldn’t presume to give you an order, but I suggest the deliberation end quickly. I am...sort of dying here.”

The bone spikes had done some damage to her body, but those she would have been able to regenerate anyway.

However, the damage to her soul...that she couldn’t heal. Khorne had respected his part of the bargain by breaking her chains, but without it, this meant the soul-injuries created by Slaanesh on the day of the Fall were reopening.

And that, no matter how powerful you were as an Aeldari, was a death sentence.

“I know. This is why I brought her with me.”

Hekatii heard the song before she saw the light.

**Sacrifice**

The Aether sang with each of her footsteps.

**Sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice! Sacrifice, and you will be *saved***!

“This...is unexpected.” Hekatii confessed, as eyes filled with stars looked at her.

“The Queen of Blades is very persuasive, and this battle is something that drew my attention.”

“**HATE! HATE FOR HATRED!**”

“I am the Queen of Blades, beast.” The arm had already regenerated, and the walls began to cover themselves in blood and viscera. This time, Hekatii knew it wasn’t a trap of the King in Yellow.

That was before a thousand silver strikes tore everything to pieces, of course.

“She may be a murderous traitor, but she was once my Apprentice. I, and only I, will decide her fate.”

Oh, by all the Swords of Vaul. This was going to be-

“You have a choice to make.”

Golden fingers burned in a light that was the bane of Chaos.

“I accept...my Empress.”

“Good. Now that is going to hurt.”

And the imperial fingers plunged deep in her chest, but none of her organs were the target.

The power would reach well beyond that.

Hekatii screamed.

And the world disappeared into an inferno of light and blood.