**Tyranny 12.2**

**(Interlude)**

**Gods and Tyrants**

*I have returned, father.*

*Are you surprised?*

*You shouldn’t be.*

*If there is a trait you gave to each of your sons, it is undoubtedly your stubbornness.*

*In my case, I inherited your stubbornness to survive.*

*It was barely enough.*

*You took everything from me, father.*

*You broke my rituals. You unleashed your full might to destroy my plans. You crippled the preparations I had made across my domains.*

*And then you sent Russ and his Wolves.*

*My strength was crippled; my Legion in disarray. I stood no chance against your Executioner.*

*My defeat was inevitable. While I never had the precognition talents of Sanguinius and Curze, I didn’t need them as I was outnumbered three-to-one.*

*It didn’t matter. I had sworn a vow when you stopped my Ascension.*

*And for this vow to be accomplished, I had to survive. In order to do that, I had to fake my death.*

*This was a critical problem. I knew your orders would include a retrieval of my body, and you would not be fooled by a convincing fake.*

*This meant that my corpse indeed had to be abandoned for the hunt to end.*

*But the soul...the soul was different.*

*My soul had survived the ritual you broke. In fact, my soul and my sorcery talent had thrived after my body was crippled.*

*The solution was as simple as it was elegant. I made a pact with one of these absurdly pretentious creatures that call themselves daemons. In exchange of several favours, I consented to invite an inferior slime in my body. I never bothered to tell this stupid entity that the Possession would start when Russ barged in my throne room and threw himself at me.*

*My body died. My soul survived.*

*But you did something blasphemous, father.*

*You took everything from me. My name. My Legion’s name. My history. My triumphs.*

*You took everything there was to know about to me, and you turned it into ash and nothingness.*

*I had lost all my names.*

*I was nothing.*

*I was weak, weaker than the weakest daemon, and what was left of me was lost in the currents of the Sea of Souls.*

*I was soon devoured by one of the uncountable predators making the Immaterium their domain.*

*But something happened, something neither the daemon nor me expected.*

*My name being obliterated has made sure the entity couldn’t properly digest me.*

*It couldn’t destroy my soul and erase me from existence.*

*It couldn’t vanquish me, but the same didn’t apply where I was concerned. I acted like a parasite, a malicious tumour, one that the daemon was unable to expel or suppress.*

*It was a struggle of every instant, but after an eternity of struggle, I had complete mastery of the essence. The daemon superficially looked the same from the outside, as I had taken great care to preserve the outer shell.*

*At long last, I could have a name. I could begin to grasp back everything you took from me.*

*I could be the King in Yellow.*

*I could begin the true trials that would restore the power that was rightfully mine.*

*And now I have returned...Emperor.*

*Remember what I swore to you when you broke my rituals and my ambitions on that fateful day?*

***Eternity*** *will be mine, or there will be no eternity.*

*What would say if you still had the ability to communicate with me despite the distance separating us? That the beings you call parasites are going to cripple me, much like they did cripple you?*

*If you think so, prepare to be disappointed...Emperor.*

*I am the King in Yellow.*

*I am going to defeat the parasites and the miserable wretches they have enslaved...the things I was once forced to call ‘brothers’.*

*I am going to create the first realm of* ***Eternity*** *in the Calyx Hell Stars.*

*And then it will be your turn.*

**Somewhere between the Warp and the Materium**

**The Tyrant Star**

Thought for the day: Glory in death is life Eternal.

**Knight Errant Psamtic Mehhur**

At first, Psamtic Mehhur had believed it was pure spite who had led to the Simurgh to creature to abandon him on this sterilised orb.

Inquisitor Contessa had managed to escape via a derelict ruin, assuming this was not a trap like the rest of this dreadful journey had been. The other Space Marines accompanying him had perished or vanished.

Psamtic was alone.

He was alone, and his supplies were inexistent.

Fortunately, he was somewhere food and water weren’t needed. For what felt like an eternity, Psamtic had walked, but he hadn’t been feeling thirsty or hungry. It was fortunate indeed, because his possessions here were restricted to his power armour and what was inside it...and needless to say, they were extremely limited.

Psamtic had thought it was sheer spite for this parody of angel that had led to his imprisonment there. The Simurgh had been denied, thus it had made sure the only escape Psamtic would ever have was to take his own life. Simple and merciless.

But this place, planet or not, had begun to change recently.

It was still sterile and devoid of life.

It was a realm of the dead...except the dead were now walking.

Fortunately, as the monotony of the landscape was now broken by countless hills and mountains. Empty riverbeds had been summoned into existence. Things that must have been forests had now been replaced by forests...of bone.

At least all this new terrain features provided excellent opportunities to hide.

And hiding was very much needed.

No one was searching for him, but there were tens of thousands of skeletons everywhere in the valleys, supervised by animated corpses of Astartes everywhere, with more emerging from the amethyst-coloured sands in the nearby desert every hour or whatever passed for it in this strange realm.

At the very beginning, Psamtic had thought they had a clue he was here.

Now he was sure they weren’t.

The skeletons and their transhuman overseers were fortifying their planet.

It hadn’t looked impressive at first, not when you had seen once the Imperial Fists building one of their citadels.

But the skeletons were never exhausted, and soon, as far as Psamtic’s eyes could see, there were hundreds of thousands digging trenches, creating kill zones, and emplacing bunkers and redoubtable batteries of what had to be powerful weapons, except clearly not guns which had been invented and forged by any Forge World.

It was slow, and with the proper technology, the Imperial Fists and the Mechanicus would likely have done it quicker and using fewer hands.

Still, there was a sense of....relentlessness. Deep in his two hearts, Psamtic felt as if the fortification effort couldn’t be stopped. Walls were built, reaching soon in the hundreds of metres, before culminating at sizes that could sustain the comparison with the Imperial Palace.

All of this, his mind could accept.

But when a dark ziggurat flew over the still incomplete fortress, Psamtic had no explanation.

The structure was beyond enormous, easily larger and having more tonnage than a Battleship.

And yet, it was flying, flying with nothing but columns of smoke of putrid black-purple colour to stand against the laws of gravity.

This ziggurat was feeling like something deeply unnatural...something confirmed by the fact every time he looked at this ziggurat, Psamtic felt his organs churn in unease.

The ziggurat left in all celerity after several minutes; as if it had only come to inspect the progression of the work done by the skeletons...something that as far as he knew, may be the truth.

And it had provided one answer he had on his tongue for a while. For while the ziggurat had no marks, there had been things dancing in the smoke. There had been symbols: an hourglass, and a skull. And there had been a number.

“It seems,” Psamtic grimaced, “the Eleventh Legion has survived...sort of. And now, it is preparing for war...”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Imperial Palace**

**The Imperial Dungeon**

**The Golden Throne**

**0.127.311M35**

**Primarch Leman Russ**

*The surroundings change every time he comes here.*

*This time, Leman founds himself in the middle of a desert.*

*The vast dunes of soft yellow are everywhere, no matter the direction he’s looking at.*

*It is a desert, and there is nothing but sand and more sand.*

*Leman hates sand.*

*He is a Primarch, not a sand snake...or one of the few animals which are able to survive in these desert conditions.*

*Besides, it is way too hot. The sun is trying its best to fry his brain. He knows it.*

*The Great Wolf is about to howl when the dune explodes, and a titanic worm reveals itself.*

*The maw, the Lord of Fenris has to admit, is so large even krakens would consider it a worthwhile challenge.*

*Russ races away, and when the worm tries to chase him, he jumps, in a vicious flanking attack that will target what he hopes to be the weak points of the apex predator.*

*But the air shimmers. The desert has been playing tricks on him, unless the worm is capable of creating mirages on its own. Leman’s strike is going to fall short. He tries to correct his jump-*

*And a hand grab him, take him as if he is a young pup, and throw him on the back of the worm like he weighs nothing.*

*“This was reckless of you, my son.”*

*Leman recognises the voice, of course.*

*“Father?”*

*The stranger standing on the worm’s back is at all looking like his father ever presented himself.*

*Most of his tall figure is hidden by a sand-coloured cloak, and beneath it, there is what looks to be an integral suit of dark grey. In his hand there is a metallic baton.*

*There is no gold, no light, and no visible weapons.*

*Yet Leman knows it is his father.*

*“I really hate sand,” the Sixth Primarch growls.*

*The luminescent blue eyes – probably the only thing that are truly identical to some of the appearances Leman saw before – stare at him in amusement.*

*“I will keep it in mind.”*

*“Where is here?” He asks. “Sand aside, this doesn’t look like any place you ever showed us before.”*

*“This place is...an old memory. A memory when I was younger.” The voice loses in potency, but Leman can hear what is spoken, murmur or not. “A memory when I wasn’t alone...”*

*Leman feels...ill-at-ease. Because for centuries, he hasn’t even thought about that. Technically, yes, he has been separated from his brothers for a very long time, but alone? No, he has never been truly alone. He always had part of his pack with him.*

*His father didn’t.*

*“This isn’t Old Earth, however. I don’t remember this world to have ever welcomed these giant worms.”*

*The Emperor chuckles.*

*“No, it isn’t Old Earth...or Terra. It might surprise you, my son, but I travelled a lot when Mankind began to settle on distant worlds across the galaxy.”*

*Not for the first time, Leman admits that he knows very little of the man who stands before him. Granted, the son knows more about his father than the combined population of the Throneworld minus the Custodes ever do, but it is cold comfort.*

*“This must have been a dangerous world, then. Unless the planet had someone like your new protégée to control the worms?”*

*“We did not,” the lips twitch in amusement again. “I suppose it was a very dangerous world, and yet for a time...it was home.”*

*This is difficult to believe...but Leman can sniff a liar from ten kilometres away, and the words here are unmistakably, painfully the truth.*

*“Home...” and suddenly it reminds him of the loss of Fenris. His home, that he was forced to finish the destruction of. The Spirit of Fenris survived, but in many ways, the loss is still grievous.*

*“You will tell Roboute to give you the planet.” The blue eyes stare at him with serenity. “Honestly, this boy makes me despair, sometimes. I haven’t tried to hold on so much to my conquests like he does since I was King of Macedon.”*

*“Ha! I will.”*

*“And you will make the concessions necessary.”*

*Suddenly, Leman feels like the young pup brought to the alpha of the pack after having played with the tail of another member too many times.*

*“Concessions?” He says innocently.*

*“Concessions,” the Emperor says gravely. “It is part of something called diplomacy, Leman. You should try it sometimes.”*

*“I know what diplomacy is, father. I recently showed my best diplomatic skills!”*

*“I will note that getting my High Lords drunk has not improved their performance.” The drawl is neutral, but the irony can be tasted at Titan’s range.*

*Leman grimaces.*

*“But I will note that the method was original and successfully avoided political infighting for a time. It even convinced most of the Terran elite to organise big parties to mark the event. So I’m not going to castigate you for that. But as I’m sure you are intelligent to realise, this is only a temporary solution. And so we return to the topic of concessions.”*

*“I don’t like it at all,” Leman amended it before his father’s unflinching glare, “I dislike making concessions to some of the High Lords. The Administratum and the Arbites Heads should be rotting in a cell before a summary execution.”*

*And though he didn’t ask aloud after that, the challenge is clear: why are their heads still attached to their shoulders?*

*“You want to replace them? I wish you good luck, Leman. The replacements would be worse, and far more obstructive.”*

*The Primarch of the Space Wolves growls in frustration. Nevertheless, his father answered the question truthfully; it’s not his father’s fault that he doesn’t like the answers.*

*“What I am supposed to do, then?”*

*For many minutes, silence reigns. The ride on the worm continues, across the immensities of sand.*

*There is nothing but the dunes, the hellishly hot sun, and his father seemingly controlling the worm effortlessly.*

*“While several High Lords are wastes of my time and yours, several can be relied upon. I contacted one, and she will have the support to force the opposition into a neutral posture...provided you make the necessary concessions and allow your Wolves to change their behaviours that will neatly decrease the complains.”*

*“That is going to be...a challenge.” Leman has not liked at all certain things he saw among the successors of his Legion. Some he had already intended to change, and he knows better than to think this is going to be painless and short.*

*“I’m almost hearing word for word the Captain of the Varangian Guard before I promised him the gold and the artwork of my palace,” his father replies humorously.*

*“Fine,” Leman huffs, “I will speak with your High Lord and...I will listen to what she has to say. But there is your protégée to consider. Weaver is not onboard with-”*

*“I have a letter prepared for her as we speak. It will explain to her some of my plans where you are concerned...though the final decision will still be hers. You will have to be convincing, when you return to Macragge.”*

*Well, Leman can be convincing...hasn’t he proved it by doing what was never done before?*

*“Obviously, there is still your punishment to consider.”*

*By Niflheim, that was something-*

*“Once you will have finished with your duties, you will join Magnus for a week cleaning and tidying up my library.”*

*There is relief hearing his brother is alive. It doesn’t last long, because the ‘my library’ words are resonating like an ominous bell of doom.*

*“Couldn’t do something easier?” Leman asks with a voice of mourning. “You know, exterminating all the Sons of Horus left? Finding you that bottle of liquor you and Malcador were unable to find during the Great Crusade? Maybe catching up one of these big worms and offering it to Weaver?”*

*“No.”*

*The Emperor pushes him off the worm.*

*And Leman is reminded why he hates sand a second later.*

**The Eye of Terror**

**Medrengard**

**Daemon Primarch Mortarion**

Mortarion had announced his visit ahead of time.

Judging by the hasty moves of the Iron Warriors manning the titan-sized fortifications, his brother had not bothered informing his sons ahead of schedule.

Mortarion looked around, before deciding that ready or not, he was not going to wait for them. Perturabo would love that, of course. More bitterness flowed into the Death Lord’s essence as he descended the landing area he had used to manifest. Evidently, since Perturabo had warned no one of his coming, all those who had been on it had been transformed into a pile of slime and metal.

The Lord of Iron had always been ruthless and prompt to decimate, but this sheer level of disdain was something else, even by their standards in the Great Game...

All around him, Medrengard growled and thundered. Or was it more appropriate to say Medrengard killed and maimed?

The planet was looking particularly horrid to his senses. It was not blessed **Decay**. It was a black mass of fortifications and foundries, of mega-manufactorums and arsenals, of trenches and poisoned kill zones.

Medrengard was the planet-citadel of the Iron Warriors, their incredible arrogance turned into a system of fortifications and murderous industrial complexes. The forges churning Daemon Engines were so high they could be seen from orbit, and the redoubts were so buried that Mortarion wouldn’t be surprised to know some were quite close to the planet’s core.

Naturally, on this world where souls were spent by the millions to feed the Warp furnaces, the jealousies ran high.

This was why when the sons of the Fourth ran to meet him, they were over fifty officers of Warsmith rank.

“Lord Mortarion, we have not-“

“**Be quiet, little fly**.” The Primarch of the Fourteenth Legion exhaled, and the cloud of poison shrouding him grew larger. “**Save First Captain Forrix, I don’t want to hear any of you speaking**.”

By the temporary silence that immediately reigned, the Iron Warriors were fast learners. Or perhaps Perturabo had killed so many of them in his mad crises of rage that they had all grown incredibly cautious.

Kydomor Forrix stepped forwards. The kindest thing Mortarion could say was that the years had not been nice to him. There were more scars, of course, but this was not the problem. His soul was...jaded and apathetic. It had not grown to the point it was irrecoverable, but the steps had been taken, and of course Perturabo’s charming behaviour was accelerating this problem.

It wasn’t Mortarion’s problem, clearly. It was still remarkable in its own way for a Legion’s upper command to destroy himself so thoroughly without an enemy in sight.

“Lord. We weren’t warned of your...arrival.”

“**I am here to speak with my brother, Forrix**.”

The First Captain didn’t flinch, but his glance at the biggest fortress of the entire planet waiting in the distance said all.

“I will lead you to the Iron Palace, Lord. But I have not the Keys, no one does. If my father does not desire to receive you, the gates will stay shut down.”

Mortarion nodded, unsurprised by the way Perturabo had cut himself from the rest of Medrengard.

The rest of the travel was spent in complete silence.

Soon, Mortarion was in front of the main gates, which were so large Mortarion had no idea what Perturabo expected to use them for. Maximus Ordinatus or Emperor Titans were not that big compared to the enormous metallic doors of ugly iron-coloured shade that barred the way.

It went without saying that the gates were closed.

“**Perturabo. I am here. I know you are watching me**.”

There were no threats or anything that might be construed as an insult...Mortarion was sure that if he dared uttering them, it would be a matter of heartbeats before orders were given so that he was banished from Medrengard.

At last, after a long period that was frankly ridiculous, the Iron Gates opened, in a cacophony of growling machines and the thunderous activation of millions of mechanisms.

What was inside was shrouded in darkness, and what wasn’t darkness was in fire. There were pipes bigger than Mechanicum Forges in their own right transported viscous substances that contained their fair share of blood and liquefied corpses. There were enormous silvery tendrils that acted as mechadendrites everywhere. Mortarion couldn’t investigate more; an avenue had been created for him to advance, and on each side, thousands of Daemon Engines mounted guard. Some of them, the Death Lord had honestly never seen stride across a battlefield of the Eye...which was maybe for the best, as some were the size of Emperor Titans in their own right.

The Lord of the Death Guard was led to a maze of tanks containing molten lava while rains of chemicals altered weapons. Millions of weapons were churned, half of them discarded for flaws that would have been declared insignificant by all other Legions.

At long last, his progression ended. He was in a massive atelier, and though Mortarion had the feeling that someone had been here not long before him – there was an aetheric signature that wasn’t Perturabo’s – his brother received him alone.

Of course, ‘receiving’ him was practically distorting facts. Perturabo had taken its favourite appearance of a machine with an iron mask, and was presenting his back to him, busy as he was dissecting...what had to be an old Man of Iron.

Mortarion breathed out.

Perturabo didn’t turn to face him.

“**Brother**.”

“**Mortarion**.” The Long War passed, and the Lord of Iron’s manners were getting worse and worse. “**Why are you here?**”

“**Hanzo is dead. And the Eleventh has returned**.”

“**I know. Why are you here?**”

Few things could shock Mortarion anymore, but this one certainly seeded roots of surprise. Obviously, friendships had faded in the carnage of the Long War. Nevertheless, it was not a good sign Perturabo could react so...so emotionlessly and mechanically to the brother he had been so close to.

“**I have come to tell you to stop whatever new plan you thought to begin at the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods**.” Mortarion decided that bluntness was probably the valid strategy. “**Tzeentch’s new toy stole Toramino’s surviving forces, and your Warsmiths proved totally unsuited to the kind of war that is fought there**.”

“**Mighty words**,” Perturabo grumbled, “**when it was your First Captain who killed Toramino. Or are you going to tell me Typhus has broken his leash again**?”

Anger filled Mortarion’s essence, and bitterness threatened submerged him.

Mortarion spat ultra-corrosive bile, but decided not to answer the taunt, for that was what it was: a provocation.

“**In this affair, Typhus is obeying his orders in the spirit and the letter they were given**.”

“**That might be the first time in his life he does so**.” Perturabo grunted. “**But**-“

“**Oh damn it, Perturabo!**” Mortarion had patience, but everyone had limits, and his were soon approaching their end. “**I have not come to listen to your insinuations about my First Captain!**” It was especially hard to endure when the Fourth Legion’s Former Captain was on his way to be an apathetic machine of flesh if something wasn’t done soon. “**I have come to warn you, brother to brother, that if you continue on that path, you’re likely to join Omegon on the planet of rats, screaming anarchic ramblings for the whole Eye to hear**.”

Mortarion was filled with bitterness about his fall to Nurgle. But as recent events had proven, it could always be worse, and the Alpha Legion had been on the receiving end of this proverb.

Sometimes it was really better to kill yourself before enduring...that. Mortarion had never liked Alpharius and Omegon, but no one deserved to fall to Anarchy.

This time the Death Lord obtained a reaction.

Alas, it wasn’t the one he wanted.

Perturabo turned to face him, and eyes shining with the power of lava and infernal forges shone glared at him.

“**I,**” the voice was mechanical menace incarnate, “**am not going to succumb to Anarchy**.”

“**I’m sure the Hydra said the same thing before Fenris exploded in his face**,” Mortarion retorted sarcastically. “**Oh, and I’m sure Lorgar assured his sons he wasn’t going to die. It is really too bad he didn’t warn Weaver and Guilliman of that little revelation**.”

“**From Iron, cometh Strength. From Strength, cometh Will. From Will, cometh Faith. From Faith, cometh Honour. From Honour, cometh Iron. This is the Unbreakable Litany, and may it forever be so**.”

They were all stubborn in their own way, but Mortarion wondered sometimes if Perturabo had not been made of spite and sheer stubbornness in their genitor’s labs.

It was like speaking with a wall...a wall of sheer stubbornness, of course.

“**We will see each other on the battlefield, then**.” The Lord of Iron had already turned back to manipulate several Knight-sized Automatons. “**Do not say I didn’t warn you**.”

“**Get out of my citadel, Mortarion**.”

“**Incidentally, Perturabo, the *Iron Palace*? Seriously? I thought you would not**-”

And as the words were spoken, suddenly, Mortarion was back before the Iron Gates, and he had to retreat fast to avoid the humiliation of the immense doors slamming in his essence.

“**Well, I tried to warn you**.” Mortarion sighed. That Nurgle had been extremely joyous when he proposed the idea should have told him something. “**The consequences will be on your head**.”

**Halo Stars**

**The Ind Cluster**

**Maharashtra System**

**Maharashtra**

**The Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods**

**9.131.311M35**

**Typhus the Traveller**

“Welcome back, Lord Herald.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Typhus answered. “I will say it is...indeed great to leave the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods.”

“The trials were perilous?”

“The trials were so dangerous describing them as ‘perilous’ is fundamentally inexact,” Typhus had known there would be losses, of course, but the seven servants of the Grandfather who had died inside this cursed place were lost, body and soul. And saying this was insufficient to describe the sheer danger of the Graveyard. “And I am glad those are over. Influenza, Plague, Plague, Rot, Death, Rebirth.”

The Captain of the Death Guard saluted and let him pass, having received the code agreed beforehand.

“I have summoned the *Fetid Blessing*, Lord Herald.”

“Good.” Unlike the Stormbirds and the Thunderhawks which had been used to land on Maharashtra, the *Fetid Blessing* was a former Titan Lander that Typhus had taken from the blind fools that prostrated them before their machines in ignorance. “We are going to need it.”

Slowly, but surely, the servants of the Grandfather were moving their prize through one out of the biggest breaches in the Graveyard’s walls. In this case, the Iron Warriors’ siege-abilities had proven quite useful.

“Lord Herald...is it...a Cadian Pylon?”

The former First Captain of the Death Guard chuckled.

“I understand why you would arrive to that conclusion. It looks a bit like a Pylon...albeit one which is reduced to its base, with the upper part missing. And yes, this is true Noctilith.”

“But it is not a Pylon.”

“Indeed not Captain.” The moment the Legionnaires were out of the cursed Graveyard, macro-engines could take the relay of the Grandfather’s blessings, and many of the Death Guard’s Chosen collapsed in exhaustion. “The Noctilith around this...this not-Pylon, is merely a shell to ensure that it can keep what is inside prisoner.”

“I suppose it is vital to keep it prisoner for as long as the plan calls?”

“Yes, Captain. I couldn’t have said it better.” Typhus studied his prize, and was satisfied to see no attack had managed to bypass his escort vigilance. “I will return to the *Terminus Est* using the *Fetid Blessing*. The artefact needs to be warded seven more times. Once it will be done, I expect the War Council to wait for me, and the last messages of the Death Lord to be deciphered and waiting for my eyes.”

“I will warn the other Captains, Lord Herald.”

“Tell them,” Typhus gurgled in satisfaction, “that we have won a great victory against *all* enemies of the Grandfather today.”

“Blessed be Decay!”

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Morwen System**

**Morwen VI**

**8.132.311M35**

**Magister Immaterial Nouakchott**

As a specialist in the noble field of studying and acquiring millenary-old artefacts, Magister Immaterial Nouakchott had always preferred animals when they were long dead.

That way, he could study their skeletons in peace.

Unfortunately, the pests that had decided to invite themselves on Morwen VI were alive and aggressive.

“ANARCHY! Glory to Malal!”

“Glory to the Great Mutator,” and Nouakchott blasted apart the head of the vermin which had just dared challenging Great Tzeentch, along with four others. The Aether Ray spell was perfectly tailored for that sort of rat eradication.

“Lord Magister! I am afraid the defences have been breached!”

“No! You think?” His sycophant subordinate was extremely lucky manpower was so limited on the ground, with most of their reinforcements busy clashing with the Khornate fleet in orbit.

By an extremely untimely coincidence, all sides had asked for reinforcements...and they were now all arriving at roughly the same time, making the joyous chaotic melee of a lifetime kilometres above their heads.

It shouldn’t have been too problematic, but alas, they were also the giant rats to take into account.

“The Spires are ready?”

“Yes, Lord Magister!”

Nouakchott made a quick calculus, as he always did. In that case, it was the knowledge and the secrets he had claimed before the enormous warren hole opened and Morwen VI began crawling with rats and other fanged vermin, against the wrath of Malicia, when the Destiny Unwritten would learn that he had abandoned his fortress without orders.

In the end, Nouakchott decided the secrets and the lore would be largely enough.

And besides, the Magister thought as he incinerated two rats trying to disguise themselves as Death Cult assassins, the fortresses would not last long anymore, no matter how arduous his efforts at defending it.

“Good. We leave.”

“But Magister, the Southern Expedition has not yet returned!”

“We have hundreds of thousands giant rats encircling this fortress, and plenty of infiltrators inside our walls, and you’re worried about the Southern Expedition?”

In hindsight, Nouakchott shouldn’t have dispersed his effectives so much, but Tzeentch had not blessed him with precognition, alas.

“We leave this site.” Nouakchott repeated. “The knowledge we gained will be sufficient to avoid the wrath of the other Magisters. Besides, it is their fault their reinforcements arrived so late, and are nowhere to be seen to defend this fortress in this desperate hour.”

There was nothing else to be said, and in an operation that had been repeated an astounding amount of time, his forces withdrew in a semi-disciplined manner, massacring thousands of rats as they made their retreat.

Soon enough, the Evacuation Spires were filled.

Nouakchott used the opportunity to activate several Grand Mutation Curses onto the rats. It was a meagre satisfaction, but as the Spires began to rise, the Magister Immaterial figured this would at least make an adequate vengeance. The tide of vermin that had dared storming his fortress fell into confusion, and that was before the Spires’ crystalline batteries wiped out the citadel.

“A good thing done,” the Q’Sal Exile allowed himself to smile, before frowning as his Spire gained altitude. “By Fate and Sorcery! How many rats are there?”

Nouakchott had thought he had made a nice dent in the ranks of the rats. But as the plains of Morwen VI were revealed to his sorcerous sight, it was clear he had merely been slaying the vanguard of an endless horde.

“We don’t see the presence of the skeletons, at least, Lord Magister.”

“That’s something to rejoice, yes. The rats are problematic, but they die like everyone else. We were in insufficient strength and-“

Nouakchott closed his eyes, as without warning, Morwen VI’s atmosphere seemed to convulse in flames. Then after a few seconds, there was a pillar of crimson light.

The Magister Immaterial shivered. What by a thousand artefacts was that?

Moving before one of his nine-blessed mirrors, Nouakchott murmured nine words before giving his instructions.

“Show me what is just responsible for the last powerful interference.”

The mirror obeyed, and the Magister Immaterial saw...blood.

Rivers of blood.

Lakes of blood.

There was so much blood.

The giant rats’ corpses were seen in so many numbers there was no way to count them, and with each crimson flash, there seemed to be more created, and the blood flowed in eruptions of red fluids.

No, no, these were not ‘crimson flashes’.

Nouakchott manipulated his mirror, and sure enough, a scarlet figure was revealed, wielding two short blades at an impossible speed.

Yet for all his attempts to slow down the image flow, the servant of Tzeentch wasn’t able to slow down it enough for the Khornate murderer to appear in a way that was stable and good for his long-range study.

He...not the figure was feminine...she...she was simply too fast.

How could anyone be so fast?

How could anyone be so powerful?

The world of Morwen VI was before his eyes, and to his shock, the blood was spreading by tens of kilometres.

The blood of millions of rats was spilled in a succession of murders that were-

The thoughts inside his head arrived to a very unpleasant conclusion.

“We must get out of this system as fast as possible. This is a damned ritual. This is why they waited most of a day before deploying. They wanted to be sure there would be enough bodies on the planet to spill the amounts of blood required.”

“Yes, Lord Magister. But the other Magisters...they say the warships of the brutes are trying to form into eight groups. We wondered why they would divide their strength at this crucial strategy, but-“

“But it makes perfect sense if their intent is to make this planet a ritualistic slaughterhouse.”

“Why by the Great Mutator would they do that, Lord Magister? They already have this monster!”

“I don’t know,’ Nouakchott admitted.

Morwen VI had never been a beautiful world. You had to mutate to live here – something the rats had compensated by sacrificing an ungodly number of their own to achieve the same feat.

But now it was nothing but grand butchery on a planetary scale.

Millions of beasts and lifeforms unfortunate to be caught here when the monster made her grand entrance were exsanguinated in a terrifying campaign that no one had seen the likes in millennia.

And the only thing the servants of Tzeentch meaningfully could do was run and save their lives.

They simply were too weak to stop the murderous onslaught.

“I don’t know, but I suspect we are not going to like the answer when it is revealed.”

**The Blood Muse**

The two-tiered ziggurats had not meant to be opened, but an ocean of blood carried power with it.

Blood was Life. Blood was Power. Blood was Destruction.

Blood was the Key.

This realisation could have brought some feeling approaching weakness, if the opposition wasn’t so *weak*.

Yes, they had provided the blood she required, but honestly, close to two billion rats, and save a few of their sorcerer-shamans, none of them had seen her coming.

Anarchy might be a rising Power of the Warp, but for the moment, it clearly preferred quantity to quality.

And the quantity was severely lacking.

Hekatii cleaned her blades as the servants of the Lord of Blood rose from the lakes of blood to participate in the massacre.

“I am going into this ziggurat,” the crimson-haired Aeldari, giving a disdainful glance to the blood-skinned monsters charging out of the Warp portals opening all across Morwen VI. “Make sure no one follows me.”

“**Yes, Blood Muse**.”

The former Apprentice of the Queen of Blades had her doubts they were going to be successful; the skeletons of the King in Yellow were still there, biding their time until they saw an opportunity. Hekatii was not naive; the armies of the dead had retreated far too quickly when the rats burrowed into reality and threw an army out of nowhere.

But as she had learned in the Empire of a Billion Moons long ago, for some Lords, it was the loyalty which mattered. The orders had been given. They all had to obey, happy or not.

The interior of the ziggurat, naturally, was filled with traps.

The Builders had tried to protect what they believed to be their afterlife with their best defences, and now that the metallic alloy had been compelled by the Power of Blood to restore an entrance, they were activated.

If you did not have the reflexes of a moderately average Aeldari, they could cause some problems. There were metallic arrows whose points were incredibly radioactive ores. A multitude of paths were leading to nothing but hundreds of miniature abysses, and swirling inside these precipices laid not mere spikes of metal, but devices which were made to release an artifice able to shred flesh and metal on the molecular level.

Several times, the chambers she went through had no air. In other occasions, the trap was the ceiling immediately falling on the occupant of the room while the doors were sealed.

The Builders had really wanted to be left alone in their cherished afterlife.

It was too bad for them Hekatii was there.

Correction: it was too bad many beings were there, able to break through their defences.

For when the Queen of the Arenas entered the immense and near-empty cavern that was at the heart of the ziggurat, it took her half a heartbeat to see she was not the first to arrive.

There were thirteen of the ‘undead Astartes’.

Even if their armours had not been this tasteless grey, it would have been child’s play to recognise for what they were.

The best word in their own language to describe them would have been...*repulsive*.

They were not Pariahs. That much Hekatii was sure. But they were not like the species they had been when they were breathing. There was something left of their souls...thin, fragile, flawed...as if someone had tried to replace their souls with artificial ones, but fumbling in the dark while ignoring every lesson the Aeldari Empire had ever gained.

Twelve faced her, while the thirteenth raced to reach the only source of the light lying at the top of the dark stairs, the very heart of the ziggurat.

Three heartbeats later, the twelve were destroyed. Hekatii was not the Queen of Blades, but killing things so weak spiritually was so easy she wouldn’t even call it ‘training’.

The thirteenth tried its best to accomplish his mission...but his inelegant ‘chainsword’ was blocked by her blade negligently a good distance away from the light...which revealed itself to be...a giant hourglass?

Hekatii giggled.

“Ah, the mystery is no more.”

The undead warrior removed his chainsword and tried to take several steps back. The former High Priestess of Khaine let the animated corpse do as it wished; many answers had been provided by a mere glance.

“*You are ignorant*.”

“Really?” Hekatii raised an eyebrow. “Because I had a theory before coming here. You see, the Builders were very focused on keeping their souls in the Material Plane. I don’t blame them; if you don’t have any Gods to protect you, the Warp is a very unpleasant to plunge your soul into.”

“*Your theory is false*.”

“They were so afraid of what coming after they held their last breath,” the Blood Muse smirked while ignoring utterly the words of the skeleton, “that they used one of the first symbols young species use to measure time: the hourglass. For if it measured time, it could also measure the time they had to escape the claws of the predators waiting for them in the polluted soup that the Old Ones messed up with.”

“*Ridiculous. Praying to an hourglass will achieve nothing*.”

Hekatii slightly inclined her head.

“Yes. That goes without saying.” It hadn’t stopped more species than she could possibly count to have tried that course of action at some point or another of their existence. “But the hourglass is the symbol and the container. It is powerful, but hardly sufficient by itself. But what if you replace the sands of the hourglass by something else? What is if still sand....but sand of a different kind? What will happen if you reduce Noctilith into a powder, imbue it with the power to keep the Warp at bay, and then pour it into special hourglasses? This is what your master learned from his explorations in the ruins of the Builders, isn’t it?”

Hekatii closed her eyes.

Predictably, the animated corpse attacked.

Her attack pulverised the lower part of its body, armour and non-armour.

The crash was loud, but not enough to hide to the snarl of anger.

And when Hekatii reopened her eyes, the light shining where there should have been eyes told her the Usurper of Death had decided to speak to her in person.

“*The new slave of the War Pretender*,” for all the feigned detachment, there was a large dose of hatred in that voice. “*You are rapidly becoming an annoyance*.”

“Only an annoyance?” Hekatii bared her teeth, throwing her blades into the air. “Disappointing. I will have to step up my game, then.”

The death rattle which followed...it took her a moment to realise the thing using the skeleton as a puppet was *laughing*.

“*You are not going to step up anything, foolish long-ear. You are merely a sacrifice the War Pretender uses in its desperate attempt to locate me. Go back to your blood bath. Tell him I will come to him*.”

“Or I will come to you.”

“*No. In the battle to come, you fall to the Red Angel, arrogant Muse of an extinct Empire*.”

The skeleton began to burn in purple flames, and there was soon nothing left of it.

Hekatii turned around to look again at the hourglass forged by the Builders.

“I’m really beginning to hate you, King in Yellow.” The blood-haired Aeldari complained. “Especially when your words make sense...”