**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 humans, 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, Antwyr!” 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 its 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-black 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 highly-encrypted 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 he 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 Mortarchs’ 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 every fortress and tunnel without hesitation, constantly reinforced by as many Daemon Engines as could be properly fielded.

They had already lost thirty thousand 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***

**Temporal Anomaly – date estimation impossible**

**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 brown 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-black 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 the 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 Astartes Legions of the thirtieth millennium 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***

**Temporal Anomaly – date estimation impossible**

**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, the genial Arch-Warlord Barbbuster, 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 sons’ 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 acidly.

“**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 the large rat.

**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 in charge 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 half 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 planet 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 utterly destroyed 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.

“**Yesssssss**.” 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 for this battle,” 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 Battleship 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 give us 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 from 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 indecent attire...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. The moon of the Last Nightmare fell to a combined assault of Archaeologists and Myrmidon Androids. And several Tzeentchian hosts supported Mortarion when he landed on the Shadowy Will world 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 slightly, 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 Blade 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 attacked, unleashing 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 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 former 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...”

**Ramilies-class 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 it as 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 intimately 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.

**Approaches of the Tyrant Star**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

“We have losses...err...”

The Magister seemed to lose his words in a definite manner.

Malicia had to admit there was a good reason for this silence.

The entire war zone was a vision of disaster made flesh.

Hundreds, no, thousands of Macro cannons and psy-guns had been ripped from warship’s hulls and were now spiralling into the void.

Nurglite-altered atmospheres were now forming dirty clouds of void Decay in the wrecks that had hosted them for centuries.

Gigantic Space Hulks had been hammered into impotence, until the masses of metal and Warp-altered materials listing away from them outmassed what was left of the original construct.

Malfian ships had broken apart, sometimes in two large sections, sometimes in so many parts it would largely take a pact with a Legion of Change to recover all the debris.

Countless warships had rammed each other, and so much unstable ammunition had been used that even with this lull in the fighting, the cursed Warpstone bombs and strange devices were continuing their detonations.

Priceless transports and everything they held had been eviscerated. Hundreds of thousands of beings, and that was in all likelihood a generous estimation, had died when their compartments were opened to the void...or before, when the ‘litany of hatred’ had commanded everyone of insufficient will to murder everything and everyone.

This was a spectacle of defeat and ruin.

And the worst part in all that? It definitely could have been *worse*.

If the Blood Eldar had not saved them...

Malicia did her best to keep her fear away from her face. It was not the moment to show weakness...no matter how close they had come from losing everything.

This was really the worst part. The trap of the King in Yellow had not been particularly brilliant, but it had worked.

“Please give me some good news.” The ruler of Malfi told her sorcerer vassal. “Please tell me that at least, what happened banished Angron from this system.”

There was a bright flash...and Malicia’s eyes widened.

“What-“

The *Fortress of Arrogance*, this corrupted Starfort, had been once again experiencing a massive bombardment from the Khornate fleet...and the latter stopped immediately.

It stopped, because the void bastion, certainly built in the days of the Great Crusade, was now neatly divided into two sub-fortresses, as if a gigantic sword had decided to cleave it in two.

“This is not something Daemon Primarchs can do, Majestryx. This is-“

The vision of nightmare assaulted her senses.

Dread engulfed everything.

Malicia saw a black-armoured Eldar figure dance around the Red Angel of Khorne.

The parahuman sorceress felt the earth-shattering power behind each blow.

“Majestryx, this is not-“

“This isn’t the Blood Muse, no.” This was something altogether *worse*. “The Queen of Blade honours us with her presence. And she seems to have decided to challenge Angron of the Red Sands.”

From anyone else, this would have definitely been extreme hubris, but Malicia had heard enough whispers about Commorragh and Macragge to know better in the case of that monster.

“What is she doing here, Warlord?”

“You aren’t asking the correct question.” The Malfian sorceress shook her head. “Relay my command to what is left of our fleet...under no circumstances anyone is to approach the *Fortress of Arrogance*...and wherever this Eldar monster does, you stay as far away as you can from her! This is my command, and if for some reason you disobey and manage to survive, I will kill you with my bare hands!”

“Yes, Majestryx!”

Malicia let herself fall into her command seat, wondering how things could go so monumentally wrong in such a short amount of time.

By reflex, she studied the hololith...but no, the Simurgh had not moved from its near-stationary position close to the *Terminus Est* and the debris of some Death Guard Battleships.

This was good for the Endbringer intervening in that massacre would have been their end.

But on the other hand, it also meant the Simurgh’s purposes went beyond killing them or turning them into fanatical puppets.

“I know the Blood Fleet was the closest,” Boros Kurn declared as he removed his helmet to show a pale and exhausted face, “and this was Angron’s fault to begin with, but what in the name of the Gods were the other Primarchs doing? They should have intervened, we got slaughtered!”

“The most reasonable answer I have,” Malicia replied in a grim voice, “was that they thought that since the *Conqueror* and its fleet failed to control Angron, it was the war cultists’ duty to solve the problem. The least reasonable answer...they didn’t dare fight the King in Yellow, unwilling to test if the King in Yellow had prepared another trap for them.”

“That’s...I understand.”

“Majestryx, I have the numbers you wanted. We lost outright about nineteen percent of the fleet, including the Battleship *Forbidden Library*. The Battleships *Tome of Ambition* and the *Proper Betrayal* are unable to move under their own power.”

One trap. A single trap, and the King in Yellow had almost destroyed them.

“And the rest of the fleet?”

“Another twenty to thirty percent are no longer fit to do any skirmish before emergency repairs are done. About half of the pre-war fleet can sail and fight, but all the capital warships are damaged, beginning with your flagship.”

“Crystal Labyrinth and Cursed Ambition,” the parahuman sorceress swore, trying to keep her calm...and failing in the process. “One more trap like this, and the *Natural Selection* will return alone to *Malfi*.”

“We have taken control of the entire battle-space around the Tyrant Star,” the son of Change’s officer pointed out. “And once the ‘litany of hatred’ faded, the King in Yellow stood no chance.”

“But the surviving ships have fled to adopt a defensive position around their homeworld of death,” Malicia hotly retorted. “And even if they weren’t, that leaves the Tyrant Star itself.”

Almost half of her fleet was gone or crippled, and of all fleets present, hers had not suffered in absolute or proportionally the most in fatalities: Perturabo and his cybernetic abominations, for example, had lost twenty Space Hulks, and Tzeentch only knew how many millions of Daemon Engines with that.

“Victory is a very distant dream, sons of Change,” the ruler of Malfi said sternly, “the Queen of Blades was not part of the King in Yellow’s plan, but her intervention at this point only limited the disaster...and the day is far from over.”

As if her words had been heard, there were more cosmic fires and nova-bright explosions coming from what had been the *Fortress of Arrogance*...

**Granithor/Komus, the Tyrant Star**

**The Gateway of Fools**

**Knight Errant Psamtic Mehhur**

At last, war had come to the Tyrant Star.

It had been a long time, but Psamtic remembered Prospero.

The Knight Errant remembered the skies in flames.

He had not forgotten how his homeworld had burned.

Today it was the Eleventh Legion’s turn to fight on its devastated homeworld.

Or rather, it was the turn of their dead.

There were no battle-cries, and no sign of panic.

The planet had been fortified and prepared.

Shields were activated. Eldritch sorcery burned everywhere, its effect focused on providing air-defence.

And then the lance from the heavens struck.

On the ground, it was as if a thousand Gods had cast their spears.

Psamtic saw many shields in the distance collapse. Thankfully, the one he was hiding under didn’t.

“They really don’t care whether the planet survives or not, aren’t they?”

In the next seconds, the orbital fire intensified....before the next level of devastation arrived.

If the Lances striking from orbit were the spears of the Gods, then what followed were the hammers.

Even from below, it was easy to recognise them for what they were: ship’s wrecks.

Whether they once belonged to the King in Yellow’s or his enemies’, the result was the same: they were thrown against the planet, forcing the massive guns to reveal themselves in order to diminish the damage.

A murderous game of fire and counter-fire began.

At some point, an Admiral in orbit must have thought the defenders were weakened enough.

The skies shrieked as a mass of Daemon Engines descended at their maximal speed to send the undead to their second graves.

There were so many of them for a moment Psamtic believed they were going to create a miniature eclipse.

But they did not.

Anti-air batteries, ranging from Titan-sized to mere chassis installed on alterations of the Hydra tanks, waited for them.

Many guns which revealed themselves were destroyed, but each seemed to reap many Heldrakes and other winged Daemon Engines before dying.

“Time to find another hideout, I believe.”

The Knight Errant had all the confirmation he needed. The enemy assaulting the planet was sworn to the Arch-Enemy. Therefore any of the belligerents, as far as Psamtic was concerned, was very bad news. The best outcome he could hope for was that they would wipe out each other. Alas, he didn’t think he could be that lucky.

For the moment, he needed to find a way to hide and to leave the planet.

Psamtic thought over several scenarios, and didn’t arrive to any conclusion he had not arrived before. The skeletons were enemies, the Knight Errant wasn’t sure he could pilot one of their starfighters or some space-capable aircraft even if he somehow managed to steal one, and so on...

The Webway Gate remained. Yes, it had looked like it was destroyed, but maybe the long-ears had repaired it in the mean time? Or maybe it was repairing itself if enough time passed? Psamtic would be the first to admit he knew very little about the ancient xenos species.

But as the skies burned crimson and black, with more orbital strikes hammering the Eleventh Legion’s redoubts, Psamtic decided it might very well be his best idea.

Of course, returning to this place wasn’t easy, not without attracting the kind of attention a non-Chaos Astartes wanted to avoid.

It took him a long time before he was able to find his step backs to the place where Inquisitor Contessa had disappeared...and Psamtic stopped well short of it.

He stopped, because there was a multicoloured-clad xenos dancing in front of him.

“Rejoice, for you are saved, human!”

Psamtic tried to draw his Bolter.

Something looking like a whip struck like a snake...and went to fix around his neck, beginning to strangle him.

“Please do not try to resist! Ha! Ha!”

There was a sound of thunder, and Psamtic lost consciousness.

When he reopened his eyes, he felt as if little time had passed, though it didn’t mean anything, on the world of the undead armies.

Psamtic saw no Eldar dancing in his field of vision, and so he stood as fast possible, trying to assess-

What.

No, this wasn’t possible, this was-

But his eyes weren’t betraying him.

The Demigod had changed a lot since the Great Crusade, but it couldn’t be an impostor.

It was really him.

“Lord Dorn,” Psamtic knelt. “I am yours to command.”

**High Orbit above the Tyrant Star**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

The last undead Battleship disappeared in a phenomenal explosion, and at last, the fleets had complete orbital superiority above the Tyrant Star.

Lotara didn’t find any reason to rejoice.

Not when the captain of the *Conqueror* felt too easily the sheer power building on the planet offering itself to her gaze.

The Blood Rose was unable to tell how long this battle had raged since they entered the system – any instrument capable to measure time was giving random answers between ‘million of years’ and ‘microseconds’, but bitter experience hinted they were way too close to the thirteenth fateful day.

“The probes have been smashed apart.” Kossolax reported. “What they tell...this planet is nothing but a succession of redoubts, trenches, and citadels.”

“Don’t forget the landmines, the tens of thousands of anti-air guns, and the trillions of skeletons waiting for us.”

The Space Marine snorted.

“As if anyone could forget them, Warlord.” There was a short pause. The World Eater knew no fear, like all Astartes, but he wasn’t Khârn. Like her, he had all too good an idea of the true cost it was going to take to secure a beachhead on this planet. “How do you want the warbands to proceed? There is a small planetary section where the shields have completely failed, and the *Splendid Massacre* is sterilising the enemy there as we speak.”

“Any other day, I would say this is where our main effort must go,” Lotara said darkly, “but unfortunately, we can’t afford to wage an entire planetary campaign. The schemes of the King in Yellow are extremely close to coming to fruition, and if we land too far away from the enemy’s greatest stronghold, we will lose all our chances to stop this undead abomination before it is too late.”

Kossolax cleared his throat.

“I can’t disagree with the reasoning, Warlord, but the ‘greatest stronghold’ is...massively fortified.”

Transformed engines hissed in fury, and the hololithic representation of a colossal ziggurat flashed into existence before them.

Despite the blood-infused projections of the Blood God and its servants, the mere vid-cast of it cast a significant baleful aura on her command bridge.

“Each approach of this ziggurat is defended by thirteen major defensive positions,” Kossolax explained, pointing out some of the monstrous anti-warship guns and major citadels. “And that’s just what the enemy allowed us to see. As one could expect from a competent enemy, the entire theatre is heavily shielded, both by archeotech from the Great Crusade and witchery, to which rare xenos tech must have been added. The servants of Tzeentch have already confirmed all sort of Entropic Curses are active everywhere. The skeletons and all servants of the King in Yellow have been immunised to it, but none of our troops are.”

“And we lack the time and the specialists to develop counter-measures,” Lotara did not grind her teeth in frustration, but by the Brass Citadel, it was not for a lack of desire.

The lack of time to stop the King in Yellow would always have been a given, given that they had thirteen days at the beginning to stop the Eleventh Primarch.

But the bloodbath of many elite units was solely on Angron’s head.

“Summon the Council of Blood, Kossolax.”

One by one, the survivors answered.

They should have been eight of them. They were only five left.

Lotara didn’t know of Hekatii’s fate since the Blood Muse had saved the battle after destroying the King in Yellow’s elaborate trap. She may be alive, but the captain of the *Conqueror* wasn’t going to bet her fleet on it.

But if the Eldar’s fate was uncertain, the two others were dead. Both Saint-Just de Montbars and Warlord Ghostfire had perished with their flagships. In the latter’s case, the demise had come by ramming one of the Space Hulks. There would have been nothing to bury if they had the time to organise funerals. Which they had not the time for, anyway.

“While I can’t be sure due to the temporal anomalies, I believe the thirteenth day of this battle has begun,” the female Warlord began without wasting time in salutations and other useless things. “We have to land as close as to the great ziggurat of the King in Yellow as close as possible, and secure a beachhead. Commander Eclipse.”

“Yes, Chosen?” The leader of the Blood Caste saluted.

“Due to your own losses and your greater discipline, you are to serve the dual role of our strategic reserve and guard our backs.”

“With due respect,” General Gore of the Gore Warriors grunted in displeasure, “the trap with the *Fortress of Arrogance* was the last trick the bag of bones had left.”

“That’s the sort of stupid idea that almost cost us the battle,” Lotara glared at him, “we are not going to repeat Angron’s disastrous mistake! Am I clear?”

One by one, they lowered their eyes...even Khârn. His armour was soaked in a second layer of blood ‘paint’, and since the skeletons didn’t bleed, Lotara had a dark certainty which troops exactly the Betrayer had spent his time slaughtering when the Litany of Hatred raged.

“The *Conqueror* is going to devastate a large shielded zone where several redoubts and kill-zones bar the way,” Lotara said in a voice of implacable command. “Then we unleash all the Legions of the Blood God, daemonic and mortal.”

**The Tyrant Star**

**The Eternity Plains – approaches of the Nameless Ziggurat**

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Everyone had known there would be no effect of surprise on the Tyrant Star.

There hadn’t been any in the first place from the moment they entered the system, why would there be in the lair of the beast?

But there was absence of surprise, and then there was the term ‘killing ground’.

The Tyrant Star was the latter.

“**Unleash me! Make sure the chaos is complete!**” Antwyr proclaimed, its malevolent joy evident to all.

“Shut up!” Malicia retorted. For reasons that were incredibly evident in hindsight, the Black Blade sounded less and less sane.

Calamity and disaster had struck the coalition aiming to put an end to the King in Yellow’s reign, and for the daemonic entity, the emotions and the deaths were akin to a delicacy.

“Ax’senaea, demolish this bastion! Anubion Cult, we need stability on the flanks! Go!”

For all her best attempts to organise some cohesion, the battlefield was just madness.

Of course, the enemy armies could bear most of the blame for that. The entire planet was a series of barracks for the King in Yellow’s undead forces, and that included the tunnels under their feet. According to the cults which had reported back, there was a maze of tunnels there, and many forts had already been located, along with other nasty surprises.

“**FATE DECREEDS YOUR DESTRUCTION**!”

Flamers of Tzeentch were conjured by the hundreds of thousands. But such was the sheer lethality of the battlefield that they had on average only the time to spray once or twice their Alchemical fires before being banished back to the Warp.

Evidently, wherever a Flamer exploded, the skeletons were pulverised, and not standing back anymore, but not every cultist could walk up in the wake of this pyrokinesist conflagration. And even if they did, they always seemed to be on more gun, one more trap, and one more battalion of undead to stop the advance.

As for Screamers, which she had initially placed very high hopes upon, they were proving essentially useless.

The Tyrant Star was a nightmarish bastion boasting an endless number of anti-air guns, and while daemons should be more resistant to them than to blades, the aerial servants of the Architect of Fate couldn’t do anything as bone spikes and other lethal ammunition darkened the sky.

“TZEENTCH! FOR TZEENTCH! DEATH TO THE KING IN YELLOW!”

“**DEATH TO THE KING IN YELLOW!”**

“LET THE GALAXY BURN!”

The attack resumed, spearheaded by millions of Pink Horrors.

And the battlefield burned indeed.

The Lesser Daemons opened the way, and for every gun which was revealed, a punitive sorcery bombardment blinded most of your senses.

The air burned, changed, and grew insanely saturated by the Power of the Warp.

The ground where Landers crashed onto began to twist in blue and pink colour.

Broken skeletons began to mutate.

The advance gained ground.

On certain worlds, that would have meant hundreds of kilometres.

Here, it was closer to two hundred metres, and there were corpses for every single metre they had claimed.

But every little footstep was important.

Every push allowed them to deploy more and more troops, to summon more and more Legions of Tzeentch upon the battlefield.

“We should commit the Knights of House Mandrakor now!” Boros Kurn snarled, as the Space Marines rotated out of the line to replenish their ammunition.

“No.” Malicia shook her head. “I won’t commit *Tyrannosaurus Rex* and all our most important units until we have a sufficient landing zone. The batteries of the enemy are still able to slaughter a third of the transports we send with each wave.”

“But they could-“

“Besides, they would be superb targets for the super-heavy artillery of the enemy the moment they enter into the fray.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“It is a question of firepower, Boros, and so far, outside of orbit, we aren’t the ones who-“

Once again, the skies burned in an inferno that had nothing to do with physical laws.

If the parahuman sorceress had not known better, she would have said it was a comet.

But as it was-

“Angron,” Malicia whispered, truly afraid. “It is Angron, and he is falling...”

“You aren’t serious!” One of the Space Marines by her side protested. “No one is strong enough to throw a Daemon Primarch hundreds of thousands of kilometres away like a modified ramming asteroid!”

There was...it wasn’t a whisper, but it was as if the galaxy was silenced for a heartbeat, and the billions of warriors and daemons had no choice but to hear *her*.

“Disappointing.” The Queen of Blades spoke, wherever she was.

And then Angron crashed into the Tyrant Star.

The entire planet screamed as the impact and the significance of the gesture seeped into reality.

It would have banished plenty of Greater Daemons, Malicia knew.

Yet impossibly, Angron stood once again, nightmarish vision of carnage and despair incarnate.

Hardly uninjured, one of the wings was gone. Most of his brass and bronze armour was falling apart, and his red skin bled rivers of blood in their own right.

The enormous Black Blade had been broken in half, and it was rapidly discarded for a Black Axe taken straight from the claws of a Bloodthirster.

“**HATE YOU! BLOOD! HATRED! SKULLS!**”

“This is a mad beast!” A Magister said aghast.

“Certainly,” Malicia agreed. “But you go to war with the armies you have, not the armies you want.”

Maybe they had been spying upon her, maybe it was coincidence, but the skies above her illuminated once more, and this time tens of thousands of extremely dangerous rockets were precipitated over the Tyrant Star, with hundreds of thousands of Skavens strapped to them.

Where so far the Warp summons landing and waging war had been essentially limited to the Legions of Blood and Change, this was no longer the case.

An ocean of Plaguebearers took to the battlefield on her right flank, and it was the vanguard of a vast number of Thunderhawks and Stormbirds in the disgusting decaying livery of the Death Guard.

“Would it have hurt them, to coordinate with us?” This was the only imprecation the Malfian sorceress allowed herself before closing her mouth and keeping her fury in check.

“**They want to become the masters, not the slaves**.”Antwyr told her mockingly. “**Oh, and it looks like the Lord of Iron has decided to grace you with his help...a bit late, but it is the thought that counts, right**?”

The battle raged for about twenty heartbeats before the Myrmidon Androids arrived.

As for the Battle for Dust and the other engagements of the Granithor System, there was no one human visibly in command of the automatons. And by ‘automatons’, Malicia meant it. No matter how intense the suppressing fire coming from the King in Yellow’s strongholds, the Myrmidon Androids were advancing with no care for their casualties.

They hadn’t any preservation. They weren’t showing any sign of humanity.

The parahuman sorceress shivered.

Even if those samples hadn’t a ninth of the capacities their forbearers of the Dark Age took for granted, it was bad enough.

It was a tide of iron, much like the Eleventh Legion’s and its auxiliaries were a tide of bone.

That the hosts sworn to Tzeentch did badly need their assistance was not sufficient to quiet down her unease.

It was important that the King in Yellow’s supremacist plan failed yes. But the Malfian sorcerer covens weren’t bleeding to replace one tyrant of bone with one of metal and cybernetics...

“We have mass teleportations flaring up. The Space Hulks are about to transfer something-“

The Magister didn’t have to finish the sentence.

The Tyrant Star shook incredibly violently, and between the violent war zone separating the Conqueror’s forces from hers, Chaos Titans began to materialise.

Thirty Scout Titans, so heavily modified she couldn’t tell if they had been originally Warhounds at the beginning or new classes.

Fourteen Warlord Battle Titans, some of them clearly having once served in the Legio Fureans, the Tiger Eyes of Incaladion.

Two Warmaster Titans, with enormous Warp-cannons mounted on the arms that looked like a new design.

“They are-“

“IRON WITHIN! IRON WITHOUT!”

The battle-cry resonated from every direction, and what felt like the most brutal artillery bombardment in existence was directed at the undead redoubts.

When it paused after...ten minutes, maybe? Everything in front of the Android Army was just...gone.

There was nothing left.

And then the Warp screamed one more time.

A last Titan trampled the vanquished skeletons of the Tyrant Star.

Unconsciously, everyone took a few steps back.

This wasn’t an Emperor Titan, of that Malicia was certain. For all its mutations of ‘Beast Titan’, *Tyrannosaurus Rex* wasn’t that big, no matter if it adopted a bipedal station or not.

It was something bigger.

It was a mountain of destruction, a great tower bristling with the most enormous and devastating weapons ever invented by the Hell-Lords of the Mechanicum and the Warpsmiths of the Iron Warriors.

It was so tall that even the Warmaster Titans looked small, barely managing to reach the top of its legs with their forty meters-height.

It was a weapon of pure annihilation.

And it was in the hands of a Primarch that had proven beyond doubt he was the least reliable of all the fallen sons of the Emperor...yes, even compared to the one serving Anarchy.

“**THE *LORD OF IRON* IS READY. YOU WILL ADVANCE. IRON WITHIN. IRON WITHOUT**.”

**The Thirteenth Gate – approaches the Nameless Ziggurat**

**Primarch Omegon**

Perturabo’s strategy had not changed since the end of the Siege of Terra.

It could be described as a maximum of firepower delivered in a synchronised dance of destruction.

Malal hated it.

**This is too-too orderly! Make him stop-change!**

**More Anarchy!**

**Send the Eshin saboteurs!**

To his complete lack of surprise, the last proposal was really popular, and Omegon had no choice but to send some lesser rats to serve the purposes of his deity.

The Primarch of the Anarchy Legion felt it was a mistake, but as long as he could more or less think clearly, not attracting the attention of the various ‘heads’ of Malal was his utmost priority.

Even if Perturabo’s way of war had been efficient so far – as long as you didn’t consider the fact he had let the Khornate and Tzeentchian hosts bleed on the black sands – his brother and he had never been close, and with them abandoning their mortal bodies behind, their relationship has severely degraded.

Omegon could have forgotten that, if there wasn’t that...absurdly tall monstrosity that had been given the name of *Lord of Iron*. And by the way, the Twentieth Primarch found the name particularly stupid, because you didn’t know any more if you spoke of the Primarch or the Titan.

But as long as one mentioned the latter...the slave of Anarchy had a very bad feeling. All these armies of ‘Myrmidon Androids’, all these Space Hulks, all these Titans...plus the millions of Daemon Engines committed so far...they hadn’t been built after Fenris and Macragge. The Warp was unpredictable, but there was some causality, even in the Eye of Terror.

This was an industrial effort which must have started after Weaver destroyed Commorragh and Slaanesh died.

And since the rise of Anarchy and the Black Crusade had not been evident at this point of time, this meant these creations of steel and cybernetics were not intended to fight against the King in Yellow, since no one knew at that point the Eleventh Primarch had survived.

The only possible targets were the Imperium and the Legions inside the Eye, and his intuition told him it was not the former.

“**Stop these frontal assaults**!” Omegon ordered as another wave of Verminus warriors was incinerated by previously hidden machine guns. “**Stay at long-range, and support the Forgefiends**!”

Of course, as Anarchy willed it, a few vermin soldiers took upon themselves to interpret ‘support’ as ‘disassemble the weapons of the Forgefiends’. Evidently, the Skaven realised quickly that a Forgefiend, for all that it was a long-range engine of destruction, was largely capable to maul and annihilate the troops of Anarchy at close-quarters.

Then a green gate was summoned into existence ten metres away, and one of his brothers emerged from it.

“**Omegon**,” Mortarion saluted.

“**Mortarion**,” the currently human-headed Daemon Primarch saluted back. “**Have you come to admire with me the result of Perturabo’s armoured fist**?”

Whatever you could say, it was really something you didn’t see every day. Over forty Titans, escorting what had certainly to be the largest War Walker in existence. There were hundreds of Knight-size machines, and tens of thousands of Daemon Engines playing the role of mobile artillery, the most common ‘breed’ being of course the Forgefiends. Soul Grinders, Defilers, and the relatively recent Decimators were operating at close-quarters, crushing billions of bones.

More conventionally, there were tens of thousands of middle and heavy tanks. The artillery, towed and self-propelled, could not be counted per the unit, but per the artillery such were its numbers.

“**No**.” The Grim Reaper-looking Primarch answered.

“**Too bad. It is something worth seeing once. And to say he lost a colossal number of assets when trying to storm Dust**...”

As the Myrmidon Androids revealed their true numbers, Omegon had acknowledged the Space Hulks were more likely than not a location to transfer the assets needed, not really a transport containing the units sent away from the Eye of Terror. Most of the Titans couldn’t have been stored inside a Space Hulk anyway, given how dangerous and unstable most Hulks were once you got inside. Perturabo must have installed functional Warp Gates in each of his Space Hulks.

“**The Ziggurat is getting closer. It is time we break them and reach the lair of the Eleventh**.”

**Yes-yes!**

**No-no!**

As always, Malal was of no use to give a course of action...

In the end, Omegon felt time was running out. The ritual would soon be complete.

They had to storm the Nameless Ziggurat and destroy whatever the King in Yellow was using to power his deathly ritual.

“**Very well, brother**.” Alpharius’ twin drew his Anarchic Spear, while as always, Mortarion had his sinister Silence, a Power Scythe so tall no one but a Primarch would have a chance of wielding it as expertly as him. “**We take the field**.”

What followed was something few had witnessed since the Siege of Terra: four Primarchs leading a general assault on enemy positions.

Obviously, except Mortarion and him, they stayed all clear from each other – necessarily in the case of Perturabo, as the Lord of Olympia had not stepped down from his Titan.

But there was something exhilarating about all of them throwing themselves into the melee once more.

They unleashed their power, and the skeleton armies were unable to even slow them down. Bone copies of various Daemon Engines, super-heavy bone artillery, hundreds of undead Space Marines, and of course more skeletons, human and xenos, that one Primarch could possibly count tried to stop them.

It was in vain.

Angron, as always, was rampaging and likely claiming the greatest tally, but none of the other brothers were far behind.

The advance, which had been progressing at a steady race, was now a slow run.

Above and below the ground, incredibly contagious diseases attacked the bone constructs.

Complex sorceries made sure the dead were staying dead.

The Titans and the walking artillery never stopped firing, and while barrels exploded left and right, there always more cannons to replace them.

Soon enough there were no more defences between them and the Nameless Ziggurat.

It was a thing of dread. It was a construction that had not been imagined and built by the living.

It was floating effortlessly into the air, about twenty metres above the ground, despite the fact it had to be the size of a small Hive, and that there was no sign of any technology powering anti-gravity plates...or anything that could replicate it, truth to tell.

As for the accesses...the only way to enter, if you didn’t have wings, seemed to use of the thirteen suspended bridges which linked the Tyrant Star to this ultimate citadel.

As the suspended bridges reeked of sorcery, Omegon could say without risk of being wrong these ‘entrance accesses’ were a trap.

But-

As he took a step forwards, new Space Marines appeared, and these ones looked similar to the ‘Mortarch’ he had killed before. There were only five of them. It looked like the losses had been significant for the enemy too...

The rejoicing had to wait, for a familiar yellow-cloaked figure, one having donned a sinister crown, stepped out of a gate of bones that hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“*How nostalgic*,” the voice was cold, dead...and yet managed to be cruel and threatening. “*Mortarion...Alpharius Omegon...Perturabo...and of course Angron the so-easily-baited*.”

A cohort of skeletons took position just in time, as the Red Angel charged.

What followed was another massacre of bones and undead constructs, but for the sake of the conversation, everyone chose to not comment on that.

“**Are you ready to concede your defeat**?” Mortarion asked bluntly. “**It is not too late for you. Decay will claim your Legion. This is not a pleasant fate, but it’s better than the one you will receive if the Four tear apart what’s left of your soul**.”

**“No-no!”**

The voices of Anarchy shrieked and screamed, finding the idea particularly intolerable.

But their tantrums quickly ended, as the Eleventh Primarch answered with a disdainful sound.

“*I will never bend the knee to the Pretenders who enslaved you, brother*.” The sceptre of skulls twirled, but after an instant, it ceased, and was once again used as a walking stick. “*I am the rightful Master of Eternity. Why would I concede defeat*?”

“**The forces assembled for the final assault**,” Omegon told in a reasonable tone, “**might provide a clue or two as to why your surrender might be preferable**.”

The King in Yellow said a word in a language sounding like one of the Tallarn dialects.

In the next second, a titanic lighthouse of purple-black was expelled by the top of the Nameless Ziggurat.

Immediately, dead dug out of the arid and lifeless ground by the billions. Omegon could feel them, all the rituals which had been cast here and now.

Thirteen times thirteen minor Ziggurats teleported onto the battlefield, flanking the approaches of the five Chaos armies towards the ultimate bastion of the Eleventh Legion.

“*This is the end for all of you*.”

An enormous sarcophagus was released on the slopes of the Nameless Ziggurat, and before they could even think about striking it, Pariah power was expelled into a battlefield-sized shockwave.

The Daemon Primarchs were among the greatest servants of Chaos. They could resist it, though their power diminished.

But the Legions behind them weren’t that lucky. Ruthlessly, violent, millions upon millions of daemons were banished from this world, and with this Warp discordance, thousands of psykers and sorcerers died screaming as their pacts failed, something devoured them from the inside, or another unpleasant demise struck them.

And of course on each ziggurat and new defensive position, there were thousands of Space Marines, the Legionnaires of the Eleventh, prepared to unleash hell.

“*Surrender and embrace Eternity, brothers*!”

“**Never**,” Omegon swore.

“**Never!**” Mortarion replied.

“**NEVER**,” Perturabo thundered.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!” Angron, for once, was not wrong.

“*So be it. Since you don’t want to serve, you will be exterminated and re-enslaved to my will once my triumph is complete*.”

The skies turned entirely black-purple as the King in Yellow said the words.

Without any warning, a tempest of black lightning struck the *Lord of Iron*, breaking through its Void Shields like they didn’t exist in the first place.

And the Titan began to fall.

**Before the Nameless Ziggurat – the Kill-Zone**

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Trapped.

Again.

The moment the ziggurats were teleported, Malicia knew what was coming.

They had fallen into one of the King in Yellow’s traps, again.

That this time there had been no alternative was little consolation.

While a sort of long rectangular kill-zone was created, the parahuman sorceress could guess it wouldn’t have mattered if, instead of a western approach, they had tried an eastern, northern, or southern one. The undead reserves were clearly prepared to counter their assault.

Nothing really mattered now.

Nothing but breaking free of the trap.

The first idea that came to her mind was to try to storm the Nameless Ziggurat, the dread bastion of horror and death. She squashed immediately. The ritual that the Eleventh Primarch couldn’t afford to be disrupted was inside it. There was no way the Enemy would be lax with its defences.

The fact that suddenly Angron, Daemon Primarch, charged the immense ziggurat and was stopped by psy-tech devices was all the confirmation she needed. If the Red Angel thought slamming his ugly mutt into the enemy’s defences was a good idea, then it certainly wasn’t one.

“The lesser ziggurats!” By good fortune, most of the Tzeentchian host was defending the right flank of the Chaos armies. “Prepare all your most powerful spells, and focus your fire on a single target! We will destroy them one by one! The King in Yellow thinks he has us trapped? Let us show him he is wrong!”

This was a speech of defiance, and it was sorely needed, because the enemy Space Marines opened fire, and the sorcery-wielding on the other side proceeded to slaughter countless cultists and soldiers.

With the banishment of the Legions of Change, the mortals were left to hold the line.

The mortals and the parodies of Men of Iron, but as the tallest Titan in existence was smacked around and fell upon its own host, the reliability of the cybernetic troops, which had never been noted for its adaptability, fell down considerably.

“Is Perturabo dead?” one Magister decided to ask the idiotic question, of course.

“Don’t be stupid!” Malicia answered as fast as possible. “A Daemon Primarch doesn’t die so easily.”

Which didn’t mean it couldn’t be banished, and the King in Yellow had clearly sucker-punched his brother. Somehow, losing a Titan of that size...well, Malicia doubted *it was part of the plan*.

“READY? FIRE! FIRE AT WILL!”

The Warp roared, and aetheric ray guns illuminated the darkness that had just been conjured by the enemy. Spells tore apart the illusions and the counter-measures of the undead. The Malfian armies closed ranks and took defensive positions. More daemons were summoned.

The Tyrant Star shook as after an onslaught of a thousand sorcerers, the first lesser floating ziggurat crashed...upon a massive army of skeletons that had just stormed out of vast tunnels.

“**Ha! How sad for them!**” Antwyr laughed evilly. “**Their Calamity is my satisfaction! Kill them all!**”

Despite the hilarity of the daemonic sword, things weren’t going well at all. Malicia called the ships in orbit to organise a deployment of the reserve force, but when communication was established, it was to be told reinforcement was impossible. Enormous rifts had opened, and *someone* had released millions of Naval Mines. As long as a clear lane wasn’t cleared, Titan Transports and the heavy macro-haulers necessary to land a massive amount of troops would simply die accomplishing nothing.

As for teleportation, it was impossible, the jamming of the beacons was simply too powerful.

They had to bring down as many lesser ziggurats as possible, and they had to do it fast.

Unfortunately, they were only two armies which had understood that: the one commanded by Lotara Sarrin, and hers. As far as the Myrmidon Androids were concerned, the directive hadn’t changed: they were to attack the Nameless Ziggurat straight on.

The servants of the Lord of Iron had at least the excuses of being leaderless and disobeyed. The rats and the worshippers of diseases didn’t have it...but they nonetheless pressed on, heedless of the monstrous casualties they were taking...no matter that the power of the defences seemed to rise, not decrease, as they pressed their attacks.

“Send them messengers! We need assistance bringing the flanking ziggurats, or we’re all going to fail!”

Already the landing zones were under attack. The undead Astartes were decimating her infantry.

It was likely going to take years for Malfi armed forces to recover from that, and this was if a core of veterans survived the day in the first place!

“The three armies marching for the Nameless Ziggurat are ignoring us!”

Malicia had thoughts about it before, but at this point, she really acknowledged that this campaign should have been commanded by a Warmaster of Chaos, or any equivalent the Gods could agree upon.

There were five army commands, and everyone was pursuing completely different goals with incredible weapons that weren’t deployed for the same reasons.

That could only result in disaster, no matter the military skills of each army commander. Hell, it was clear the Khornate army and the Daemon Primarch of Khorne hadn’t the same goals and priorities. So technically, there were at least six different factions...

More daemons came to reinforce them, including three Lords of Change.

The ruler of Malfi only felt it came too late. They had downed three lesser ziggurats now, but that left ten, and a glance on what was happening on the left flank told her Lotara Sarrin had not been able to do better.

They were losing ground. It wasn’t a large amount of land, but with each meter they were forced to abandon, they lost dozens if not hundreds of dead behind them. And the power of undeath was growing so powerful that the Anubion Cult was no longer able to keep the defunct soldiers in a lifeless state.

But there was worse. For all the fanatical resistance of some cults, the landing zones behind them were beginning to be overrun, the fortresses conquered a few hours ago returning to their owners. If the Naval Mines in orbit weren’t cleared soon enough, then she would have nowhere to land her reinforcements.

“*You can still flee, child*.”

The words were coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

“For you to shoot my retreating forces like elephants in a corridor? No, thank you.” She retorted derisively.

Malicia wasn’t arrogant to pretend herself the equal of a Primarch in terms of battle-experience and global strategy, but she knew that it was when an army was routed that the butcher bill could rise to monstrous proportions. If there was a situation that was ripe for an epic massacre, it was this one.

“*I will self-destruct all the ziggurats you have some trouble with*,” the old monster promised, “*and my servants will be banished temporarily.”*

The parahuman sorceress’ eyes narrowed in mistrust.

“Yes, of the goodness of your heart, I presume?”

Cold laughter answered, like a cruel imitation of human behaviour.

“*No. You will give me your Black Blade as payment. You will deliver me Antwyr. This will be the price of your salvation...and the final lesson you shouldn’t have tried to meddle with mysteries you had no proper understanding of*.”

“**What? No! Don’t give me to him, Majestryx! I remain your most obedient servant**!”

“Oh shut up, Antwyr” Malicia rolled her eyes. “I have heard my quota of improbable lies for today.”

The problem was that as far as desperate situation went, this one really began to smell badly, and it wasn’t because of Nurglite cultist.

They were really trapped in a cauldron of death.

Half of the Daemon Primarchs were not giving commands to get out of this trap, and the other half had decided that as long as they broke through in the Nameless Ziggurat, whatever happened to their armies was irrelevant.

Unless they were granted a miracle, they were going to die here.

“*Have you taken your decision, child*?”

In the end, it was the incredibly arrogant voice that made her decision. Malicia freely admitted she had made some bad choices over the years, but this King in Yellow was making her, really, really angry.

“If you want to have Antwyr,” the Chosen of Tzeentch spat, “you are welcome to have it. You will just have to take it from my cold dead hands!”

“**What she said! Go Destiny Unwritten! Spank his old bones**!”

Needless to say, the King in Yellow wasn’t really happy with the answer...

“*You signed your own death warrant, foolish child. But let’s not say I am an unreasonable God. Once you will be joining your fallen in a pool of your own blood, I will indeed make sure you bow before me and deliver your weapon in my possession*.”

“That’s your dream scenario. I happen to disagree. Your armies can still be vanquished.”

“*My armies are endless and eternal*,” the seething hatred could definitely be heard now. Had she touched a sensible point? “*They can’t be vanquished*-“

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

The ferocious roar managed the impossible; it stopped nearly instantly all the fighting.

Malicia gaped, and she wasn’t the only one.

This couldn’t be true, first the Simurgh and now-

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

And then the skies began to turn green.

Many explosions rocked the orbital space above their heads.

Strikes from the heaven resumed.

One by one, impossibly, the lesser ziggurats began to fall, before millions of astonished eyes.

The undead armies had to flee to avoid being pulverised by their own redoubts. Entire companies of enemy Astartes teleported away in catastrophic emergency before their firing platforms crashed onto the Tyrant Star.

And belligerent screams continued, announcing the turning of the tide.

“WAAAGGGHH! WAAAAAAAAAAAAGGHHHHHH!”

**Somewhere in space close the Tyrant Star**

**Grey Knights Battle-Barge *Fire of Dawn***

**Grand Master Stark**

For all the best efforts of the Prognosticars, there had been no prediction that the greenskins were about to involve themselves into the bloodbath of the Calyx Hell Stars.

But for once, the arrival of the Orks was not something the Grand Master of the 2nd Brotherhood was unhappy with.

There were truly few loyal souls in this system, but an abundance of Traitors’.

Simple logic dictated the ramshackle fleet hurling itself at the various heretical formations was going to increase their enemy losses.

Last and most precious benefit, the Orks by random luck seemed to have disabled one of the King in Yellow’s traps at the worst moment possible – worst moment possible from the trap-maker’s perspective that is.

“The Orks seem to divide themselves into two sub-fleets,” Brother-Captain Angkor said after a few seconds of silence to study the situation. “The loud boasts they’re broadcasting on every possible frequency suggest two beasts of mid-level importance allied with each other, and now they’re trying to accomplish their own objectives. The first, which seems to have stolen advanced xenos guns somewhere, is moving to board one of the Fourth Legion’s modified Space Hulks.”

The Grand Master of the Grey Knights didn’t show any emotion outwardly, but deep inside, he allowed himself a wince at the bad news. An Ork in command of a Space Hulk-sized warship was not good news for the Imperium or anyone in this galaxy at all.

But his mission was not to destroy the Orks. And Stark knew that the 2nd Brotherhood would likely not have the strength to accomplish it anyway before running out of time. The first Ork sub-fleet was forty ships-strong. He, on the other hand, had just the *Fire of Dawn*, and the 2nd Brotherhood wasn’t at full strength.

The Ruinous Powers had tried their utmost to make sure the Knights of Titan would not reach this battlefield before it was over, and unfortunately, that the Blades of Victory – as the 2nd Brotherhood was known – were alone was proof the Arch-Enemy had not triggered countless uprisings and engineered mass daemon summonings in vain.

“The second sub-fleet?” Stark asked.

“They are moving through the minefields in a typical Ork way.” Which meant, as everyone in the galaxy knew, that the Orks were ‘clearing the minefield’ by throwing their warships into it, and trusting their xenos luck that some might arrive alive once they were no more Naval Mines to detonate. “It looks their Warboss was offended that they didn’t invite them to this battle, and the greenskin in a hurry to correct the situation.”

“Hmm...”

Many new stars were born as fatally, the Ork vanguard disintegrated as thousands of Naval Mines blew up at once, taking at least six Cruiser-sized Ork ships with them.

Certain fleets were trying to reinforce their beleaguered forces on the Tyrant Star. By a turn of irony, most of the Chaos factions had kept their corrupted Tau factions in reserve, along with other xenos. It wasn’t good news, for it confirmed the Arch-Enemy was giving great importance to its semi-disciplined elites.

But overall, the situation in orbit of the Tyrant Star was complete chaos. The King in Yellow’s lieutenants were counterattacking, sending fire ships against the greatest squadrons of the different heretic fleets. The Space Hulks were particularly targeted, as suddenly their colossal sizes, the random position of their batteries, and their inability to dodge anything were revealed to be incredible problems.

And as much as the Grand Master was enjoying the heretics being on the receiving end of their own ‘medicine’, it was impossible to truly rejoice.

“What say the Prognosticators?”

“It seems the intervention of the ‘Fools’ did a lot of damage...but it wasn’t enough. The King in Yellow’s plan has been delayed significantly, but it is not broken.”

The Lord of the Blades of Victory knew what the Brother-Captain was about to say before he opened his mouth.

“Grand Master, the intervention of the Orks is not going to be enough. While our...allies have allowed the strike team to get inside the nameless Ziggurat, the main warbands of the heretics were unable to imitate them. The two disruptions will have offered some momentary salvation to the Traitor Astartes, but they aren’t going to reach the inner sanctum of the King in Yellow and end him. As long as the different shields, be they esoteric psychic or merely technological, keep the armies outside of the Nameless Ziggurat...the Purged Primarch wins.”

The Grand Master examined every facet of the battlefield, trying to find a point which would invalidate what Brother-Captain Angkor had said.

But he found nothing.

“Very well,” Stark nodded. “The heretics have had their chance, it’s time for the 2nd Brotherhood to win where they failed. Remove the Aethergold and the Weapon’s beacon from the Umbralshroud Chamber.”

The ‘shadow Noctilith’, as so many Inquisitors had nicknamed it in the last months, was the only reason the Battle-Barge *Fire of Dawn* had been able to sneak into the Granithor System without anyone noticing. The Grand Master was sure this operation was going to have deep repercussions where it came to the battles waged by their Chapter, especially when its use was combined with Aethergold.

There were times when they had to stay in the shadows. And there were times when a Knight of Titan had to step into the light to fulfil his oaths.

The time of discretion was now over. Now the daemons and all those who consorted with them had to *burn*.

“We are the hammer!” The Grand Master of the 2nd Brotherhood called his battle-brothers to arms.

“IN THE EMPEROR’S NAME, LET NONE SURVIVE!”

**The Nameless Ziggurat**

**The Throne Room**

**The King in Yellow**

The King in Yellow was seething with rage.

He had had to give the order to retreat to twenty-six of his armies, and his plan to slaughter the Pretenders’ armies wholesale had utterly failed, though some measure could perhaps be recovered in time.

The situation wasn’t full desperate, but it always came back to a simple question.

How?

His plan had been flawless.

The ziggurats had been tied to the hourglasses, and the hourglasses were in his Throne Room, beyond the reach of all of his enemies.

How had they managed to-

The being which had once been called the Eleventh Primarch stormed into the vast hall, and felt an immense internal shock.

It was not because he saw several hourglasses being destroyed. The moment several ziggurats fell, the King had understood some of them had been broken.

It was because the scene in front of him was of utter madness.

As the sands of Nadirite flowed out of the hourglasses, creating pockets of time anomalies in the process, a parody of a battle was fought.

The participants looked like they had been specifically assembled to look like an insult to his magnificence.

One was a man, using unstable metal devices that by all rights shouldn’t function. His black armour would likely have given shivers to any tech-oriented specialist of any race.

The second, who looked like his ally, was a bare-chested Squat with an enormous orange mohawk, was wielding a large axe while making atrocious sounds that would never be called *music*.

The third and fourth, their ‘opponents’, consisted of a white rat perched on the shoulders of one of those ‘rat-ogres’ that had been hurled by the tens of thousands against his defences so many times in the last day.

“Die-die, my nemeses!” The white-furred menace laughed, before throwing another grenade burning with eldritch light.

Before the King could summon his powers to stop it, the projectile largely missed its intended target...and ended up destroying one more hourglass, making it the tenth out of the thirteenth he had lost by the fault of these...these vandals.

“*ENOUGH*!” The King in Yellow shouted, with the Mortarchs hurling a salvo to mark his point. “*YOU STAND IN MY THRONE ROOM! EXPLAIN YOURSELVES, INTRUDERS*!”

This was when the rightful Master of Eternity heard the clapping.

Laughter echoed, somehow managing to be close and yet so very distant.

But it was not the laughter of a C’Tan.

By a series of acrobatics no human was capable out, a multi-coloured being went to stand between the rat duo and their human enemies.

“*Eldar*...”

The King in Yellow had always disliked these manipulating and perfidious xenos, but after what the Blood Muse had done to his plans, he had really begun to experience hatred about these arrogant scions of a failed Empire.

Now? The King in Yellow perfectly understood why so many human civilisations had had a ‘shoot the Eldar on sight’ policy during the Great Crusade.

“**Cegorach**,” the clown made an insulting reverence, “presents his apologies for the poor theatrical performance. The actors are sub-par-“

“Hey!” The parody of a Tech-Priest shouted.

“Their comedic skills need a lot of work, and we haven’t had enough time for a year or two of repetitions,” the Harlequin finished, ignoring the interruption.

If someone had told him at that moment he needed to pay half of his treasury to watch his Mortarchs strangle one hundred clowns with their bare hands, the King in Yellow would have paid it gladly.

Focusing the rage he felt into his sceptre, enough energy was channelled through it to kill a Titan.

“*If you have a word to say before I wipe you out so totally even your God won’t be able to save your soul, now is the moment*.”

“Your throne is no longer empty, oh King in Yellow.”

Torches lit up, and the half of the throne room which had remained hazy and suffering the most from temporal distortions due to the Nadirite flow was revealed.

And it allowed him to see the Eldar had said the truth.

The King in Yellow recognised immediately the challenger, of course.

He had gotten older, was missing part of an arm, but no matter how many scars, the indomitable presence was still the same.

“Dorn,” the Lord of the Nameless Ziggurat said in a voice which could have frozen half of Macragge if given sufficient power. “You are sitting on my throne.”

“So am I, Traitor.” The Primarch of the Imperial Fists answered in the same stone he had given him millennia ago. “What do you intend to do about it?”

**The Eternity Plains – approaches of the Nameless Ziggurat**

**Captain Boros Kurn**

No Astartes who had survived the Siege of Terra and the Legion Wars really believed in miracles, unless there were Word Bearers. And these days, there weren’t many of the sons of Lorgar left alive.

Yet with this battle, they were granted two miracles.

The first was all the small ziggurats crashing down inexplicably.

The second was the arrival of the Orks.

As their landing zone had been overran, the Orks had crash-landed with their legendary subtlety – which could be summed up as shouting and charging like a Khornate berserker – drawing multiple skeleton armies away from the sons of Change and the other warbands, and making it possible for the Scribe Caste among many other forces to reinforce them with a new landing zone.

It was the kind of thing not even the craziest strategist would rely upon before a battle began.

But it was happening.

There was just a little problem.

The two miracles weren’t enough.

“Captain! There aren’t enough Orks to-“

“I noticed!” Boros Kurn grunted as he killed three more skeletons and trampled several before they could reform. “Not only the greenskins are separated from our ranks by about sixty hundred thousand undead, they don’t have enough firepower to shatter the hosts of the King in Yellow.”

Arguably, the former was a very good thing, because if the Orks were able to reach them, they would fight against the sons of Change and the coalition’s armies, this was a certainty.

But the latter wasn’t.

The Orks were loud and battle-happy, but so far, the only thing that looked more or less capable to make a difference was their Knight-sized ‘Squiggoths’. The beasts, for some reason that escaped him totally, were eager to celebrate with a feast of bones, whether they were still living or not had no importance.

But the Orks themselves? No matter how ferocious they were, the greenskins had to attack the redoubts that had just been lost by the five main warbands.

It was a question of numbers, and the Orks didn’t have them.

They were arriving in an incredibly dispersed fashion from orbit.

Sometimes it was a full warship which crashed in the distance.

Sometimes it was an asteroid that the xenos had somehow towed there before releasing it into the high atmosphere.

Against living human defenders, this would have been devastating. The skies were on fire, the communications were suffering severe degradation.

Against an enemy that had fortified the Tyrant Star like the undead commanders did, this was just a death sentence...and an invitation to join the skeletons’ ranks.

If you didn’t land or crash anywhere near the positions where the anti-air batteries had been taken out, you could as well take your Bolter and kill yourself, it would be an easier and less painful death.

Outside the zones they controlled, and they were less and less of them, the skeletons were everywhere and killed everything that had a pulse.

“A fighting retreat? The enemy Space Marines are missing now, but we could begin moving towards the Nameless Ziggurat...”

“Out of the question,” Boros shook his head before crushing the skull of one more skeleton, and charging into the masses of enemies once more, killing as many as he could. “As long as the shields of this damn bastion aren’t lowered, a retreat there just means we are slowly cornered.”

“But we are once more at risk at being flanked!”

“Yes, but we have at least a landing zone to deploy reinforcements and evacuate critical personnel.”

Unlike a few minutes ago, there was no risk of complete encirclement...yet. The sons of Change would not been eradicated today.

“By the damn walls of Terra! This isn’t what we were promised! The Gods-“

“The Gods help us,” Boros retorted before the idiot said something that would see them all transformed into Chaos Spawns. “You aren’t blind surely? They have allowed Legions of their servants to be summoned here?”

The problem was not the Gods didn’t give help.

The problem was that it wasn’t *enough*.

“If we had ten thousand more Astartes here, we would be able to crush them.”

Boros sometimes pitied the younger generation. Some had really no idea what kind of training, logistical efforts, and facilities the recruitment of ten thousand Astartes required.

“Why not wish for a few Legions, while you’re at it?” The Astartes Captain asked derisively, just trails of fire illuminated the sky.

“By the Eye! These are...these are Drop Pods!”

“Yes.”

But that raised the question, where were those Astartes coming from? Aside from the ships of Typhus, disabled in the middle of the void battle, there were no more Astartes in reserve in any of the five fleets. At best, there were small detachments on the flagships and a few of the Battleships. The Space Hulks may have more Androids onboard, though given the hundreds of thousands that had been lost so far, Boros wasn’t going to gamble on it.

So where were these Astartes-

“**The sons of the Anathema!”** the daemons shrieked. “**The sons of the Anathema come**!”

For the first time since this battle began, the Light dawned on the Tyrant Star.

The dark skies and all the sorcery broke, and with each Drop Pod opening, standards and weapons of radiant gold were revealed.

There were merely dozens of grey-plated Astartes wielding them, but they went on the attack nonetheless.

And suddenly, for the first time of the Battle of the Tyrant Star, the undead ranks broke without fighting.

“WE ARE THE HAMMER! FOR THE EMPEROR!”

There was a titanic shockwave of Light, and skeletons and daemons were disintegrated.

“Get away from them!” Boros shouted, as suddenly he saw several fallen Space Marines mere hundreds of metres away beginning to burn in golden flames. “These are loyalist Astartes, and it looks they have...it has to be this cursed Aethergold Warlord Malicia warned us about!”

The Destiny Unwritten had tried to be reassuring when she had informed them of this issue, saying that the stocks of the Imperium were fortunately so far incredibly limited, and the Transmutational Changestone would be an adequate counter.

It looked like she had been wrong...because each of the eighty-plus Astartes here were protected by many Aethergold relics, many having been shaped as heraldry shields, the book-and-swords emblem, or some purification seals.

They weren’t many of them, but they were burning the skeletons by the tens of thousands, and the further they expanded their control zone, the more the daemons and cultists were burning.

There was no choice but to order the fighting withdrawal this time; Boros didn’t want to test if the Malfian sorcerers’ protections were going to protect him against *that*.

“Did you notice it, Captain?”

“Notice what?” Boros growled at the insolent Magister who had spoken. “The beating these monsters are delivering to the skeletons and everything that is in their kill-zone?”

“No! I mean, yes, I saw from my Screamer, it looks like twelve of them are preparing what looks like a ritual summoning circle!”

“This is stupid!” Boros replied automatically. “The dogs of the False Emperor don’t have any forces to summon from the Warp. They aren’t worshipping daemons, last time I checked!”

When planets burned for the crime of some citizens telling their not-beloved clergy that there were other Gods more worthy of worship than the ‘God-Emperor’, it wasn’t exactly surprising.

“No, but they have Aethergold, and they are really doing something, we have to stop them!”

“Unless you don’t have properly examined the situation, we can’t even-“

The golden inferno spread. Between two broken ziggurats, the intensity of the Light became blinding.

If the daemons had shrieked before, the sounds they made now were of utter despair.

“**It comes**!” The Hosts of the Four screamed in fear. “**It comes! The Sleeper has awakened! The Anathema has awakened Destruction**!”

And it came.

Its arrival decreased somewhat the light intensity, and they could look in its direction again.

It was easily the size of a Primarch, and it flew over the battlefield with mighty wings.

It was an Angel.

It was cloaked into a halo of Light, and when it passed over the grey-clad Astartes, they threw him an enormous sword of Aethergold, which instantly began to burn like it was a miniature sun.

It was not human. Boros knew it instantly. He didn’t know what it was, but it wasn’t an echo of Sanguinius, a Living Saint like Weaver was supposed to be, or something elevated from the ashes of Mankind.

It was a living weapon. It was death burning in the Emperor’s flames.

The Angel turned to face the Nameless Ziggurat.

There was no battle-cry.

There was no grand challenge.

There was no speech and no explanation.

The Aethergold aura of the sword was multiplied by ten times in intensity as the Angel wielded it with both arms, and then all of it was expelled towards the Ultimate Citadel of the King in Yellow.

It was apocalypse in golden flames.

And when it struck, there was a terrifying shriek.

The shields of the Nameless Ziggurat, shields and sorcery which had kept four Daemon Primarchs and thousands upon thousands of sorcerers at bay...these shields were taken down, and as it did, the Angel struck again.

The top of the Ziggurat was blasted apart, and clouds of purple-black sand were instantly dispersed in the air.

And of course, slowly but surely, the floating Hive-sized construct began to descend upon the battlefield. It was a controlled arrival, but it couldn’t be part of the plan, not with the suspended bridges busy burning in golden flames.

There was another golden explosion, and the Angel disappeared in a tornado of flames and light.

And the Space Marines who had made it possible...they began to withdraw. They moved strangely at first – Boros would later realise that they had done their best to recover every tiny shard of Noctilith they could from the battlefield – but quickly they teleported out their Drop Pods, before disappearing themselves.

The Angel, terrifying presence of Light and Destruction, didn’t reappear.

For a couple of seconds, silence reigned on the battlefield. No one was quite sure what to feel about this unprecedented intervention.

But soon enough, all eyes turned back to the Nameless Ziggurat.

No matter how it had been done, the fact was that the Ultimate Citadel was at last vulnerable.

“DEATH TO THE KING IN YELLOW!”

“**THE GODS WILL IT**!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE KING!”

**The Nameless Ziggurat**

**The Throne Room**

**Leet**

“What do you intend to do about it?”

Leet couldn’t say honestly...he had never been so terrified.

The thing in front of them couldn’t be human. It was just madness incarnate, with just a yellow cloak to hide the horror.

His powers told him to flee, and if an exit appeared on the wall right now, Leet would use it without hesitation.

But there was no opening to run away. The only way to leave this throne room was the official entrance, and the dark horror barred the way.

“*I* *will kill you, Rogal...and I believe I am going to take a significant amount of pleasure doing so*.” The King in Yellow’s words were an angry whisper, as if his previous outburst had forced him to decrease the output of his rage. “*Mortarchs! Rid me of these clowns*!”

The first purple-black blast hit the rat abomination, throwing the white-furred rodent against an intact hourglass...and since he had prepared an evil spell, the big artefact shattered instantly. Eleven down, only two left...

Leet had already thrown himself behind a pillar meanwhile...but immediately, the undead stopped firing.

Risking a glance to satisfy his curiosity, Leet saw it was because all the five big skeletons had been returned to the state of lifeless pile of bones.

And the other heavily-scarred Primarch was pointing his Mongolian-themed blade at the back of the yellow-cloaked horror.

“*Jaghatai*,” the King in Yellow hissed, “*what an unpleasant surprise*.”

“As always, your sense of hospitality is a catastrophe,” the Primarch of the White Scars replied. “What happened to the sacred responsibilities of the host where accredited ambassadors are concerned?”

“*I will send your head to the Golden Throne*!” Ouch, the brotherly affection was inexistent.

The next second were sheer chaos. Leet thought the horror tried something...and then it seemed as time itself froze. Or it went crazy?

Or...

Leet didn’t really know what happened. Maybe this sand was really dangerous so close to the Primarchs...

The Tinker was dragged by a Space Marine on the left side of the throne, where he joined Borek, more Space Marines, and the Eldar clown – who had presented himself as the ‘Laughing Bard of the Bone Saga’. Yeah, the alien buffoon thought they were in the middle of the greatest joke ever.

“What...what happened?” And if his voice was trembling, yes, it was totally justified.

“The grand ritual was interrupted,” the Primarch of the Imperial Fists answered. From the corner of his eyes, Leet saw flashes of a golden citadel smashing apart demonic assaults for all eternity. “And the shields of the Nameless Ziggurat are down.”

“Well done, manling,” Borek complimented a son of the Emperor!

“I wasn’t involved in this operation.”

“*Indeed*...” no matter the damage, the horror returned, sceptre in its yellow gauntlets, crown of dread upon its hood. “*You were merely the bait. But since the paladins of Malcador are out of my reach, I think you will be the ones to pay the price, Rogal, Jaghatai*.”

Strangely, the white-furred rat was nowhere to be seen. Maybe the rodent had been able to use the incident to flee? If it did, this bipedal enemy was maybe the being having the bigger self-preservation instincts in the room.

“Those are threatening words.” The Primarch of the White Scars answered. “But they may need some corrections. I hear them coming. I hear the winds of this dead word shriek and grow silent as they advance. And no one can stop them from storming your defences now.”

The words proved...remarkably prophetic.

It didn’t take ten seconds before the large gate exploded and countless debris fell from the ceiling.

A cloud of dust and black sands obscured everything for a brief moment.

When it ceased to be, Leet wished the gate had stayed close.

The thing which advanced...it was looking strangely like one of those ‘Helbrutes’ that the Traitors used as their Dreadnoughts. But this one was far, far bigger...and no Dreadnought or Helbrute had these awful-looking cannons mounted on the arms. By all the deities of video games in existence, those weren’t mounted on the arms, *they were the arms*!

The yellow-cloaked horror...sighed.

“*Perturabo*.”

“**The Purged**.” And Leet realised with horror that the metallic skull wasn’t an emblem or any sign of allegiance...it was the *face* of the monster. Skynet could go back to the drawing boards, this creature was worse than the most horrible Terminator in existence...

“*Would it be too much to hope you have not led the others here*?”

“**What do you think**?”

They arrived one by one.

Each time ‘one’ did, reality seemed to shriek and his power urged him to disappear, to do something that would teleport him far, far away from this throne room.

Even minor glances seemed too much, even with the medallions of Aethergold they all wore.

“*Mortarion*.”

If you wanted a movie with a Grim Reaper, this guy was to be hired for the job. The odour of disease and death...it was not something you could get used to.

“*Omegon*.”

This one was...part-rat, part-monster. And he changed into things that...it just didn’t make sense.

It seemed the worst, there were places tails and organs shouldn’t be...that was, until the ceiling broke, and a demon crashed in. Of all the monsters, this one was really looking the demonic part like none of the others were. Red wings – though one was still in the process of regenerating – red skin, an armour that looked like it had been forged in hell, and the rest of the demonic panoply. In its right claw was what looked like the biggest axe in existence.

“*And last and least Angron*.” The horror finished. “*What a tender family reunion*.”

Wait. They were...oh damn it, that wasn’t even funny...

“*I suppose no one else is coming*?” many enemies chose that moment to rush by the destroyed entrance, naturally.

“**No more additional brothers, at least**,” ‘Mortarion’ said. “**I think Guilliman, Corax, and Russ have other things to do than to participate to this little...family reunion**.”

“**Let’s finish this**,” the monster of metal declared.

“*Ah, Lord or Iron, are you sure you don’t want to share your shame with dear Rogal*?”

“**No**.” The metallic growl proved that the provocation had hit its target, “**I will deal with him after you. You die first**.”

“*But brother, I am the King in Yellow*.” The yellow cloak opened, but Leet had already closed his eyes. “*I am already dead. I cannot be killed*.”

There was an instant of silence...followed by powerful screams.

“*But you can’t claim the same...brothers*.”

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

It had been a while since she had seen so many Primarchs in a single hall.

That was the first thought that crossed Lotara’s mind when she stormed into the throne room.

The second was that the place had to be warded and modified somehow to contain that much power. A large amount of space was one thing, but there was only so much you could do when the power of the Gods was involved.

“*But you can’t claim the same...brothers*.”

“WWAAAAAAAAAGHHHHHHH!”

They came from the monumental breach Angron had created.

They were large, though the Blood Rose had seen some larger specimens’ skulls at Ullanor.

They were the classical greenskins, eager for battle.

“MOAR!” The brute in crude power armour leading them shouted, his excitement clear. Well, at least someone was having the time of his life... “MOAR DAKKA! MOAR WAAAAGH!”

The King in Yellow’s retaliation was immediate.

Purple-black sorcery saturated the air, and a spell of utter destruction hit the Ork Warboss.

In a flash, the greenskin leader was transformed into a smoking corpse.

Predictably, the Orks took it as a challenge.

“WAAAAGHHHH!”

They charged.

They charged, and in the throne room, save two Primarchs, more or less everyone tried to kill in the King in Yellow.

There were chainswords, chainaxes, Bolters, and so many weapons that it would take a few days to properly describe all their technical specifications.

It was an onslaught of military and Warp power that would have reduced a division in ashes within a minute.

And it did absolutely nothing to the enemy they had hunted down in his lair.

“*I cannot be killed*.”

“**We can’t either**,” Mortarion retorted trying to use Silence to tear apart him in the back.

“*Tell that to Lorgar*.”

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!”

“**KILL! MAIM! BURN**!”

It was total war, and there was no quarter. There never had been in this holocaust.

The rats which had reached in time the throne room were ground to dust in mere seconds. Space Marines were broken like they were basic conscripts. The Orks were slaughtered one by one, screaming their battle-lust to everyone who had ears to hear.

It was a battle where the fighters began to alter the very fabric of reality around them.

The throne room was changing.

It was taking into it a more...Gothic air, with the pillars being made of skulls.

Walls were bleeding.

Statues began to be summoned into existence, representing each of the major participants.

The battle temporarily paused when three more Space Marines of the Anarchy Legion perished.

Not because the main Champions cared about their demises, but that everyone needed to revaluate their strategy.

Because if the Orks had been mercilessly slaughtered, none of the Primarchs looked the worse for the wear – though in the case of Dorn and the Khan, it was because they and their companions hadn’t bothered joining the fight.

In fact, most didn’t have any sign of visible wound from the ordeal.

The problem...it applied to the King in Yellow too.

“*You have tried your best*.” The yellow-cloaked abomination said. “*This is over*.”

“More forces are on their way,” Lotara snapped back, “and while we haven’t been able to give you the killing blow, you have failed to vanquish us in turn!”

The yellow hood was slightly inclined after listening to her words.

“*No. You did the best to give me the killing blow. I, however, was waiting for one of my allies to take the field*.”

The world convulsed in madness. A song of sheer madness and malevolence began to play.

There was a black-purple explosion, and suddenly, the King in Yellow was no longer alone, but flanked by two beings.

The first was easy to recognise...the Simurgh had been sighted both in the Calyx Hell Stars and this very system before.

The False Angel showed a distinct smug tone on her face, one that gave Lotara the urge to charge and ram her spear between her eyes.

But the other...

**PAIN! PAIN!**

Sheer agony coursed in her veins.

It was suffering, unending suffering.

Lotara screamed.

Fortunately, her God intervened, and his influence pushed back the attack.

The Blood Rose stood, and was able to properly study the creator of this torment.

It was...it looked like a Giant Praying Mantis, one of green colour...but with Eldar traits?

“**What have you done**?” Mortarion seethed.

“*Oh? You don’t appreciate your weapon in action, brother*?” This was definitely a jab at the Death Lord, no mistake... “*Should I reveal them the truth of what you intended*?”

“**He is**-“

“*Dear Mortarion*,” the irony was so thick everyone could taste it, “*took one of the Shards of the Goddess Isha his Pretender had confiscated, and tried to turn it into the new Queen of Decay and Pain. I suppose her final transformation would have been fuelled by all your demises and mine when he smelled an opportunity*.”

“**I was in pain**,” and the voice sounded like an Eldar, damn it, “**but I know what I must do now**.” The hybrid of Praying Mantis and Xenos gave them an innocent life. “**The galaxy must learn how to *suffer***.”

“**No**...” Mortarion growled.

Telekinetically, the Simurgh threw an empty helmet at his feet.

“*This belonged to your lieutenant, I believe. Or is it your favourite betrayer? I tend to forget his title*...”

“**Typhus**,” the Daemon Primarch of the Death Guard said darkly, “**and you did not kill him**.”

“*He’s one of the slaves you call ‘Daemon Princes’ now. As far as I am concerned, this is sufficient. He’s removed from this game...and maybe many others. I don’t think the Slaver-Pretender who holds your leash is going to be very happy with this massive failure*.”

Mortarion struck so fast it was a streak of pus and swamp-coloured light.

But no matter how fast, the Praying Mantis hybrid was faster.

In the blink of an eye, the Lord of the Fourteenth Legion was immobilised...with the two massive blade-arms of the Praying Mantis impaling him.

“*The Age of Primarchs is at an end*,” the King in Yellow gloated. “*Meet your Bane, Mortarion. She will be my True Thirteenth Mortarch. Behold Drakira, the Queen of Vengeance and Suffering*!”

Mortarion...seemed to suddenly burn in a aura of decay and-

Lotara rushed behind a pillar, and it wasn’t a moment too soon.

The terrifying explosion propelled a colossal amount of poison and toxic things, and it was a good thing her helmet could be void-sealed in a second.

When it ended, there was a terrifying crater where Mortarion had been, and the green carapace of the Praying Mantis hybrid was cracked in several parts.

“*Recognising you as a true opponent, but taking a banishment to seal the cycle of enmity rather than facing true death*,” the King in Yellow commented coldly, “*clever, Mortarion. Clever. Drakira*?”

The thing that had been an Eldar Goddess long ago, made a reverence, accented with her murderous blade, which were covered in the slime of decay...and it didn’t seem to hurt at all.

“**Master, I am your eternal servant**.”

And if these words were not going to make you shiver, this was because you had no instinct of self-preservation...

“*The Death Lord is no longer an immediate problem, but there remains*-“

This was the time nine sorcery rays erupted from every direction, and at long last the Tzeentchian force revealed itself.

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

For her ambush, Malicia had been unwilling to take any chance.

Not with the Simurgh revealed as an ‘ally’ of the King in Yellow.

Because of course, that scheming bitch had allied itself with the side who wanted to turn the galaxy into a realm of undeath.

This was why all her Majestryx Golems and Harbingers, carefully preserved for that very moment, struck with overwhelming force.

Most of the Transmutational Changestone she had left on her, multiple spells invented by the Anubion Cult, and all the power nine sorcerers of the Scribe Cult could unleash were hurled at once.

The Daemon Primarchs were paralysed by Pain, whether they realised it or not, but she was not.

The Simurgh and the Praying Mantis ‘Drakira’ were hammered by hundreds more spells, pushing them away from the King in Yellow, and Malicia ran.

Nine new spells...and then three more to destabilise her enemy.

The King in Yellow conjured an Entropic Death Curse, but this time the parahuman sorceress let her true power tank the attack, and then Malicia struck, Antwyr giving her the kind of power few Brutes on her homeworld would have been able to boast.

It was a strike fuelled by all the hatred she had accumulated for this being, as so many of her cults and warbands were destroyed.

The yellow cloak was severed, and while there was only void, Malicia felt Antwyr thrust into the void, and the King in Yellow gasped.

“**Yes!**” Antwyr laughed. “**No more eternity for you, Eleventh Son**!”

Something looking like purple-black blood began to seep out of the darkness.

The King in Yellow mumbled something unintelligible.

“**What are you saying? Are these your final words**?” Antwyr mocked him as she did her utmost to push the daemonic blade deeper...and damn, it was hard. What was this darkness based upon? Adamantium?

“*I said*...” for the first time, there was definitely something sounding like pain in the undead voice. “*Do you really believe that the Decay Pretender is the only one I can turn potential servants against*?”

Malicia barely saw the sorcery attack coming. If she wasn’t a parahuman who could endure such an attack via her powers, she would have died here and there.

As it was, the sheer power still send her flying, far from Antwyr.

And-

No!

Malicia conjured a sorcery blade and parried the next strike...fortunately, because the claws would have torn her throat in the case she didn’t.

“Ax’senaea...” The Malfian ruler whispered.

The former Executrix had not changed...but she had now a bone collar around her neck.

“*I will admit she has proved extremely reluctant to accept my wisdom*,” the King in Yellow admitted, “*but in due time, she will accept who her rightful master is*.”

Malicia would have loved decapitating him for those words, but Ax’senaea was unleashed, and the parahuman sorceress had to fight a duel for her very life.

There was nothing she could do as the King in Yellow removed Antwyr from its incorporeal void. As for the others...the two ‘loyalist Primarchs’ didn’t make a move, useless bastards. The Simurgh was hammering telekinetically Angron, leading him on a merry chase. Omegon and his army of rats had to fight against the recovering Praying Mantis, and the latter was killing dozens of rats with each of her strikes.

The only Daemon Primarch willing and able to act was Perturabo...and the Lord of Iron advanced, firing countless guns and blade projectiles, justifying the ‘storm of iron’ tactics he had employed in the past.

For a brief moment, Malicia dared to hope.

Maybe, just maybe, the Lord of the Iron Warriors could disarm the Purged Primarch, and give her another chance.

Ax’senaea was incredibly dangerous, but her dead eyes told clearly she wasn’t putting everything in the blast.

And as the Blood Rose diverted away the Entropic Sorcery from the Primarch of the Iron Warriors, this hope increased.

***OBEY***

This was the end of all things.

This was death; the end and the beginning.

It was a blow that could have downed Titans and Gods.

Perturabo took it without any shield to protect himself.

The super-Dreadnought-shaped body collided with the cold floor of the throne room, creating a miniature earthquake and enough rumbles to imitate a thundering avalanche.

Lotara Sarrin, while not directly targeted, was too close. She was thrown away by the sheer power of the attack.

And then it was their turn.

Malicia saw it coming in slow motion, and all she could do was conjuring a shield and pray.

It wasn’t enough.

Antwyr in her hands had magnified many of her powers and abilities. In the King in Yellow’s, it was something on a level unimaginable to even the greatest Warlords.

They rammed the walls, were hammered like dolls thrown by a spoiled child.

“*You will OBEY*!”

“**WE WON’T**.”

Any human traits Omegon might have shown once, the Primarch of the Anarchy Legion had lost them now.

It was a gigantic rat now. It was a Daemon Primarch in all its chaotic glory. It was the Avatar of Anarchy.

Red-lit eyes were glaring in hatred, and the maw was filled with so many rows of fangs Malicia had no wish to be close to them.

“*I’m really beginning to understand why our father wished to usher you as the Fourth Power*...” her hopes had been crushed, but Malicia couldn’t help but laugh. They may not been able to prevent the monster from claiming a Throne, but it was clear his ability to force the other Gods to submit had been utterly broken in this battle. “*But as you wish, Beast. If you don’t kneel, you will be eliminated*.”

Antwyr delivered another terrible blow, and the Daemon Primarch’s rat body was decapitated, banishing him back to the Warp...certainly for a very long time.

There were more terrible sorcery attacks, and just like that, the battle was over.

All her Harbingers were dead. All her Golems were pulverised and torn to shreds.

Angron was pinned down against the wall by ‘Drakira’, impaled by her blades.

Khârn the Betrayer...she saw no trace of him save his broken axe and a pool of blood...perhaps Typhus’ fate had been his?

Lotara Sarrin...the Captain of the *Conqueror* was barely conscious...and bleeding from multiple wounds, some of them quite bad.

As for Perturabo, he wasn’t conscious anymore...just exactly how bad had been this blow for its enhanced daemonic essence?

Much as the very assessment made her despair, Malicia knew she was likely the one who had the most strength left of all the fighters committed to the battle...and it wasn’t enough.

Oh no, no it wasn’t enough. For as the parahuman sorceress stood on shaky legs, Ax’senaea and the Simurgh floated in her direction.

Given the smug smile of the Endbringer, Malicia was certain this bitch had played a role in how easily the King in Yellow was able to circumvent every failsafe she had given to the enchantments moulding Ax’senaea.

“*What did you say before, child? Ah, yes. I believe it was something about prying the Blade of Calamity from your cold dead corpse*?”

Of all the ways to die, Malicia had a feeling this was not going to be one of the painless ones.

The heartbeats seemed to slow down in an eternity, and the Destiny Unwritten prepared for one desperate attack...which was certainly going to be her last.

And then the sounds of battle in the distance, which had always been raging since they stormed the Nameless Ziggurat...they ceased entirely.

The Throne Room seemed to pause in time.

Light footsteps were heard.

And after a couple of seconds, a familiar golden woman in angelic armour entered the throne room.

Malicia recognised her, of course. Some of the aetheric signature was slightly different than what it had been on the Ymga Monolith, but there was no way it could be someone else.

This was not the living weapon unleashed by the grandchildren of the Anathema against the Ziggurat’s shields. This was not the false angelic appearance of the Simurgh.

It was the Angel of Sacrifice. It was the Destroyer of Commorragh and Saviour of Macragge.

Light seemed to burn within her like a beacon of hope.

And beyond the Veil, a far distant beacon and winged angels came to support her.

“*Weaver*,” the King in Yellow said, and though the hatred was manifest, there was something there...the shadow of fear. “*Have you decided to break the rules of your Ascension from the very beginning? The power you gained on the* Vengeful Spirit *has consequences for you. Get out of my Ziggurat, and never return!*”

None of the two blades were drawn.

And with the golden helmet hiding her face, there was no way to see what kind of expression the insect-mistress had in her face. Yet Malicia felt that if she could see beyond the Auramite and the golden aura, she would see a smug grin...as smug as the Simurgh had been before her arrival.

“I am the Empress of the Eldar Empire,” yep, definitely a smug grin, “I go where I want, when I want. And if you are displeased by it, you are free to make a request to the one I take orders from. You may have heard it of him, bone-bag. He sits upon the Golden Throne. I am sure he will study your request with all the seriousness it deserves.”

Malicia laughed hysterically, and she wasn’t the only one...

**Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert, the Angel of Sacrifice**

“*You have indeed the arrogance of the species*.”

Taylor didn’t bother hiding her snort.

“Should I remind you of your words, King in Yellow?” The large amount of fabric torn apart was considerable, and the wound the daemonic had inflicted him was still bleeding the essence of the void. “It was something about eternity, if I remember correctly.”

The glare she received in return was certainly very impressive...yet he didn’t attack.

That was the problem, wasn’t it? The undying Traitor Primarch wanted to avoid having her as a sworn enemy...while she had her own reasons to do the same.

And in this place, in the very heart of a conflagration which had killed billions, the eyes of the Ruinous Powers were upon them.

Their actions *mattered*.

What happened here would have repercussions for millennia to come.

“*You call the Pretenders parasites...but you arrived very late to the battlefield, Weaver. You are a jackal of war, tearing apart the survivors when they are weak*.”

Oh...that one was amusing.

“None of you needed any encouragement when it came to slaughter. You and the other abominations butchered each other, as evil entities laughed and the stars ran red with blood.”

The Imperium hadn’t even needed to give them a nudge or two. If the protections of the Nameless Ziggurat hadn’t been that impenetrable to heretics worshipping the Ruinous Powers, the Grey Knights might not even have needed to intervene.

Banishing that thought, the Angel of Sacrifice turned to face one of the two parahumans present in the room.

“Malicia.”

“Weaver.”

The Calyx Warlord looked...well, she was not looking too bad, actually. Her Pharaonic blue-gold armour was certainly going to end as a total loss, but it had done the job; though the enchanted power armour had melted or been entirely dissolved in many sections, it had undoubtedly saved her life and spared her from major injuries.

As the floor covered in corpses proved it, this was sometimes all could one hope to achieve.

“The Emperor sent me here today in the hope you would be willing to reconsider some of your life choices, if you know what I mean.”

The answer was short, quick, and to the point.

“No.”

The Queen of the Swarm wanted to say it was the parasites whispering her promises of glory and power in her ears. But it was not the case here. In such a cursed seat of power, the Ruinous Powers could give power, threaten, and do many other abominable actions, but they could not corrupt like they did where Warp Storms raged.

“You realise,” the Lady General Militant said slowly, “that this offer won’t be made again. At least I personally won’t make any new offer. I can’t speak for other agents.”

“I know, I thank you for that...and my answer remains negative. I am not going to shackle myself to the Carrion Lord on the Golden Throne.” Malicia removed the ruin of helmet from her head. “I respect your choice. But in the end, you are going to lose.”

“We are going to *struggle*,” the black-haired parahuman corrected. “The fates of this galaxy and the Imperium have yet to be written. We know what is coming for us. And we will be there to welcome it blades in hands and enough military power to light a funeral pyre for all our enemies.”

“Impressive words,” the former Glory Girl nodded. “But my answer remains no.”

Taylor Hebert shrugged. She had tried...and in the end, this had been a command relayed by the Custodes, not something she pursued of her own volition. As the Angel of Sacrifice, she had been able to watch some of the atrocities and abominations Malicia had created on the Path of Glory.

It had really made her relativized her anger for Shadow Stalker. Sophia Hess had never committed that sort of butchery, in this life or another, for all her stupid predator mindset at Brockton.

 “Duly noted.”

The Lady General Militant didn’t add that the next time they would meet, it would be as enemies; not only it would be cliché, it was unnecessary. Taylor was sure the other parahuman could feel it like she did.

“*You truly have not come to fight me*.”

The Lord of the Nameless Ziggurat seemed genuinely surprised, though all hilarity could wait, as three massive abominations flanked him. While they had been talking, the King in Yellow had imprisoned Angron of the Red Sands in a sort of eldritch prison...ah, he had built it from the debris of one of the hourglasses.

“Nothing can escape your vigilance, truly.” The winged parahuman smiled. “I came here to this system to recruit a member for my new Honour Guard. The Eldar are getting insistent I get one, you see...”

“*You aren’t...no...you came to recruit the Blood Muse*?”

The stupefaction of the parasite was really something amusing, she wasn’t going to lie...

“To be honest, whether the recruitment is successful or not remains to be seen. The interviews are conducted by the Queen of Blades, and you know how much a perfectionist this...well, she’s the Queen of Blades.”

Taylor breathed out.

“*In that case, you have done enough damage. Remove your odious presence from Ziggurat*.”

“Ah, yes. About that. There’s a last point to speak of.” Taylor looked further away, towards a certain throne. “Lord Dorn, I’m glad to see you back.”

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Weaver.” The Primarch of the Imperial Fists replied with his usual courtesy...which was as usual those of a warrior to another. “I presume my father had a message for me.”

“Indeed. The message is...’you were right, it did more harm than good’.”

The gene-sire of the Seventh Legion left the ugly throne behind, and began to step down the throne’s stairs.

To his right was the Primarch of the White Scars...and if Rogal Dorn had suffered many, many scars from the torturers of Commorragh, it was nothing compared to what had been done to the Khan. Taylor could only home some new medicinal inventions would be able to erase some of the horrifying wounds, because it was horrible, and it certainly had to feel incredibly painful, Primarch or not.

The two Primarchs advanced, and the King in Yellow raised another piece of damnation shaped into a sword. Minor consolation, this one looked far less powerful than the End of Empires wielded by the Despoiler.

“*I vanquished them, one by one, and they were four of them*.” The yellow-cloaked spectre of undeath seethed with malice. “*Do you really think that your two cripples can beat me? I am the Master of Eternity*!”

“No,” Taylor interrupted his monologue before it hurt her ears. “You are **Tyranny**. Your rituals have been broken, and honestly, the lies you gave to the Ruinous Powers betray the truth, as always. You are ruin shaped in the form of bones, trying to destroy everything Mankind ever built.”

“Yes,” Rogal Dorn approved. “And I am tired from listening to your arrogant proclamations of superiority...**Nagash**.”

There was a long moment of silence.

And then the abominations of the Warp laughed.

It was a trillion sounds of damnation, evil for the sake of evil...and suddenly, their baleful influence began to tear apart this planet from the outside.

Taylor felt it.

Whatever the outcome, the Tyrant Star wasn’t going to last long now.

Not when the Primarch of the Imperial Fists had provided the Four such an opening.

“*No! NO!*” For the first time the King in Yellow...no, *Nagash*, was really sounding aghast and flat-footed. “*Only father did*-“

“The power he used for his Obliteration Edict was colossal,” Rogal Dorn explained, “he needed someone to protect him when it was done. And I am his Praetorian. I always was, and I guard his secrets.”

Slowly but surely, bones began to materialise where there had been only nothingness before.

There was a name. There was vulnerability.

Taylor turned her head to her left, and watched the black-haired Champion of Khorne struggle to stand as her wounds slowly closed. It seemed that her intervention had been sufficient, judging by the evidence.

“I will be waiting outside,” the Lady General wanted to ram her sword into the throat of this abomination, it wouldn’t be prudent. Besides, it wasn’t like she was really needed; the two Daemon Primarchs and the other Chaos Champions remaining were restored to their fighting proficiency, as Nagash’s hold upon reality slipped from his grasp. “Don’t take too long.”

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

The Veil shattered.

Until now, only a small number of Legions had been able to enter the Granithor System. The King in Yellow had been too strong, the retaliation counters too devastating to risk.

But now, the dam was broken.

The Four had nothing to restrain their hand, and they weren’t known for being timid beings.

The battle had been slaughter on a catastrophic state so far.

Now it escalated beyond that.

All the armies of the King in Yellow were now in action, billions upon billions of skeletons kept in reserve for the final battle, and now the Legions of Change, War, Decay, and Anarchy submerged them in a clash that shook the Calyx Hell Stars to their foundations.

And in the heart, the last two mortal Primarchs charged their former brother, who was paralysed, as bone after bone, the darkness was transformed into a familiar of bones.

The King of Skeletons was becoming a Skeleton himself, it seemed.

But Dorn and the Khan didn’t have the time to exploit this weakness.

As always when something bad was possible, you could count upon the Simurgh.

The infuriating bitch was still here, and she intercepted their strikes, then with devastating telekinetic blasts, forced them on the defensive.

It was only a delay, though.

Perturabo had risen up, and a warhammer that shouldn’t have been out of place wielded by a Knight walker was swung.

“**IRON WITHIN! IRON WITHOUT**!”

But once again, the weapon didn’t meet its target.

The green blade of a certain Praying Mantis monster blocked it.

“**One does not attack the King before his servants**.” Drakira chided the Lord of Iron.

“**You are truly a repulsive creature...xenos**.” Perturabo growled, a sound of cogs and dark engines, “**I will break you**.”

The entity which should have been the greatest weapon of Decay laughed.

“**What are you waiting for, then**?”

Malicia focused...and then she uttered a word of command.

A collar of bone broke...and Ax’senaea teleported in front of her, free.

Free of...

The parahuman sorceress swallowed.

The Simurgh had not just overturned her protections before the King in Yellow placed the collar.

She had broken all the bindings, restrictions, and power draining there ever was.

Ax’senaea was completely free.

And before her eyes, the appearance of the Executrix which had assimilated in her soul so much daemonic energy changed, turning into a platinum-haired woman with shining blue eyes...it was not difficult who Ax’senaea had decided to model herself into.

She and Malicia could almost have passed as twins now.

“If you are my imagination turning against me, I must defeat you as an equal,” and for the first time, the delusional woman was...almost reasonable in tone and reasoning. “What do you say?”

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**! **I WILL CLAIM YOUR SKULL NAGASH**!”

The Champions of Khorne had regenerated enough to fight once more, and the Lord of the Red Sands and the Blood Rose attacked the King in Yellow...which alas had sufficiently recovered enough to wield Antwyr against them.

“I say,” Malicia replied, turning away from the scene, “that it sounds fair. We have gained a lot of power in the Calyx Hell Stars. It’s time to see if I can defeat you or not.”

They saluted each other...and then attacked.

It was a ferocious duel of strength and sorcery.

It was a deadly game of strikes and counter-strikes, where reflexes and instinct counted above all.

And it was over before they truly could wonder how long they had been fighting.

Malicia felt pain flare in her chest, and looked at the aetheric blue blade which had stabbed her chest...far away from any vital organs.

The same couldn’t be said about hers: it had impaled the heart of Ax’senaea before emerging from her back.

“Why?” the Destiny Unwritten asked. “You...you chose to miss.”

“I...” for the first time, the other woman, her own reflexion, was hesitant, “you empowered me. You allowed me to control many things save myself. You were already my equal...the partner I wanted to have.”

A thin smile of satisfaction appeared on her face.

“And honestly...you will need an ally among the Court of Change...I will master myself...and make sure you remain there to test me.”

The blades disappeared.

But Ax’senaea didn’t fall.

Instead, she began to float.

And she levitated, her aura grew out of control.

Ax’senaea was more akin to an infernal sun of blue-gold...a sun of pure Warp energy.

Her armour and everything she might have ever donned...it was torn apart.

For a brief moment, Malicia contemplated her own reflexion, pale and naked, flawless...vulnerable.

And then Ax’senaea **changed**.

Her back tore open, and gigantic blue-feathered wings were unfurled.

Her feet were consumed in blue-pink flames, before emerging anew as dangerous avian talons.

In a mutation akin to the Navigators, a third eye opened on the forehead, one which once it opened, burned with the madness of the Sea of Souls.

The skin, much like her own, had been pearly white in this battle...now it became a rich blue and everywhere the shade grew permanent, golden glyphs proclaiming the glory of **Tzeentch** and **Change** were branded upon her essence.

Horns grew from her platinum hair, though they remained short and ‘feminine’, if such a thing could be said about horns.

There was a ripple in the Aether...a scream came out of the Warp.

And it ended.

Pharaonic-themed power armour was summoned into existence, but the true work had already been done.

A new Daemon Princess of Tzeentch was born.

“**I see why you were so insistent calling yourself Destiny Unwritten**...”

The three-eyed feathered apparition used her wings as chaos and war raged around them.

“**Don’t worry, I will watch over you**.”

Her wounds, the energy expended by the duel, the distortions caused by all the Primarchs...it was too much.

Malicia felt her last forces abandon her, and as she closed her eyes, her last vision was one of a crimson spear flying towards an hourglass.

**Primarch Rogal Dorn**

When he had decided upon this course of action, Rogal wouldn’t deny there had been some pride involved.

*Nagash* had been the First Traitor, and before his treason was firmly established, Rogal had not seen it coming. Much like he had not been able to realise Horus’ arrogance would lead him to treachery and rebellion against the Imperium.

Horus was long dead, but Nagash wasn’t.

Thus when he had head the Purged Primarch had survived in some form, the Primarch of the Imperial Fists had been determined to erase this problem, especially as according to several sources, he had a powerful weapon to deal the Eleventh a terrible blow.

The problem was that the blow, while massive, had not been enough to kill him.

And as this cursed winged creature bombarded them with feathers that were properly insane given the multitude of properties they possessed, Rogal was merely a witness as the entire throne room was in chaos.

The Traitors, both of bone, metal, or the daemonic, received constantly reinforcements. Most of them instantly died, reduced to bloody fragments by the rage of Angron or the sorcery of Nagash.

Two whirlwinds of pure death were slamming into each other. One was a crimson storm of ferocity and hot-headed rage. The other was a cold blizzard of purple-black darkness.

Cursed blades clashed, and wherever the different black blades were colliding with each other, the Skaven, the Orks, and the Daemons died.

It reminded him of the desperate battles across the Vengeful Spirit, and this assault had been a nightmare by itself.

“**CHANGE! FOR THE CHANGER OF WAYS! BOW TO YOUR FATE**!”

“**IRON WITHIN! IRON WITHOUT**!”

“**SUFFER! THIS GALAXY WILL KNOW MY VENGEANCE! EVERYTHING MUST SUFFER**!”

Many players had already died, or disappeared, and in this instant, it was the turn of Perturabo and the Praying Mantis xenos abomination.

Both of their armours were cracked. Both were bleeding, the Lord of Olympia’s carcass letting escape oil and metallic lubricants where blood should have been.

The black warhammer, carved with hateful glyphs, smashed into the thorax of the Mantis at the same time the green blades broke through the already weakened metal.

There was a moment where the two opponents stared at each other with glares promising nothing but destruction and pain...and then the grey-green explosion wiped out both of them from this throne room.

“Jaghatai, I think-“

“Where is the Simurgh?”

Rogal opened his mouth...and gaped, because his brother was right. For thirty seconds, they had lost sight with the creature. The last feather bombardment had been indirect, and they had not had their eyes upon it...and now the Simurgh was gone.

“We can-“

BOOOOOOOM!

“Oh damn it, what now?” The Primarch of the White Scars reacted in a very annoyed tone.

The ‘what now’, apparently, was part of the ceiling getting pulverised. In all seriousness, Rogal feared that if the Warp receded, this throne room was going to receive the full Ziggurat upon it, because it simply wasn’t possible for something to be stable after the damage wrecking it-

“Brute-things!” A new Skaven landed upon a pile of bones that hadn’t been here seconds before. “I, the Glorious Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster, have destroyed the secret-secret ritual room of the Vermin in Yellow! Glory to me-me! Glory to **Malal**! Praise-“

These would be the last words of the bipedal rat, for he had landed too close to Angron.

In a second, the huge rodent was transformed into a shapeless mass of meat, with just the tail being left intact to testify the whole thing hadn’t been a hallucination.

The whole affair seemed to make Nagash very, very angry, it had to be said.

“*I understand now why the Deceiver was so proud to tell me there were things I hadn’t accounted for*.” The yellow cloak fell to the ground, and the tall skeleton the Purged Primarch had become was now revealed in all its dark majesty. A crown was still on his head, but it was now purple-black, and it seemed to spread an even greater aura of dread than before. In the hand that was not wielding the Black Blade, there was a book where sands swirled before being hurled as sorcery attacks. “*The rats have destroyed all my hourglasses. Of the true Mortarchs that were to kneel and recognise my greatness, only one did, and she has been temporarily banished*.”

“One might think,” Jaghatai pointed out, “that your infallible plans were not so infallible, in the end.”

“*Yes...*” the word was hissed between parrying two assaults from Angron, “*but don’t think it is over. You have denied me Eternity, but as our father’s agent of Sacrifice remarked accurately, there is still Tyranny. This is not over. I am Nagash! And if I am to lose today, I can ensure all of you are defeated with me*!”

The Ziggurat trembled...and with a power that shouldn’t have been within the means of a Primarch, Nagash’s Black Blade found the throat of Angron.

“Run!” Rogal ordered as a crimson spear slammed into the last giant hourglass and more chaos erupted in the throne room.

The Space Marines and all the improbable allies that they had journeyed with didn’t need an encouragement.

They ran, and didn’t look back.

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

Her body hurt.

Somehow, it was a good thing. As long as there was pain, it meant that she wasn’t dead.

For now.

But as her spear shattered the last hourglass, Lotara knew that if she didn’t do something quickly, her survival was going to end very quickly.

Nagash, formerly the King in Yellow and now the King of Bones, had perforated Angron’s throat with Antwyr, and now the Blood Rose could feel an improvised draining ritual begin.

The monster’s ambitions had been crippled, but his plans had required the sacrifice of a Daemon Primarch in the first place, certainly Perturabo.

And now that the original ambition to become a God was impossible to reach, Nagash was shifting its goal for a lesser victory. He wanted to become a Daemon Primarch.

It wasn’t a perfect description of this gambit, of course. The Master of the Nameless Ziggurat...which was not nameless any longer, Lotara felt the name of the location echo here too...he wouldn’t be a servant of any of the Four. It would be more akin to be a Daemon Prince of Chaos Undivided, yet not answering to any Power.

“*By the ancestral bones of the Eleventh Legion I command*,” the tall Primarch skeleton began, “*you will be defeated, in the name of* ***Tyranny***!”

Her body hurt, but Lotara forced herself to step towards the two Primarchs.

Every move was dolorous, and if the abomination that was still Drakira was here, Lotara was sure she would have been defeated in a second.

But there was no one else, as everything disappeared into a maelstrom of blood and darkness.

There were just three beings fighting as the Warp sundered everything, and the Ziggurat – Nagashizzar – was being destroyed both from the inside and the outside.

Angron was fighting back, but it was clear his brother-enemy Nagash had caught him exactly where he wanted...again.

Some part of Lotara burned in fury, urged her to challenge this King of Usurpers. It felt like the hatred of Angron, the unreasonable things that had led them straight into disasters more than once.

But every step grew more difficult.

Challenging a Primarch before was going to end in her death, without achieving anything.

Ritual or not, Nagash remained far too powerful to be beaten.

But there had to be a solution. Lotara had seen the glances the Angel of Sacrifice had given to Malicia and she before leaving. They had to be something, otherwise the Emperor’s favourite would not have-

There was a solution.

Lotara felt her heart beat faster, because she realised at last what Khorne had in mind.

Haematia...the Noctilith had more than one use.

And it wasn’t stealing if it was taken by force.

*Nagash couldn’t drain Angron if she drained him first*.

“I am the captain of the *Conqueror*,” she began.

“*Patience, insignificant thing*,” Nagash turned his long and cruel head in her direction. “*I will deal with you once I have finished with dear Angron here*.”

“You will do nothing of the sort,” Lotara grimaced as more pain assaulted her body, “because it does not matter whose blood flows...as long as it does.”

With all the strength remaining in her wounded body, the Blood Rose threw her spear.

One last time, she hit exactly where she wanted: the daemonic part where the Butcher’s Nails were embedded into Angron’s skull.

The Daemon Primarch roared in fury...and his enemy laughed.

“*What a betrayal! Thank you for making my task easier, foolish child*.”

Ignoring him, Lotara removed her gauntlets, cut her own hands on the spikes of her crimson armour...and then not bothering taking a deep breath, the female Warlord held her Haematia crystal with them.

“*No one runs away from the Conqueror*,” Lotara had to fight for each word to come out, “*and that applies to you too, Angron*!”

The ship mistress of the Twelfth Legion had expected a difficult fight, but once she willed the draining to begin, it was like a single tidal wave striking her in a single second.

Suddenly, the pain disappeared.

In an instant, her body began to mend and regenerate from the grievous wounds she had taken in the last hours.

There was fury, rage, and hatred, but Lotara captured them, burned them, and placed her under control.

An aura of blood and war began to burn around her, and Lotara smiled.

Angron’s daemonic essence trashed and collided with the debris, but the draining continued.

“**No, Nagash**,” Lotara spoke, and she knew at this moment her voice was echoing through the domain of the Gods, “**thank you. Without you, I wouldn’t have realised what needed to be done**.”

She summoned her spear back to her left hand, while keeping the Haematia in her right.

“*You are killing Angron, you realise. And in killing him, you are burning your own humanity in the process*.”

“**Yes**,” the Blood Rose agreed, “**and I find it liberating. Now Nagash, I believe you have something my Master desires**.”

She grinned.

“**Your skull**.”

Lotara attacked.

She attacked, and her spear found its mark. This time, it wasn’t the void itself that began to bleed from the chest of her enemy, but some ugly yellow fluid...and though there was no sound of pain, Lotara knew it was a wound that would never fade away.

This time, having seen what others had done, it was clarity itself in her mind to establish a new strategy to duel this enduring enemy.

But one hourglass was summoned into existence by the Lord of Undeath, and the bastard tried to explode it into her face with Antwyr.

Lotara conjured a wave of blood – she was taking inspiration from Hekatii here – to make sure it didn’t cause more problems, before striking again...and meeting nothing.

“**I will admit...I was not expecting that**.”

The stillness and the dreadful presence which had always accompanied the King in Yellow were gone.

Nagash was gone.

Angron crashed down, broken and empty thing empty of power.

Antwyr was lying on the broken black marble, abandoned.

Lotara knew better than to hope the Eleventh Primarch was dead.

Something as dangerous wasn’t going to die in such an anticlimactic fashion.

No, the Lord of Nagashizzar had realised he wouldn’t be able to obtain any of his goals or succeed in anything...and so he fled. Certainly using the ‘bone roads’ that were intended to be a poor copy of the Webway.

But he was gone...and with him gone, there was no one left to command the armies of skeletons and other bone constructs. In an infinitesimal amount of time, Lotara was granted many visions, and they confirmed that after incredible fanatical resistance, the Eleventh Legion and its auxiliaries had either gone missing or fallen apart.

The battle was over.

“**My Master**,” Lotara felt **his** burning eyes fell upon her, as the Veil was nearly inexistent. Her body was burning with something she couldn’t properly describe. “**It is done. Nagash has fled like the coward he is. His plans are in tatters. He will never be able to claim *Eternity* again**.”

The red eyes pierced through her, and she felt...satisfaction? Yes, there was satisfaction and a savage joy which increased the fire that began to burn her from the inside.

“**What is your command**-“

The wave of pain rode her body.

Lotara threw her back and shrieked.

She could feel her head tearing like it was paper. Between black strands of hair, small nubs grew through the slits in her scalp. Lotara felt the weight of them as blood dripped before her eyes. Second after second, the female Warlord could feel them extend, pushing further and further. She couldn’t see them, but she felt them weighing her down.

Lotara tried to reach for the horn on her left side, but paused. Her nails were now black...and no longer short as she kept them. Nor was it the only thing noticeable. Her armour and all her protections had burned away, and her skin, which had been so pale before, was now taking deep pinkish hues.

Then the pain exploded again, and Lotara screamed once more. She heard a billion demonic whispers at once. She heard the wars. The Blood Rose felt the bloodbath and the carnage spreading across the galaxy, and countless prayers, in words and bloody deeds. Quadrillion of souls and more were singing the praise of **Khorne**, no matter what they really believed.

Lotara shrieked as a pool of blood surrounded her. She plunged her hands, into it, but it only increased the pain. She could feel bones growing in her back, below her shoulder blades. The *Conqueror*’s Mistress could feel them attaching themselves to her back muscles and spine. The pain reached new levels of intensity. And then her skin split on their side of her back.

Lotara couldn’t see it, but she could feel little talons work their way out of her body.

They were little, but they grew. The talons were growing, before moving aside to leave the place for the bone and muscle to follow the talons. Soon enough, black leathery skin unrolled from the long and thin bones growing centimetre by centimetre.

Everything expanded. Everything was pain. There was growth. There was torment. But her fledgling wings were born.

And they expanded until on either side of her, each wing was laying in clumps of blood and skin with a wingspan of about three metres.

Lotara could feel everything. She could feel the air and the blood on the new leathery skin as the wings dried, despite the blood pouring upon them. The Blood Rose could feel the new bones and the muscles. Those were not vestigial appendages. She was truly a winged being now.

But the pain was too much. She tried to speak, begging for the transformation to stop.

“**No, please, please not**...”

The fire burned hotter in her chest. Her chest was burning. Her arms were twitching, along with her new claws – you couldn’t call anything else what her hands had become.

Her pale lips darkened into a deep black as muscles tore and rebuilt themselves over and over.

Lotara writhed in pain, and her tongue shredded itself, as her teeth were changing too. No, no longer teeth. There were thin, razor fangs which were in the process of expelling her former dentition. The coppery taste was enjoyable for the blink of an eye...until her pelvis broke before snapping back in place. Then the Blood Rose screamed again.

But her transformation was far from over. A hairless tail erupted from the base of her spine, and it soon grew longer and longer, its tip expanding into a wedge shape. Lotara could feel it, much like the wing. It was a new part of her. Her chest...her chest began to grow too. While her breasts grew, this was only incidental, as more and more muscles and power was built within it. Her skin was now a light shade of red, and the sensation of burning was getting ever more intolerable.

Her legs grew. As a military officer and a Warlord, Lotara had always been muscled, but the sheer power coursing in her legs would have been unimaginable to her before.

The air was soaked in blood, and she found it...pleasant. The *Conqueror*’s Mistress looked past the changes transforming her legs before wincing as the nerves anywhere near her feet flared in awful pain...then died. As one more scream escaped her dark lips, Lotara watched her toed melding together. It was a slow progress, but one by one, they stuck together until her feet were nothing but a mass of flesh. The soles rapidly dried out, turning back and rough. Bone connected through her skin, and then spread out, ensuring that each of her feet was now taking the shape of a hoof. The rest of her limb was lengthened, pulling up and back until her lower leg looked like a Bloodletter’s leg.

And the fires inside her at last began to grow less painful and more...enjoyable.

“**It is done. Let me see you**.”

Lotara felt many things wash away from her. Her ability to fear was gone, and it took her by surprise at first...but it felt good, as good as it felt when many of her inhibitions were discarded.

And without the pain clouding her thoughts, the Blood Rose understood. The fire had been a natural consequence of assimilating the power of a Daemon Primarch. Her body, no matter how much it had been augmented, was not ready for it.

Lotara understood more things as her Master and God rewarded her. The Anathema had forged Weaver into a new kind of being, and she was Khorne’s answer to this challenge.

Lotara would not be a rival to the Angel of Sacrifice – that role had been taken by Ka’Bandha, but she would be her *peer*. She would be the second Nephilim Queen to be born.

As rivers of blood flowed all around her, Lotara considered herself. Her growth had been spectacular, she was easily two metres tall now...possibly more because of the shape of her lower leg. Her skin had now turned a deep crimson red, on par with the shade of a Bloodletter. She spread out her wings, and while the outside was black leather, the inside was the same red as the red as her body.

She made a step forwards, surrounded by blood and piles of stone. Slowly.

At first, her legs felt shaky, but this moment passed away. The Blood Rose felt powerful. As she watched herself in the growing blood pool, she could see her eyes had turned black and irisless. They were akin to abyssal pits now. Her ears were long and pointed now...like an Eldar. Lotara appreciated the irony. Only her hair could not have been said to change much...they were a bit longer now, a black and elegant mane around her horns.

Lotara opened her mouth, and a smile of fangs was shown in the pool serving as her mirror...but her smile faded fast.

There was still something wrong, and it wasn’t her naked body or the fact she hadn’t a weapon in her claws.

It was like something she needed to admit. It was something that was not hers, something-

“**You are Valkia. You are my Red Angel, my Blood Rose...and my Gore Queen**.”

And Lotara Sarrin ceased to exist.

“**Yes, my Master**.”

Past and future dissolved.

Valkia listened to the screams of a galaxy at war. The new Red Angel heard the prayers of those who worshipped her. She saw what was coming, and the terrible wars it would trigger.

She was who she was always meant to be.

Valkia stepped beyond the woman she had once been, and became something greater.

And she was eternal.

**Granithor System**

**Ruins of Eternity**

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

The good news was that she hadn’t been unconscious for long. And her former...lieutenant had protected her, as she had promised.

There was more good news in that the King in Yellow wasn’t going to turn her into his personal footrest or something equally ignoble.

The bad news...the level of destruction was extremely difficult to assess. The planet they had fought for so much had perished, that was for sure.

The ruined Ziggurat was floating in the heart of an enormous mass of miniature asteroids which had been corrupted by the Warp, and by a certain God in particular.

In case you had any doubt which God, it was raining blood, and there were mountains of skulls. Given the abundance of red gems everywhere, the undead Noctilith had certainly been transformed into Haematia.

It wouldn’t have been bad news, if Malicia wasn’t granted more visions and long-distance views of how few warships and evacuating troops remained.

The King...no, Nagash had fled, and the galaxy wouldn’t fall under the eternal tyranny of the King in Yellow today.

But there was so much destruction and losses, ending with a series of broken worlds, that you couldn’t call that victory.

Most of these conclusions, by the way, were done to temporarily divert her thoughts away from the topic of the busty red-skinned Daemon Queen emerging from the blood bath.

“**Malicia**,” the new Red Angel saluted her as skintight black armour covered her crimson red skin, with soon red glyphs adding to it a more Khornate theme. Her voice was powerful, yet remained feminine.

“Valkia,” the Destiny Unwritten replied.

After trying to engineer the birth of a Nephilim Queen for so long, the parahuman sorceress felt some jealousy that two had achieved it before her...and that her main effort, Ax’senaea, had resulted in an immensely powerful Daemon Princess, but a Daemon Princess nonetheless.

“**I won the battle, in the name of my God**.”

No protest escaped her lips; after all, unless you were blind, you couldn’t miss the blood and the skulls, or the thunderous shadows of the eternal battlefields raging in the distance.

“**The Calyx Hell Stars are *mine***.”

Malicia saw and felt the enormous weight of the proclamation ripple through the Warp.

The Tzeentchian Warlord also immediately knew this wasn’t going to be a realm as big as it could have been when she made her plans so many years ago. But it was going to be something important, protected by a Warp Storm and many tons of Haematia...and it would all be under the nominal rule of Khorne.

“Since you aren’t the type to gloat for the sake of it,” Malicia didn’t stare at the black pits that were the Gore Queen’s eyes, “please give your conditions.”

Valkia smiled...and as her black lips opened, they revealed fangs that were thin and sharp as razors.

“**Of all the Great Warlords who participated in this battle, you are the one who really worked by my side to destroy Nagash**,” the name was uttered like a curse...and to be fair, it was one. “**By respect for this and the long rivalry we had, I give you the choice to you and your God. You can bend the knee...or you can leave, taking the planets of your Malfian Crown with you. If you decide for the latter, I will make sure no one interferes**.”

Before this...this Second Battle of the Tyrant Star, she supposed, Malicia would have scoffed and treated it as a joke.

Here and now?

The proposal was made by a Daemon Queen who had taken many, many powers, including but likely not limited to some Slaaneshi essence, most of a Daemon Primarch’s raw power, and other things that she had no wish to study.

The new Red Angel had a red tail, black-red wings, long black hair, and lost most of her humanity.

Unfortunately, it seemed Khorne had grown smarter, and not removed her strategic skills and her intelligence.

As most of the cults and the elite military forces in the Calyx Hell Stars were gone, the question was thus simple: did they have something to stop a Daemon Queen who stood above the Exalted Bloodthirsters as far as the hierarchy of the Blood God was concerned?

And the answer was no.

Transmutational Changestone would slow down the speed of the defeat, but it would only be a decrease.

Malicia could feel Valkia’s power.

There was no one left to fight her...except Weaver naturally, but the parahuman sorceress kind of doubted the other Nephilim Queen – though she was called a Living Saint by the Imperium – was going to answer her calls and sell her services to the highest bidder.

“I will take my planets out of the Calyx Hell Stars,” Malicia replied.

Kneeling was out of the question, the very thought gave her the urge to vomit...and honestly, it would always be a vassalage filled with dangers. Khornate forces were going to have overwhelming firepower on their side here, which meant any wrong move would result in a Legion of World Eaters storming Malfi.

The Destiny Unwritten didn’t know where Tzeentch would send her next, but the Calyx Hell Stars were a lost cause...for now.

“**Good. I give you eight days**.”

Malicia snorted. How kind of her...

“Anything else?”

“**Now that I think about it...yes**.”

Valkia turned around and went to grab a sword lying abandoned...and to her surprise, it was the Black Bade of Antwyr.

But it wasn’t as much a surprise compared to the monumental shock she felt when the red-skinned Nephilim Queen threw her the Blade of Calamity, hilt first.

“**Your performance is lamentable**,” the sword insulted her immediately, proving that alas, it wasn’t a fake artefact. “**Do you have any ideas of the torment I endured by the hands of the King in Yellow**?”

“Oh, shut up,” Malicia suddenly felt all exhaustion dropping on her shoulders. Her attention returned to Valkia. “Why?”

“**It is likely Nagash will make new plans, rebuild his armies, and try to give himself new abilities before striking again a powerful blow**.” The Gore Queen explained. “**And in terms of sheer power, there are few weapons stronger and more useful for his tyrannical methods than the Black Blade of Antwyr. If I keep it, he may not come. But if you are the owner**...”

Damn, this Red Angel was extremely dangerous. And assuredly, the ‘gift’ was poisoned...in more ways than one.

“He may very well move against me,” the Destiny Unwritten finished the sentence. “And you will be able to track him...before hunting him down.”

“**Precisely**”, the black lips twitched. “**I am his Bane, after all**.”

Just for this time, Malicia was almost tempted to pity Nagash. Of all the Champions and Warlords that this battle had seen clash, the former King of the Tyrant Star had really chosen one of the most painful and difficult options...

“Farewell, Valkia.”

She turned away.

“**Farewell, Malicia. I hope one day for your sake that you will find your destiny**.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Samarkand Quadrant**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Arena of Blades**

**Adjutant-Colonel Bellona**

Bellona jumped in joy as *at last*, the Eldar Cruiser’s hatch opened, revealing...

“Webmistress! Welcome back to your humble Arena!”

“*Her* humble Arena?”

Something very dangerous purred next to her, and the Adjutant-Colonel felt her legs grew a bit weak...but Bellona wasn’t afraid.

She wasn’t afraid!

“The key to the new ‘Palace Quarter’, with the super-luxury bedrooms, baths, showers, and other priceless living accommodations!” The Adjutant-Spider hastily added before throwing the aforementioned object to the Queen of Blades, who had somehow teleported behind her, bypassing her vigilance. “We have also added a new catalogue which allows the performer to order clothes and goods from a list of one hundred thousand objects, and refreshments are on the house!”

“Hmm...” the long-eared Endbringer looked at her with a bored expression. “Fine. You avoid the spar for now, arachnid.”

And she walked away.

Bellona felt plenty of relief...and she was ecstatic as the Webmistress began to pet her.

“I am so glad you came home safe and healthy, Webmistress!”

“So am I, Bellona...I see you’ve done excellent work.”

“Thank you, Webmistress.” Having far more eyes than a human, even closing some in pleasure, the Adjutant-Colonel couldn’t miss that there were several more people leaving the Eldar ship. “Should I open more prestigious Quarters? I see...but...Leet and Borek are back? Can I sound the alert? I want to see the Adeptus Mechanicus pass into ‘Leet Warning Mode’!”

“Now, now, Bellona...it is not funny to mock our duo. They have lived extremely dangerous adventures.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Well, if the Webmistress said it...and the images Bellona was telepathically given supported it entirely. “Besides, Leet and Borek won’t stay here. They will return to Nyx. Missy will make sure they have a palace to relax until I come back. It will always be time after that to find them new missions to exploit...their unique talents.”

Yes, unique talents to spread mayhem and trigger explosive situations...but they had killed a Vandire, and that excused a lot of things.

“You don’t intend to stay, Webmistress?”

“Unfortunately, Bellona, I must return to the *Enterprise*. I have political and military conferences to attend on Macragge, and I can’t skip those. But once those are done, I will return here, and, barring unforeseen problems, I intend to stay several years and give my focus to the Nyx Sector.”

“Those are news that will rejoice the hearts of the Swarm and everyone living on Nyx, Webmistress!” The Eldar warship departed quickly enough after some of the crew had left various containers, and the humans, led by the duo Leet-Borek, were moving towards one of the ships that the Arena’s personnel used to ferry goods from the Nyxian planets to the Arena. As a result, there was only the Webmistress, Bellona...and a xenos wearing a red hooded cloak hiding everything. “Err...who is the other visitor?”

The red hood fell, revealing another long-ear...but this one was golden-skinned. And immediately, Bellona felt it. It had been hidden so far, but this Eldar had touched Aethergold...a lot of Aethergold, in addition to the Webmistress’ touch, of course.

The eyes...the eyes were strange. They were crimson on the outskirts, but golden for the rest.

As the cloak opened, revealing that the Eldar was near-naked, Bellona could see that the rest of the body was golden too. In fact, aside from the nails, the vivid crimson-blood hair, the eyes, and the lips, everything was gold...leading her to an inescapable conclusion.

“You made her into one of your servants, Webmistress?”

“That’s a bit more complicated than that...”

“Yes.” The long-ear replied with a dangerous smile.

When in doubt, always listen to the voice of reason...and the voice of reason was the Webmistress. Who cleared her throat.

“The Queen of Blades will fight her for as long as she wishes here. If she survives...well, we will see. Until Aenaria Eldanesh departs, this new guest is to be given her private quarters. Don’t go for the sums we agreed upon for the Queen’s quarters, but the living space provided must be of high quality.”

“Of course!” They had a reputation to uphold, both inside and outside the arena! “And...oh, what is the name of this honoured guest?”

The Webmistress turned her head in the crimson-gold long-ear, curious...

“I am Liandra,” the crimson lips moved in a musical tone. “Liandra of Caledor.”

**Somewhere deep in the Halo Stars**

**Far away from the Ind Cluster**

**A few minutes after the end of the Second Battle of the Tyrant Star**

**‘The Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods’**

Once they had time to properly debate between themselves of the events that had led to the defeat of the King in Yellow and the destruction of the Tyrant Star, many Lord Inquisitors would unanimously agree to send an expedition to the Maharashtra System.

After learning the heretics had found a terrifyingly powerful daemonic sword and a Noctilith ‘cocoon’ that had transformative capabilities able to change a God-level entity, an urgent answer was needed.

An Inquisitorial fleet would leave a secret shipyard somewhere in Segmentum Obscurus and reach the same system so many heretics had decided to visit. The hulls of the fleet in question would have a significant number of Exterminatus weapons, of course.

They would find...a system scoured of life.

While the planet Maharashtra was exactly where it should be, the Acolytes assigned to the auspexes would report with some confusion to their masters that the planet was an airless ball of rocks.

The devices the Inquisition had bought from the Mechanicus – tools that had cost a number of favours most citizens would go livid if they were ever informed of it – were formal: if there was some life upon it, it had happened millions of years ago.

And yet, when an Inquisitorial Task Force descended upon Maharashtra, they would find Astartes Power Armours, along some Legionnaire war machines.

But all these husks looked like they had waited for hundreds of thousands of years here.

In fact, as Tech-Priests would claim when working upon these relics, it was the anti-Hrud protocols of certain Iron Warrior equipment which had ensured they could be recovered in such a ‘serviceable’ state.

In time, the Inquisition Fleet departed with more questions than when they had arrived.

One thing was sure: they hadn’t found the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods.

And for good reason.

The very moment the Angel of Destruction was unleashed against Nagashizzar, the Graveyard was no longer in the Maharashtra System.

The immense temples, the tropical forests surrounding the cursed city...all of it for a moment ceased to exist.

By the time it reappeared, the King in Yellow’s true name had been revealed, and the armies of undeath would have lost the battle.

It was far away from the Ind Cluster, deep into the Halo Stars, where this return would be felt.

In a system that had never been colonised or even explored by humanity, an ice-covered telluric planet began to be overwritten.

It had been an aster of different heavy metals, but it didn’t have any trace of life upon it. The temperatures were far too cold, the planet way too far away from its sun.

Which was why if an Explorator Ship had been able to witness what happened, they would have likely not believed their own eyes...and in the process, likely gone utterly mad too.

For this entire star system was remodelled, on a scale that was difficult to believe.

The planet chosen had to support the Graveyard needed to be closer to the sun to support life...and so it was moved closer to the sun, no matter if two other planets were pulverised and many other actions breaking the cosmic order of this star and its planets happened.

When the completely transformed system acquired some semblance of stability, the Graveyard and its jungles were there on the planet in question, as if they had been for tens of thousands of human years.

There was extremely lethal fauna and flora, like in the Maharashtra System.

But there was a major difference.

Unlike last time, the Temples were spread out all over the world. They were part of the jungle.

This wasn’t a mistake.

For in the city that wasn’t a city, walls were restored. Sky-reaching buildings looking like they had been imagined with what humans would call an ‘Aztec theme’ appeared.

There was a malign intelligence at work there, and it had energy to spare.

Ignorant of it, the different armies which had fought inside the Graveyard had done something the Emperor of Mankind and many civilisations had done their best to avoid: they had fed it.

Every Astartes, mutant, xenos, and worse who perished within the bounds of this cursed city had his soul devoured. There was, to date, no known exception to this rule.

And yes, it was truly a Graveyard for a Thousand Dying Gods of the Immaterium. The archives written by every major civilisation of importance on the subject were absolutely right about that. In time, if the current Gods and Goddesses perished, maybe the Graveyard would welcome entities whose name were known to the Champions of the Imperium and of Chaos.

It had existed for millions of years, it existed in this era, and unless the Emperor managed to leave the Golden Throne in the future, it would likely exist until the arrival of the great Tyranid fleets, for only the Emperor had really the power to extinguish it forever.

Alas for all sane civilisations, the first time the Master of Mankind had encountered it, he had not been ready to annihilate it. Specific tools and assets had been in terribly short supply, and there was, as always, the threat of Chaos waiting behind the scenes.

And so the Graveyard survived, sealed, weakened, but not forgotten.

One of its purposes was indeed to welcome the Unborn and Dying Gods, in their last-ditch attempts to delay their final end.

But it was not the primary purpose of this malevolent thing.

At the centre of the city, a black storm coalesced. If the Inquisitorial fleet had been present in orbit, they would have been in the process of giving firing orders for Exterminatus, arguing correctly that something horrible was revealing itself.

They would have been absolutely right.

For when the darkness stopped its work, it revealed a temple of black stones.

It may have looked, at first glance, like an Aztec temple, but the glyphs carved upon it had not and never been included in any human language.

But the real madness was at the top of the edifice.

There, a dark gate was waiting.

At the summit of such a temple, it should open on nothing but empty air, and yet it didn’t.

It could be opened from both sides.

Fortunately for the sake of this galaxy, the gate was closed.

The first side had been sealed by the Emperor himself. The second side was shut down by Inquisitors dabbling in fusion or archeotech and sorcerous lore.

Naturally, the malign entity was absolutely not satisfied by this state of affairs.

Various species had given it a name many times, but the most appropriate, translated into a billion tongues, was best avoided spoken anywhere near it.

It was the Echoing Vault.

It was Eternal.

And it wanted to be opened.

**Author’s note**:

The vault is closed. For now.

And in case you had any doubt, no, this isn’t the last time you have seen the King in Yellow. The Tyrant will return...if there is something you can count upon where Nagash is concerned, it is his ability to hold grudges.

The Weaver Option will continue in *Tyranny 12-4 Ashes of Victory*. Much like this Interlude was near-entirely about the events in the Second Battle of the Tyrant Star, this one will be about the Macragge Conference.

12-4 should be the last chapter/interlude of the Tyranny Arc...unless I change my mind in the next couple of months. We will see...

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www . /forum /threads /weaver-option-thread-3-the-5th-black-crusade-story-only.506948/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption