This is not a teaser – 26 June 2023

**Tyranny 12.3**

**(Interlude)**

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

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

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

*The slaves of Chaos are coming for you.*

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

*But it is a lie.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Everything you have said is a lie.*

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

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

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

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

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

*It is that simple.*

*So enough lies, King in Yellow.*

*Fight with all your might.*

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

*I am watching you.*

**Granithor System**

**Temporal Anomaly – date estimation impossible**

**Battleship Natural Selection**

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

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

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

She hadn’t.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was not the most glaring problem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Malicia sniggered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

All of that had been planned for.

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

They were assets she had not been warned about.

“What are those things, Antwyr?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Dust**

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

**Temporal Anomaly – date estimation impossible**

**The Ninth Mortarch**

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

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

“They hold...for now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The forces of Dust had to hold.

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

“They are targeting the unshielded sectors.”

“Can we reveal the main batteries now?”

“No.” The undead Space Marine spoke.

There was something wrong.

He felt it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the hatches opened, and the enemy came out.

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

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

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

The design was...

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

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

It was relentless. It was merciless.

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

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

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

“This confirms Perturabo is their creator and master.”

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

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

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

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

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

The Ninth Mortarch nodded.

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

Yet there has to be more than that.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, Lord.”

“Very well.”

More Myrmidon Androids were landing with every minute.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

“Exegete Hundsturm.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By the Throne of Skulls!”

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

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

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

They were hardly an innovation.

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

But these had been the bait.

Now the King in Yellow was moving for the kill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This is-“

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

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

“Warlord? Is this what I think?”

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

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

“He wanted us to see a massacre.”

And a massacre it was.

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

But it felt like a couple of minutes at best.

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

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

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

And now it died.

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

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

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

“Kossolax.”

“Yes, Warlord?”

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

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

**Granithor System**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

They did not meet in person, of course.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Malicia wished she had a bit of warning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**And if I did**?”

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

For good reason.

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

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

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

Perturabo, however, had done it deliberately.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This is the only way to win!”

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

The parahuman sorceress turned towards the favourite of Khorne.

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

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

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

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

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

“Malal doesn’t will it!”

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

**Rust**

**Hekatii, the Blood Muse**

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

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

Scales.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The peevish retort forced a chuckle out of her lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anyway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hekatii laughed.

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

**Sea of Madness**

**Typhus the Traveller**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If so, their hilarity came at an end.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Lord Herald, Dust!”

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

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

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

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

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

It was a spectacle of Death.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Somewhere in the Granithor System**

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

**The Seventh Mortarch**

An Imperial officer would have raged and cursed his enemies.

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

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

Their duty remained.

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

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

“The outer defences have broken.”

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

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

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

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

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

“And your command, the Sea of Madness?”

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

“You were given the order to hold!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And flawless or not, it had worked.

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

Dust and the two moons were no more.

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

There was a torrent of shrieking and evil laughter.

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

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

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

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

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

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

Malicia chuckled.

“True. They really believe in overkill measures.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Malicia snickered.

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

The parahuman sorceress turned his head towards Ax’senaea.

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

“You know what I want. Speak.”

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

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

And then he *spoke*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Malicia rolled her eyes.

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

“**No**.”

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

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

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

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