Weaver Option Update 20 December 2020

**Ovation 9.3**

**Return to Wuhan**

*Every person in a position of authority must be careful about gifts and the unintended consequences they can create. Failing to understand that can lead to very unpleasant outcomes. One of the biggest and most infamous examples illustrating my point is unquestionably the Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector.*

*There is no doubt the Ecclesiarchy intended their gift to be a true reward for the destruction of Commorragh. Unfortunately, due to the vastly decentralised nature of the Imperium, the sheer incompetence of Ministry officials, and the lamentable behaviour of the Lemurian Hierophant and his idiotic followers, the Suebi theatre in the 297-299M35 period was far more approaching the description of ‘poisoned chalice’ than ‘excellent planetary addition to a sovereign Sector’.*

*Due to its very spatial configuration across the Nebula, the Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector was, for all intent and purposes, two different sub-realms which just happened to be ruled from the same location, which was the Hierophant’s palace on Lemuria. As such, Missy and the Nyxian emissaries who were sent to deal with the huge problems plaguing it faced two very different problems.*

*The ‘southern’ trail, ranging from Parthia to Hibernia, was loyal and true to the Imperium, but suffered from a combination of ruinous economic tithes and a distinct lack of industrial contributions from foreign actors. Evidently, chasing away the Cartels which refused to pledge full and undivided allegiance to the Atlantis Cardinal and the Adeptus Ministorum had some ugly effects, and the economic ones were only the most visible of the list.*

*The ‘northern’ trail, by contrast, was far wealthier. The average Imperial citizen rarely saw a handful of Throne Gelts from it, as the upper priesthood of the Ministorum had monopolised the wealth and the valuable resources of these worlds for centuries. And if they were too many malcontents in the streets, well, this was why Sparta existed in the first place: the Penal World was going to be the grave of the worst insurgents and troublemakers of the Suebi Sub-Sector – though plenty of criminals and opponents to the rule of Atlantis were also sent there.*

*Despite some pathetic propaganda attempts on Lemuria to blame everything on other parties, a quick analysis of the situation showed that the change of Sector wasn’t to blame for the woes of the planets from Antioch to Drakkar. The iron-fisted rule imposed by Lemuria had worked for decades, but as the tithes became more and more unbearable, all the powder keg needed to blow up was a spark.*

*Fortunately for the Hierophant and his cronies, the Sparta Rebellion and its survival for three long and atrocious years were far away from the eyes of the public they wanted to brainwash into believing they were infallible. Unfortunately for them, the abandonment of the Frateris Templar forces on the ground, the disruption of supplies, the need to find other prisons to keep their criminals away from law-abiding workers...all of it generated a lot of bureaucratic evidence. Details of what happened on the Ice World were supposed to be kept secret, but people always gossiped. Even the Mechanicus does it – although Tech-Priests do their damn best to pretend the contrary – and whisper after whisper, the people of Lemuria and Vijayanagara began to form their own opinion about what was happening in the neighbouring systems. The official transfer of status of Sparta from Cardinal-Penal to Mining World couldn’t be silenced, however. By that point, it was only a question of how bad things were going to unravel in the Lemuria System, not if or when it was going to explode.*

*The Hierophant and the trusted subordinates he shared his wealth must have thought themselves astonishingly lucky when agitation in the Drakkar System convinced Missy to bypass Vijayanagara and Lemuria altogether. In reality, it was only avoiding a problem to jump into a largest pit of pain...*

Extract from Archive C-0110-S-246, secured in the Fafnir Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by then Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter between 297M35 and 310M35. The necessary accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

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*Contrary to the prevalent fear of most Inquisitors, we have now amassed enough evidence to indicate that a large majority of the Necron worlds were not heavily defended before they went into near-eternal suspended animation and disappeared from the annals of their enemies’ galactic history.*

*Why is it not as reassuring as it sounds?*

*The first reason is the problem of time. By the Nerushlatset Dynasty own admissions, the ‘Great Sleep’ of the Necrons was never supposed to last the millions of standard years it did. Therefore if one of the complexes where the Necrons were waiting was sabotaged, suffered technological malfunctions, or simply was on the receiving end of entropy and environmental conditions able to erode the walls and the protections of the redoubts, said metallic automatons would soon be reduced to miserable wrecks and interesting archaeologist relics for the Mechanicus.*

*In other words, the worlds of the Necrons which failed to defend enough their complexes were already destroyed thousands of years before the Great Crusade was even the shadow of a project in His Most Divine Majesty’s mind.*

*The second problem is the definition we ascribe to ‘lightly defended’. For Necron Overlords, the domains which aren’t protected by World Engines, the extensive orbital grids of their Crownworld, a full Battlefleet, or some other massive military installation, is not heavily fortified. It is not an illogical view to have, since these impressive weapons and defensive assets are indeed several orders of magnitude more powerful than anything the Necrons of a ‘Fringeworld’ could count upon to fight back tides of greenskins or other enemies. But from the aspect of any attacker, the firepower available to the xenos colonies we would call ‘backwater outposts’ in our blessed Imperium, is nothing short of terror-inspiring.*

*The weakest and most isolated Necron Nemesors have limited resources to defend their domains. That much can’t be denied. But these xenos commanders also don’t have a single civilian in their ranks, and that translates in them being able to arm and unleash one hundred percent of their forces on the battlefield, supported by millions of Canoptek elements, aerial-superiority elements capable to decimate the Aeronautica air wings, and artillery pieces shrugging off days of lengthy bombardment before silencing regiments in one shot.*

*This is why, Acolytes, if you are ever convinced you have discovered a Tomb World, you call your Master...or the closest Adeptus Astartes Chapter. It is not the moment to be brave and stupid. It is entirely possible the ruins will contain only a couple of long-crippled xenos hulks. But it is not impossible either it will be a new* [REDACTED].

Extract from Inquisitorial file [REDACTED], dictated on the order of [CLASSIFIED, INSUFFICIENT CLEARANCE], on the eve of [REDACTED].

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“That the Necrons called what we knew as the Ymga Monolith the Throne of Oblivion is all you need to know to realise how cursed this location is.” Anonymous Inquisitor in a speech made approximately in 325M36.

**Suebi Nebula**

**Nerushlatset Space**

**Crownworld Amarnekh**

**Approximately 8.115.297M35**

Thought for the day: The foolish man puts his trust in luck; the wise man puts his trust in the Emperor.

**Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten**

“The humans have found WHAT?”

Neferten rarely asked for her vassals and senior Overlords to repeat a sentence. This time, she made an exception to her own rules.

“Lady Weaver sent us the approximate coordinates of the Oblivion Throne, Great Phaerakh,” Destruction-Overlord Sitkah said dutifully for the second time.

The ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty accessed her most secure memories and verified thrice by herself. The spatial data, unfortunately, was completely correct.

“How did they even manage to locate this dark pit in the first place?”

“Reading between the lines the report Lady Weaver sent us...it is likely the humans captured an ancient Aeldari database before destroying Commorragh.” Sitkah paused. “That or they tried to assault it centuries ago, and they’ve just realised our species built this thing from the very beginning.”

“The former is a likelier possibility than the latter,” the Phaerakh commented. “The report is about shipments of Noctilith, yes? The moment the voluminous deliveries were placed into the Throne’s vaults, I doubt anything the humans have available in monitoring technology would be able to pierce the Cryptek chrono-shrouds.”

That and anyone who had tried to attack the Oblivion Throne during the War in Heaven had met a final and atrocious end. Krorks, Aeldari, Hrud, and even a few things no Phaeron liked to reminisce about...they had all been slaughtered.

“You have clearly studied the data the humans have sent,” Neferten abandoned these dark thoughts to interrogate Sitkah. “Your opinion?”

“Unless the Silent King kept this node active for far longer than the other Dynasties,” the Destruction-Overlord began, “the Noctilith that over sixty Dynasties were forced to offer in tribute to the Szarekhan Overlords must indeed have been stored there. We continue to search, of course, but these stocks weren’t used to build the early Pylon Network or transported to other vital strongholds. They must still be there in the dimensional vaults of the inner sanctum.”

“They may as well be two or three galaxies away, then, Mighty Phaerakh,” Overlord Kamosekh the Prudent intervened. Neferten felt a surge of irritation, in her surprise she had forgotten to dismiss him. “Yes, the quantity of Noctilith stored by order of the Silent King will be found there. But there’s absolutely no feasible way the young race of the humans will be able to breach the outer defences of Oblivion.”

“I don’t know,” Sitkah answered back, “I’m sure the Drukhari were dreaming the same thing about Commorragh, and looked what happened to them.”

“The circumstances are completely different, young one,” the ancient Overlord – so ancient he had been old when she was crowned Phaerakh, in fact, “yes, the humans, with our help, managed to destroy Commorragh. But the *Drukhari* were only decadent shadows of the threat the Aeldari warriors were. I fought against the Aeldari from the very battles to the moment we cornered them in their last redoubts. I killed thousands of them. And I can tell you, if the Aeldari had still been alive, this invasion would have been utterly slaughtered in the Port of Lost Souls. Under no possible scenario the ancient Phoenix Princes would have allowed us to send so many Battleships into the vital sections of the Webway.”

“True,” Neferten confirmed before the exchange turned more heated. “But if the Aeldari had been alive, they wouldn’t have tolerated the interstellar empire of the humans either. We will not divert from the subject at hand, however. We were speaking about the Oblivion Throne.”

“That we won’t be able to assault, directly or indirectly, Mighty Phaerakh,” Kamosekh declared. “The protocols of the Silent King prevent us from attacking the worlds of the other Dynasties, I dare say the same protections are also present there and some more honourless engram-decerebrating traps besides,” at that point, the fact Kamosekh was one of her rare Overlords to not have any Cryptek skills shone through. “The humans will have to fight through the three Replicator Forges alone, without our support. I don’t know how they can possibly survive these outer defences if the Triarch Praetorians do the smart thing and activate the Dolmen Gates. Fighting the Sautekh is already complicated enough when their Phaeron does the intelligent thing and places one of his best commanders in charge, if they can replicate their Battleships at will, the battle can’t be won.”

“The technology of the Replicator Forges is hardly flawless,” Sitkah immediately disagreed. “My Phaerakh, the humans have proved they are not entirely unskilled in the art of sabotage-“

“Completely against our code of honour,” the other Overlord gritted his Necrodermis teeth.

“And they have their own strengths, despite having minds and bodies of flesh,” the female Cryptek-Overlord finished, glaring at Kamosekh. “They may be able to do the impossible a second time.”

“And it’s also possible they won’t,” the Overlord nicknamed ‘the Prudent’ replied darkly. “In the improbable case the young race deal with the Sautekh and the Replicator Forges - which would be quite a feat, I’m sure you are aware, there is a Solar Harvester mounting guard, escorted by a reinforced fleet. I don’t know the name of the Dynasty which was forced to give out these assets, but I don’t think it was one of fourth or fifth rank. This means at least fifteen more battleships and uncountable phalanxes, all equipped with the latest teleportation technologies the Szarekhan Crypteks stole from their inventors before the Great Sleep. That is the outer defences; there’s no way to know what is awaiting beyond this, for none of the nobles who aren’t part of the Szarekhan Dynasty have been invited inside.”

Sometimes Kamosekh was far too pessimistic for his own good. He was also a great believer in the theory that as long as a Necron had invented something, other races wouldn’t be able to do something able to counter it.

Nevertheless, the Overlord had been entire truthful about the sheer devastation the defences of the Oblivion Throne could unleash against an unsuspecting invader. There was a reason no one had been able to go past the outer defences before the Great Sleep.

“Your description is fairly accurate as far as our ancient information on Szarekh’s vanity projects are concerned.” And even the arrogant male pretending to be their Holy Saviour had not constructed most of the planetary-sized infrastructure for this one. Half of the work of what was going to be one of the most defended locations in the galaxy had been conceived by the unholy alliance of the Void Dragon and the Nightbringer. “But it also represents an opportunity for us. While the Oblivion Throne is not on the list of targets I gave to Lady Weaver, Mandragora is.”

If the humans forced the Szarekhan Dynasty to come defend the Throne as they surely would – arrogant bastards always preferred someone else to pay the price of broken Necrodermis bodies and warships crippled – they would have to take them from somewhere.

And if they took as many phalanxes as they could from the Sautekh Crownworld...

“It is pure folly,” mumbled Kamosekh. “And the Silent King will be aware of our betrayal.”

Neferten had a hard time not scoffing at that one. Despite uncountable evidence to the contrary, the ‘old guard’ of Overlords and Nemesors often persisted seeing in Szarekh an infallible genius, all because his neural-matrix was bigger than every other Necron.

Moreover, if – admittedly, it was a big hypothetical outcome – if the humans managed to break the Szarekhan grasp on the Oblivion Throne, the Replicator Forges, the very molecular-hyperalchemical devices would belong to the Nerushlatset Dynasty with all the strategic consequences it implied.

“All of this purely speculative for now, Overlord,” this wasn’t the kind of operation which could be decided on a whim or even days of debate. “But it is certainly an interesting report. Overlord, you are dismissed.”

The ruler of the Nerushlatset phalanxes waited for her conservative subordinate to be out of the assembly halls where she was preparing several of the new improved Necrodermis shells, before addressing Sitkah again.

“I am going to need to send two messages,” the Phaerakh-Cryptek said to her vassal. “The first will be for Weaver. I want to meet her face-to-face, preferably within the year.”

“Yes, my Phaerakh. And the second?”

“The second will be for Trazyn. If we try something against the Sautekh Dynasty, it is vital to neutralise one of their greatest assets before the first shot is fired.”

It was bad enough that the average Sautekh Overlord was a bloodthirsty warmonger with tens of thousands of battles of experience, but if they were forewarned of what was going to happen, this entire campaign would be an absolute disaster from start to end.

“Tell him to go after Orikan the Diviner.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

***Vulkan’s Arsenal* Shipyard**

**3.121.297M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

One of the many good points about being Planetary Governor was that you hadn’t to ask yourself every time you pushed a door if you had the budget to pay yourself something in the shop or commercial quarter you were living.

And thanks her luck for that, because if she wasn’t wealthy beyond her wildest dreams, the list of prices in this VIP lodge aboard the *Vulkan’s Arsenal* shipyard would have made her grit her teeth. Fortunately, she had the price to pay their absurdly expensive services, and the location offered her the opportunity to speak with Dragon without the risk of being overheard, as the personnel had forestalled her desire of privacy by placing several jamming devices around their table.

It was far from the only expensive thing which was mentioned in their conversation, as the Basileia of Nyx finished reading the list of requests for military and non-military projects Dragon had handed her a few minutes ago.

“And here I thought the Mechanicus had cold feet about innovation,” the insect-mistress huffed when the last paragraph recorded on the data-slate ended.

“We’re not speaking about something as heretical as ‘innovation’, perish the thought,” Dragon immediately showed an offended stance which would have made any aristocrat proud. “The Tech-Priests of the blessed Adeptus Mechanicus are going to study and analyse a multitude of sacred templates from thousands of Forges, and determine which one is the most appropriate to be put into mass production. And if afterwards some modifications are required...initiative and technological dedication are important.”

To Taylor’s ears, that sounded a lot like innovation, but if the Tech-Priests preferred to avoid the name and continue their researches using both past and present knowledge, she wasn’t going to spend thousands of hours going to change their mind for an extremely limited gain.

“Yes, yes. You’re still asking for a lot in terms of budget and resources, Dragon.”

“You didn’t need an hour to sign the budget presented by Groener and Schwarz.”

“That’s unfair,” the golden-winged parahuman snorted. “I followed their requests and the needs of the Guard in the Sector at every step of the procedure. Something I didn’t do with the Mechanicus Council.”

It was infuriating to always repeat herself on the subject, but as ‘fun’ as it was to watch new weapons and lines of production take shape in the Artisans workshops, there were only a limited number of hours in the day, and Living Saint or no Living Saint, she couldn’t be everywhere at once.

“By our very nature, the projects of the Adeptus Mechanicus are anything but cheap,” Dragon countered reasonably, disdaining the biscuits and the warm beverages in front of her. “And the Artisans and all my researchers are going to need years for these projects, Taylor. I can’t guarantee right now that some will be halfway completed when there will be a need to call the guardsmen to war for a major campaign. I think it’s better to begin the projects with a full budget now. It will prevent a lot of doomed hopes in the future.”

“Fine but...a Hover-Tank? A Hover-Transport?” I think even Mars and Ryza aren’t producing enough grav-plates per year to build a regiment of them!”

The Imperium had lost a lot of technology in the pyres of the Heresy, but Hover-type technology had never been truly widespread in the first place when the Emperor was walking among humanity.

“Assuredly, this one is a bit of a long shot,” the red-robed Tinker acknowledged. “The priority is on the White Scars-commissioned Jetbike project.”

The young Planetary Governor had an urge to slam her head against the table. Alas, all it would likely do was creating a painful headache and give a large sum to repair the damaged object.

“And the rocket-launchers which evidently do not look at all like modern Katioucha?” the Lady of Nyx asked for the sake of her curiosity.

“The Manticore launchers are immensely destructive, but their price is completely prohibitive. Unless you find a STC every ten years, their numbers will never exceed a thousand in a full Crusade. We need something filling the role that every Industrial World will be able to produce the ammunition for.”

To this the Lady General of the Guard had no counter. Manticore missiles could erase a brigade from a battlefield like it was nothing, but the sheer cost of a single missile was bleeding both the Munitorum and Nyx’s funds.

“Okay, you win. You and your subordinates will be able to work on all these Volkite, plasma, teleportation and shields projects...but I want results.” Not that she was truly fearful about that, but best to keep a little pressure on the Tech-Priests. “Was there anything we had to discuss before my departure for Wuhan?”

There shouldn’t be normally; the request for the naval construction program of the next decades had been dispatched to the Navy, Archmagos Sultan, and all other interested parties. But there were so many things unfolding that she had likely missed one where the Mechanicus was concerned.

“As a matter of fact, there is. I have talked a lot with the other members of the Council, and I think it would be a new idea to increase significantly its size. The Masters and Mistresses have too much to oversee and check now that we’ve extended their areas of operations, the projects, and the scope of our ambitions.”

“Ah,” to be honest, this wasn’t something she had thought much about...mainly because none of the senior Archmagi and Magi had mentioned the necessity to her. “How much of an increase we’re speaking about?”

“Ideally, I would go for a new Council of thirty-six.”

“Thirty –six?” The insect-mistress had thought about twenty-four maximum. “It’s not for the sake of increasing and giving more representation to some loudmouths, is it?”

“No,” the draconic-themed Minister of Industry was prompt to reassure her. “Like you, I’m all for avoiding political problems when it is possible. This increase is done because otherwise, the existing Masters will be overwhelmed by the work they need to do inside and outside the Nyx System. Running around can be tolerated during exceptional emergencies, but not for normal affairs.”

“Examples?”

“We need a Master of Titans, a Master of Noctilith, and likely a Master of Bacta.”

And if there was a need for a Master of Titans at Alamo, there would be also a ‘Master of Forges’ in the same system. The former Penal World’s allegiance was to the Adeptus Mechanicus, but it would obey the laws and the directives of the Council of Nyx, especially if there were enough Archmagi rotating between the two planets.

“I am willing to approve as long as there’s some preliminary testing beforehand. You know, to ensure this really increases the efficiency and doesn’t cause tensions.” The Basileia emptied her cup of tea. “And all the positions must be necessary, I won’t accept thirty-six council members just because it’s a multiple of twelve.”

“That goes without saying.”

“And if there’s a new ‘Master of Bacta’, he will need to be involved in the births of the new larva. We’re going to keep their raising slow for now, I want to be there when the new ‘Lisa’ goes into her chrysalis, but it’s best to make sure we have an extensive staff to care about our so-precious moths.”

“Not to mention finding adequate locations to host them,” Dragon couldn’t help but tell her. “Giant Moths are expensive.”

Taylor groaned.

“Come on, a flight of moths is adorable!”

“Not when the one we have eat more than a field army...”

**Hive Aquila**

**First Lieutenant Freya Brasidas**

By convention and good sense, Freya shouldn’t look like an officer covered in medals. Being rewarded with the Lion of Terra for her aerial victories during the Battle of Commorragh had at least given her this privilege.

But if there was one thing above she wasn’t gifted in, it was to refuse her father when he made one of his ‘suggestions’. Freya was a bit ashamed to say it, but she hadn’t dared challenging his decisions in a while...maybe not ever, if she had to stay truthful.

And so here she was, in her parade blue uniform of the Aeronautica Imperialis, giving credence to the reality that yes, past a certain point, there was such a thing as too many medals. The fact that Nils, who unlike her had not been granted the Lion of Terra, was looking as ridiculous as he was helped a bit, but not that much.

The eldest daughter of the Brasidas line tried to maintain a smiling face and not to show her boredom. This was rule number one of politics as usual; on that point even your Planetary Governor being a Living Saint had changed *that*. Unfair? Not really. Fair was fair, there was fewer of these boring occasions now, and when they happened it was for far better reasons.

But once the head cogboy had presented the first prototype of the Brunhilda superiority fighter and given a very short speech about the important role the Mechanicus – and Lady Weaver, of course – intended it to play in the future, the excitement for the evening was over. Lady Nyx wasn’t going to honour them of their presence; not with the Regency system once again officialised and the *Enterprise* sailing past Nyx Quartus a couple of hours ago.

All was left was networking, except for the reality there were a lot of cogboys everywhere, and Freya wasn’t speaking their secret ‘binaric’ language.

As for coming closer to the chief exhibit at the centre of the room, it was difficult. Not because the Tech-Priests were unwilling to let anyone touch the result of their efforts, but due to the concentration of her father’s friends and other nobles around it. Freya had stopped wondering a while ago why they did that. After all, it was likely these *civilians* didn’t understand the differences between a Thunderhawk and a Thunderbolt and-

Freya froze as a crystal glass containing cold water was placed in her hand, and eyes the perfect shade of blue stared at her.

“Thank you for the glass,” the First Lieutenant said, trying her best to not sound desperate at finding an avenue of escape. Unfortunately, with so many spectators and officers around, it was a bit difficult to move without crushing someone’s feet.

“You’re more than welcome, Lieutenant Brasidas, is it?” As if her name wasn’t placed above her panel of medals. And as if her interlocutor had not memorised most of the attendees’ list a few hours ago. “You look like you needed it after speaking with so many Counts and Barons.”

“I will survive,” the young noblewoman recently named instructor at the Aeronautica Academy replied before drinking the water. There was no taste of poisons, stimulants or aphrodisiacs as she had thought; trying to alter the judgement or assassinate someone when so many cogboys were present would be the height of folly. “Are you here to admire the first Brunhilda prototype?”

This would explain at least why the daughter of one of the High Twelve of the Senatorum Imperialis was here and not part of the huge escort of ships trying to follow as discreetly as possible the Battleship of Her Celestial Highness.

“Of course not,” Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg didn’t snort or made any insulting gesture; but there was still something in her behaviour and her stance which screamed Freya was below her...and the Nyxian noblewoman didn’t like it. “I came here to see if it was possible to buy the prototype the Tech-Priests would create after this one.”

Freya had a hard time not gaping like an unprepared dancer of the Great Game. Buying an atmospheric fighter or a starfighter wasn’t exactly impossible for men or women of good breeding; not if you had a few millions of Throne Gelts you didn’t know how to spend and as long as you didn’t expect the manufactorums to give you the first-grade ammunition and the weapons the Imperial Navy and the Aeronautica Imperialis reserved for themselves. But these were for mass-produced hulls which had been in service for centuries. It wasn’t for the prototype of a recently rediscovered STC template placed under the holy protection of a Living Saint. Even if it was the second prototype, not the first, it would certainly cost the equivalent of a huge ransom.

“And what did they say?”

A smile was all the answer Freya received. Not even inclined to brag at moments like this? The moment there was an opportunity to flee she was taking it, no matter how hasty it may appear to the eyes of outsiders.

“Why are you interested in this prototype in the first place? I doubt you can pilot it...” The Terran looked fit for duty, but in her impeccable white uniform of a Chartist officer, decorated with diamonds and other priceless objects of jewellery, Freya rather doubted the other woman was the type to risk her life in a cockpit instead of sending a flight of replaceable agents in her stead.

“Am I? You know, despite a more predatory look than its cousin the Xiphon Interceptor, the Brunhilda seems to place less stress on its pilot and as such does not require heavy augmentation or a transhuman constitution.” A new smile arrived on the pale lips. “Or maybe I’m just trying to show my faith into the industrial rise of Nyx, unlike certain narrow-sighted Houses.”

The Heiress of the Brasidas didn’t know if she needed to be disgusted or envious. Envious because the Terran noblewoman was able to see ancient relics of five thousand years ago when she wanted. Disgusted at the insinuation her House wasn’t financially supportive of the Basileia’s reforms in the orbital industry and the brand-new fusion reactors and thousands of technological devices.

“It will fail, you know,” the blonde-haired Nyxian said in an almost inaudible whisper. “She won’t trust you, and the Tech-Priests will listen to her.”

“Unlike the previous nobility of this proud Hive World,” the murmur was so low Freya had to focus all her senses not mistaking the words, “I am not careless to block the path leading to Her ascension.”

The pilot in her was relieved the ordeal was over as Marianne Gutenberg turned to engage the conversation with a scale-looking red robe. The noblewoman in her was grimacing.

Thank the God-Emperor there was only one of her on Nyx.

**Hive Athena**

**Emissary of the Queen of Blades Veth’va Xorl**

This cycle would be remembered as perfect. The sky was radiant and the emotions were a joy to experience.

The Monster of the Swarm had departed the planet, and Veth’va made sure to praise Atharti once more. There were still likely legions of insects not far from the rooms she had been given, but at least the armoured bugs weren’t right in front of her door, informing the Monster of her each and every move she made!

This made this assignment a bit more tolerable. Not a lot, but then every little bit counted, and knowing that she would not be drowned into a sea of insects and devoured from the inside was an excellent morale improvement.

The young Wych of the Cult of Blades shivered imperceptibly. Unlike most of the average Wych in service of the Queen, Veth’va had been part of the light garrison ordered to defend the Arena while the Cult was away hunting big prey, and as such she had been in excellent position to see the black waves surging to break the walls of Commorragh.

From that point onwards, the black-haired Drukhari had known they were enemies they shouldn’t have made, and the Monster of the Swarm was definitely one. The humans could give her prestigious titles and sing her praises by the tens of billions, Veth’va knew the human appearance was just a disguise to hide the implacable machine of death and destruction which had utterly annihilated dozens of sub-realms. The news the owner of the swarm legions had not only engaged in a fight with their Queen and survived for several hundreds of heartbeats had only cemented this opinion.

Prey and predators, no one survived the Queen – especially when she was fighting an opponent half-seriously.

‘Weaver’ – or whatever name she was using – was something else. Something unnatural and terrifyingly deadly. Something it was best to stay away from, and the safe distance was likely measured in thousands of stars. There was a difference between fighting a single Helspider in an arena, and keeping a few million as war auxiliaries.

The quarter-cycle the Queen had announced she would be the one to be the Emissary to the Monster had been one of the worst of her life, unquestionably, and if it was not the worst, it was because this sixth-cursed Harlequin throwing her to the Monster and being surrounded by a cohort of enemies was taking first place.

If her path once again met this clown, Veth’va swore she would flay him, drop him tied and bound into a pool filled with tiny carnivorous fishes, before sending him the biggest fleshy parts to Cegorach one package at a time. She had not enjoyed the travel, and she had loathed the ‘delivery method’!

The young Wych hissed a curse and looked away from the false-window showing her the outside. By the ashes of the Dark City, she didn’t like this assignment. This was a human world, with all the pollution, the lack of respect towards her species, and the measures keeping her in a cage.

“This mission can’t end soon enough...”

But while the Monster of the Swarm wasn’t there, the mission wasn’t about bugs, centipedes, or Helspiders. It was about building the new Arena of Blades for her Queen, and the Drukhari harbouring one of the blood-red new soul stones on her chest knew that if she failed in this, being devoured by insects would be the least of her problems.

And so Veth’va Xorl returned to the three-dimensional plans the human architects had delivered to her this morning, and the black-haired warrior began the arduous project of resistant assessment and aesthetic judgement.

She really, really should have known better when she opened her mouth to demand an end to boredom a night rotation before the Eversprings Gate opened and the devastation of the Second Fall was unleashed against their race...

**Forge-Temple Fafnir**

**Lady Dogma Dragon Richter**

If Astartes Power Armour Prototype XO1 could be summed-up in one word, there was a good chance ‘ugly’ would win the contest.

Seeing no use to waste money on a painting which wasn’t going to survive the first test, the Artisans in charge of this project had chosen a dirty grey to spray upon the outer plating.

It wasn’t limiting itself to the colour, though. What had originally been a Mark VII Aquila Power Armour – also known as Mark VII Imperator sometimes – had received additional planting above the neck joints, the lower chest, the fists, and the upper legs. This series of changes had forced the Nyx Mechanicus enginseers to build a new helmet, and the less that could be said was that under no circumstances the men and the women who had participated in this engineering problem would win artistic congratulations from the sons of Baal. The helmet was halfway between a gargoyle and the ‘plague doctor’ the Mark VI was.

But of course this was not the end of the modifications. One had to add the issue it wasn’t an Astartes hiding behind the armour, but a huge combat servitor the Mechanicus used for tasks like this, provoking several...ungainly alterations. Last but not least, there was the monumental outsized backpack which had added itself to the air reserves, the solar panels, the cell charger, and the cell chargers amongst many other things.

It gave a very ugly look to the Prototype XO1, close to being ridiculous and given how slow the servitor took to advance in the middle of the testing ground, a good engineer could also argue it was impractical too. The heavy servitor – close to ninety percent mechanical parts and ten percent flesh this one – could lift the same loads as an Astartes, and run at half the speed of one of the regular battle-brothers.

But it was a prototype, and agility and speed were not what it had been prepared for.

“Fire,” Archmagos Reductor Stefan Delta-Septimus ordered, and a millisecond later, the twelve robots facing Armour X01 acknowledged the order and unleashed against the immobile servitor a combination of Volkite, Plasma, Laser, and shells which could have largely given pause to an armoured company.

But when the command to cease fire was given after twenty-four seconds of explosions, smoke and debris, the experimental Power Armour still stood where it was, undaunted. The reason why it was so easy to see despite the smoke and the damage caused to the testing room, lay into the blue ‘halo’ the *Heimdall* Psy-tech Force-Field was manifesting.

Not a single hit had been made. The dirty grey paint had not a single scratch upon it. Granted, it was hardly a proper battlefield simulation, but if it had been a Space Marine inside the armour and the enemy was truly trying to kill him, there would have been a murderous retaliation for the devastation unleashed against him.

Unfortunately, six more seconds after the automatons had stopped their assault, the energy shield flickered a lot for three or four seconds, before outright vanishing, and that was a flaw which wasn’t part of the demonstration.

“It’s a sub-optimal outcome,” High Magos Thomson Siemens canted, trying as best as he could to keep annoyance outside his metallic throat. “Post-battle matrix-resonance? Insufficient compensation of energetic output? Insufficient purity of our metals and alloys?”

The last question did not please Dragon at all.

“I thought the assumption behind all the major projects was to provide the best technological parts we can afford to build,” the Tinker spoke coldly.

“And it was done,” the Master of Electro-Life assured her. “But the best parts Nyx can build right now aren’t the same as the best the Ancients could build several millennia ago. We are still trying to catch up with their miracles, Lady Magos Dogma.”

Well, this was a sobering reminder how far they still had to go. On the good side, they were progressing. The shield of Prototype X01 had functioned correctly for twenty-four seconds, and for the issued raised by this newly discovered flaw, there had been no internal problems like an explosion of vital electronic parts, a rupture of the air reserves, and other damage which would have transformed its user into bloody paste.

“I understand.” Which was a far cry from saying she liked it, obviously. “Sensors?”

“Except the force-field, all systems are operational and functioning at the expected levels.”

“A not-so-unsatisfying outcome, I believe,” the Master of Destruction declared.

“I’m not sure I completely share your optimism, Archmagos. The weight of Prototype X01 is such that if the *Heimdall* Force-Field isn’t active, the enemy will have absolutely no difficulty pinning it down. I am willing to acknowledge it will cause a lot of damage before its ultimate destruction, but the moment it is pinned down, the armour’s destruction is one hundred percent guaranteed.”

“For a first prototype, it has its promises,” disagreed Thomson Siemens of Voss Prime. “Evidently, our subordinates in charge of this project are years short of developing a battlefield-operable power armour. But I have seen far worse beginnings, praise the Laws of the Machine-God.”

“And in the mean time, we have also the testing of Prototype X02 in the other block. This one received a more conventional ion shield, and I think you will be pleasantly surprised by the technical challenges we have solved...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector**

**Parthia System**

**Parthia**

**5.150.297M35**

**Princess-Magister Zoe XIX Attica**

After a few weeks of Parthia, Zoe had begun to suspect while the Menelaus Dynasty had ceased to send important members of its peerage outside the Nyx System.

Contrary to what the tales of intrepid adventurers and boldly step where no one of your homeworld had stepped before, the reality was often far more boring, and this was when it was not harmful to your health.

The Nyxian Foreign Minister had discovered plenty of things by landing on Parthia, evidently. The first was that, unfortunately, anything bigger than a swimming pool which also happened to have waves was making her very seasick. The Parthians and her personal medicae personnel had tried plenty of cures, some traditional, some ‘tailored’ for her, but nothing had worked. To make things better, she was not at her best when the temperatures were too warm.

On any Hive World she was aware of, it wasn’t a problem. On Parthia, where the oceans covered eighty-nine percent of the planet – why the locals continued to call them ‘seas’, she had no idea – and the temperatures in three seasons out of four were rarely passing under thirty Celsius degrees, it was leaving her exhausted most of the time. The orange-red haired woman could only hope Ajusco would be less taxing on her health.

“I hope you are feeling better, Minister,” Prince of the Seas and the Deserts Mykerinos said politely as she finished drinking the ‘medicine’ who had been brought by her assistant. “It would be quite...problematic and vexing for the first diplomat we receive in my lifetime to be so inconvenienced by our seas and weather conditions.”

“I am getting better,” it would have been a bit better if her face wasn’t so pale. “But I am afraid that no matter how desirous I was to adapt to Parthia, Parthia is too much for me. I have finally realised that for all my desires to be a provincial Lady, I am a Hive-girl through and through.”

And lands on Parthia were not only scarce with two large islands-continents, they were anything but valuable. The coastal plains like the one they were present currently at hosted a few major cities with a few millions of inhabitants, but they were the exception, not the rule. The majority of people on Parthia were living aboard gigantic cruise ships which were at the same time fisheries, algae-harvesters, and water-maker provider.

That Parthia Harbour, the city of white buildings she was hosted into, was the capital had more to do with the need of an administrative chokepoint close to the sole and only starport of the planet than the belief of the Parthians life was better on land. The last census of the population a decade ago had given a number of one billion and eight hundred million, but if there were more than three hundred million on the two land masses, Zoe would eat her files.

“Ah yes, the Hives,” the white-haired ruler of Parthia declared with a minor dose of irony. “My advisors almost didn’t believe me when I returned from Nyx. I’m afraid that for all the prowess of construction they represent, we Parthians are...uncomfortable about these huge starscraper mega-cities. It isn’t natural for a world to have so many cities and so few seas.”

Zoe didn’t answer back this comment; it was a very well-spread opinion among the people of Ocean Worlds who had the opportunity to travel to other non-water-dominated planets.

“And some people think it’s unnatural to have so much salty water,” herself for one, and the ‘benefit’ of not visiting during the storm season had not saved her from sea sickness. “But enough about me. You and your government had requests concerning tithes.”

“Yes,” the old man nodded, Zoe trying not to be too bothered that at ninety-nine years-old, she was the eldest of the two...but unlike herself, the Planetary Governor had refused all offers of rejuvenation and youth-giving procedures offered from Lemuria, or more recently, from Nyx. “A reduction of thirty percent, to be precise. Lemuria is bleeding us in tithes!”

Zoe tried to not grimace inside the privacy of her thoughts. It was good the seventy-plus sunny-tanned man had not tried to make a proposition like that to the Adeptus Administratum tithe-masters. Planetary Governors and member of a ruler’s family had been on the receiving end of ‘tragic accidents’ for less.

“Lemuria has not really the choice. Part of your production of algae and fishes, along with the grain and the eggs of Ajusco, are needed to feed the Hibernian manufactorum workers.” The Industrial world of this trail had many advantages, but its freezing temperatures did not allow the local government much leeway to harvest abundant food. “Lady Weaver is willing to support your government with a reduction of five percent now that Sparta doesn’t need to be fed, and we will remove the latest series of ‘custom taxes’ the Hierophant imposed on your world.”

“Five percent isn’t enough.” The local Prince who according to the rumours, was ruling over ten thousand fishing boats, protested. “The Administratum demands too much!”

“Governor,” Zoe countered immediately. “For all your complaints, Parthia has been extremely lucky so far.”

“Lucky?” The old-looking noble definitely shouted the word.

“Yes, lucky,” the Princess-Magister kept her calm. “You weren’t involved in any war against the greenskins in the last decade; your world had not to pay the Munitorum tithe in living memory.”

“Of course not! We are fishers, not warriors!”

Zoe had an urge to laugh before this display of naivety. As if it had stopped Munitorum and Imperial Guard delegations before from emptying a planet of a generation of young men and women.

“I would suggest you make sure your PDF is still up to its limited number of duties, then.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No,” Truly the conversation wasn’t going in the direction she wanted it to. “It is a warning. Guard and Munitorum inspectors will travel across the Nyx Sector soon and check numbers, equipment, and training of the Planetary Defence Forces. After several disasters which could have been avoided easily if the PDF officers had trained their men correctly, Her Celestial Highness is eager to avoid problems in the long-term.”

“And to have more bodies to fight her wars.”

“For once, I will let this comment pass unchallenged,” the black-eyed Nyxian woman told the Planetary Governor, “I only want you to consider this: if Lady Weaver had not stopped the *Death Star* in the Brockton System, there are two Warp trails it could have followed. One was leading deeper into the Nyx Sector. The other would have brought the xenos directly to Antioch or Parthia.”

Given what she had seen of the system before taking a shuttle to go enjoying sea sickness, that was to say, almost no orbital industry and a few satellites, the Orks would have slaughtered everything and everyone in their path.

At last, the ‘Prince of the Seas and Deserts’ blanched, apparently having not understood the doom which had been on his doorstop before now. Sometimes, diplomats truly needed to mention the lasguns before mentioning the Sanguinala presents.

“Her Celestial Highness is disposed to help the people of Parthia in their every day’s life. Fusion reactors, Amphitrite hydro-plants, mega-cactuses, and other technological boons can be yours at low-interest loans.”

“And what does the Basileia wants in return?” It would be a bit too much for the reservations to disappear in the space of fingers she supposed.

“Loyalty...and a lot of the arid lands far from the sea,” the last part had not been asked in her briefings, but since the deserts were near guarantees to have important resources easily converted in promethium...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Alamo System**

**Alamo**

**3.157.297M35**

**Grand Princeps Surena Ctesiphon**

For everything of great importance, Surena made a point of watching it through the ‘eyes’ of *Ilium Scutum*. It wasn’t just because the auspexes and the hundreds of other different sensor-reading devices of his God-Engine were far better than mere mortal eyes. It wasn’t only because merging with the ancient machine-spirit was akin to become a God and see the world as such. It was more due to the known fact that memories like those were near-eidetic, literally imprinted in his brain until the God-Emperor would be satisfied with his service, and summon his soul in front of the Golden Throne.

Alas, these days it wasn’t possible. The mighty *Ilium Scutum* was repaired aboard the extensive workshops of *The Last Command*, thousands of kilometres above his head, and there was far too much to do to wait for the momentous moment when the damage of the Battle of Commorragh would be declared erased.

The aerial ‘observation-barge’ – he understood it had been a nobility air-yacht before being seized and repurposed – he was currently aboard would have to serve as a substitute.

“As you can see,” the Magos next to him continued to speak in an archaic form of Low Gothic, “the Chosen of the Omnissiah’s tools sent to us have been employed to maximal efficiency. The schedule-simulations will be respected in the imparted delays. The Fortress of the Two Wings will be ninety-three percent operational in five years.”

“And the Forges?” The Grand Princeps asked. It wasn’t his main preoccupation and he was not in the chain of command for this project, but a lot of the spare parts, the weapons, and everything a Titan Legion needed to march to war would be produced by the Forges of Alamo in construction.

“Forge Alpha will be fifty percent operational and reach Hive-level production in approximately eight years,” the representative of the Mechanicus reluctantly informed him. “The Council is hopeful the schedule will be accelerated, but as many of the Tech-Priests destined to work in this system have yet to reach the Nyx Sector, the tech-power is for the moment significantly limited.”

Seeing the very yellowish earth of the former Penal World being remodelled by the might of thousands of geo-engines, ancient mines reopened, mountains hollowed, and structures rising from the ground day after day, it was difficult to believe the resources of the Adeptus Mechanicus were ‘limited’ by any definition of the world. The defences already installed were not light; once the first armament manufactorums and the major orbital foundries were brought on line, the military infrastructure of Alamo would be best described as colossal.

But since the lack of humour of the Tech-Priests was infamously legendary, Surena Ctesiphon didn’t try to convince his mechadendrite-user interlocutor that it was an exaggeration.

“Eight years is long, but hardly unreasonable,” the survivor of Commorragh pointed out. “Many of the God-Engines under my command have repairs time of over a decade.”

The Artisans and the thousands of other helpers available were already there, doing what they could, but there were no repair parts for Titans anywhere near Nyx save those Legio Defensor and the Archmagi of Mars had brought with them.

“True art can’t be rushed when it comes to the wrathful and glorious avatars of the Machine-God,” the Magos declared pompously.

For all his loyalty to the Red Planet, the Grand Princeps was not ready to accept every assertion coming out from a cant-vox. Many God-Engines of Legio Defensor were ancient, extremely ancient, and since their Forge World had been turned into radioactive ashes by the Arch-Traitor’s fell servants, the prime-knowledge to build and repair them.

Thankfully or not so thankfully, of the forty Titans having survived to hear the Hour of the Emperor’s Judgement had illuminated the galaxy and inflicted grievous injuries to the Traitors, twenty-two were newer models: his eighteen Warhounds and four out of the eleven Reavers. Those were far easier to repair, and the schedule given by the Martian Magi in charge of them agreed with this: all of them would be operational within five years.

For the six Warlords, the seven remaining Reavers, the three small Rapiers, and of course the three Mirage God-Engines, the headaches were far bigger.

“I am not saying otherwise,” Surena said politely, “I am just...unsatisfied at the unfortunate reality that if Lady Weaver launches a campaign during the next decade, I will be only able to provide a token force for Her Celestial Highness’ goals.”

And since all the Princeps and commanders of the Legio had sworn eternal loyalty to the Living Saint, failing to support her properly wasn’t acceptable at all.

“Yes, it is inconvenient.” Another understatement typical of high-ranked Tech-Priests. “But there are going to be God-Engines reinforcing you soon.”

They were reinforcements, yes. If the Magos had the clearance to compile this list – he may very well not have it – he would have noticed every God-Engine given to the newly-authorised Forge World was of the Warhound class.

Surena Ctesiphon wasn’t going to refuse them, oh no. Five confirmed Warhounds were five Titans any Princeps of the Legio Defensor worth his rank couldn’t in good conscience refuse. But there was also denying that it forced his Princeps and himself to work with a lighter battleline of God-Engines battle after battle.

“There are. We are already conducting the first batteries of tests to select worthy aspirants at Candle, Eris, and Smilodon...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Cruiser *Holy Wind***

**3.162.297M35**

**Vice-Admiral Vortigern von Drenthe the Eighth**

One second, there was nothing on the auspexes.

The second after, the familiar tear into reality created by a Warp translation opened into the spatial zone of the Mandeville Point, allowing the *Enterprise* to complete its journey to the Wuhan System.

For all the exhaustion it took upon his physical reserves to stay so many hours on the main bridge, Vortigern von Drenthe didn’t think for a single second to go to his quarters and rest.

It wasn’t every day a Battleship visited his station, and it was the first time the *Enterprise* was coming to the Sub-Sector Capital. Tiredness and discomfort could be acknowledged and discarded for a while. Especially as one watched the screen of warships and transports forming around the eleven kilometres-long capital warship as it began to accelerate towards Wuhan Secundus.

Security measures forced Navy Captains, Archmagi, Frateris officers, and other masters of starships to stay far away from the Basileia’s flagship as it translated or navigated into the Immaterium, but once it was back into reality, the only minimal distances were those prescribed by the codes of spatial navigation.

The ageing Vice-Admiral didn’t think there were so many hulls following the most powerful Lords Admiral of Kar Duniash when they made their inspections.

“How many visitors do we have now?” Vortigern asked the Lieutenant in charge of the long-range augurs.

“Six hundred and thirty-four, Admiral,” the answer arrived in less than ten seconds, “including one Ark Mechanicus, three Battleships – not counting the Enterprise – four Battlecruisers, five heavy Cruisers, twenty-nine Cruisers, fifty-seven Frigates...”

Naturally, once the younger Navy officer had finished speaking, the situation report was obsolete again. There were more starships arriving from every direction. Mechanicus Destroyers flanked red-black bulky transports. Brilliant cathedrals of the Ecclesiarchy led and ordered columns of pilgrim ships. Navy squadrons surrounded Guard transports and fuel mega-tankers.

It was a very good thing this armada was on their side, the Vice-Admiral of the von Drenthe line mused. If this Crusade-sized fleet hadn’t been friendly, it wasn’t the naval strength at his disposal which would have been able to stop them.

His squadron had grown by leap and bounds over the last five years – just as he was about to retire, what an irony! – but he had no Battleships. Something his replacement apparently wouldn’t have to endure.

“Admiral, between fifty and sixty ships are separating from the Enterprise and setting a course for Wuhan Tertius.”

“It seems,” Vortigern observed after two minutes and the hulls showed no intention to return into the formation, “Her Celestial Highness had her own plans for this Mining World.”

“But Admiral,” one of his many Lieutenants spoke, “shouldn’t the authorities of Wuhan Secundus sign up on whatever the Nyxian Cartels and the Adeptus Mechanicus intend to do here?”

The Vice-Admiral didn’t have to open his mouth to tell the naive youngster how stupid this sentence sounded.

“Her Celestial Highness is the owner of Wuhan Tertius in every way which matters,” the insult ‘idiot’ or ‘moron’ wasn’t uttered at the price of a considerable effort of will. “The Wuhan-Cao Cartel, the Hubei Cartel, and the Shanxi United Shipping Company...they’re all in the process of being broken, and reformed according to the will of the Living Saint. And besides, who is she going to ask the permission to? The Lord-Magnates are a rare commodity to be found these days...”

And it was likely going to be worse in the next hours, judging by the military assets the Victor of Commorragh had judged good to accompany the *Enterprise*. The Vice-Admiral didn’t know the new Living Saint enough to speculate on her goals and methods, but you didn’t invite an Iron Drake Strike Cruiser just to parade them around and receive cheers from the crowd. The Guard transports were also a strong hint that the Sector Lady had moderately enjoyed hearing how many heretics were hiding under the beds of the Wuhanese nobility.

Said aristocrats had been relatively spared, given the unforgivable treachery the assassination attempt of a Planetary Governor and his fellow Hive-rulers represented on an Imperial planet. Vortigern didn’t need to be as good as the von Lohengramm lineage as naval strategists to know a purge was a near-inevitability.

“A lot of people are going to be unhappy,” his second-in-command was smiling like his favourite holo-vid – the one where starfighter pilots so many heretic planes that even propaganda was complaining about the unrealistic plot. “I’m betting on *at least* fifty Penal Legions created in the first month.”

“Sucker’s bet,” a black-bearded Warrant Officer immediately retorted. “It will be at least one hundred Penal Legions, and over fifty percent will be Underhive gangs.”

“No! It will be one hundred and fifty. I will bet three hundred Thrones...”

Vortigern von Drenthe the Eighth sighed. His retirement couldn’t come fast enough...this insanity was certainly reeking of indiscipline and worse, it was terribly contagious...