Weaver Option Update 29 January 2020

**Ovation 9.4**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

*A new war has begun.*

*Most of the galaxy isn’t aware of it for now.*

*The weapons which are firing and the lives lost have been restricted to places where few humans live. The deaths of the xenos and the other monsters have happened out of sight, and as the old proverb concluded, out of mind.*

*It won’t matter. War is coming nonetheless.*

*A part of me wants to blame the Necrons, and the fiend called Orikan the Diviner in particular.*

*The Cryptek, judging by the information we were given on him, has no redeeming qualities whatsoever. I could respect his dedication to maintaining the status quo if he was a prestigious noble of the Sautekh Dynasty. But he isn’t. Orikan is an outcast. And his self-professed loyalty to the Necron rigid hierarchy is very dubious as he was infamous for insulting and mocking the Phaerons and Phaerakhs before they transformed into metallic androids.*

*It is really, really easy to hate such a being. While punishments for someone’s betrayal are extremely common no matter the species you belong to, trying to punish one of your peers for something he might do is a frightening level of madness. Especially when the self-proclaimed Master of Chronomancy has admitted once imprisoned that his ‘predictions’ are falling extremely short of having a one hundred percent rate.*

*Orikan didn’t even envision his flesh-and-blood race losing the fight against the Old Ones, when a rapid analysis of each camp’s military capabilities should have been a clue or two his race was defeated before the first shot was fired.*

*Maybe we ruined his plans with the destruction of Commorragh. So what? I wasn’t personally present, but I have seen a sufficient numbers of picts and vids to acknowledge that the utter obliteration of the Dark City was one of the best things that could happen to this galaxy. Commorragh was a lair of evil built on the entrance of the very hells. Nothing good could have come from letting this cancer grow unchecked, and someone who is dissatisfied by it is an enemy of humanity.*

*After more hours of thinking though, I have arrived to the conclusion that like many of our enemies, Orikan had, impulsively, decided that there would be no peace between Humans and Necrons, not as long as he was able to do something about it. And while it is a more debatable hypothesis, I think this jealous individual is against the very concept of peace itself. When there is no negotiation possible with someone, when your first recourse is to convince bloodthirsty Dynasties to unleash a weapon bigger than* Terra Cimmeria *and* Phalanx *combined, when everything you do is destined to spread violence and distrust...you are a warmongering monster.*

*The real tragedy is that they don’t even realise the scale of the mental problems afflicting them. That if they continue in this path, they will be soon no difference between an Ork and a nihilist Necron commander save the colour of the skin and the material used to build the body.*

*Because in the end, what are these Necrons fighting for? Resources? Their technology and Necrodermis bodies allow them to synthesize and mine everything they may desire. Security? If they really stay on the defensive, armies and fleets of Necrons are the next best thing to invisible, protected by planetary shields the Tech-Priests salivate just by looking at them.*

*No, the reason the majority of the Necron Dynasties will want to conquer the galaxy if they are allowed to wake up is because they can, and they think it is their right to do so.*

*And so we will go to war again. Because when the proposed choices are death or eternal slavery, there is no option but to fight.*

*Even if our defeat is pre-ordered. Even if other enemies lurk in the shadows, impatient to size our gains and our advancements for themselves. Even if ancient civilisations empowered with near-divine technology failed where we propose to thread.*

*We go once again, as the Salamanders say, into the flames of battle.*

Extract from Archive N-4225-X-555, 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.

“Onto the anvil of war, brothers! Oblivion will not claim us!” Chapter Master Hezonn, [CLASSIFIED BY THE ORDER OF THE INQUISITION]

“*This war not because you feel threatened by younger races or because your honour has been trampled until you could take no more. This war has been started because you made a series of mistakes an eternity ago, and in your arrogance, you refuse the tiniest chance you could have been wrong. You want war? You will have it. But do not complain when your realm of metal and pride will turn to dust, and your deeds will ensure no peace will be possible when your enemies come to burn your worlds. Humanity is not a merciful foe*.” [REDACTED] to [REDACTED], [WARNING, INSUFFICIENT CLEARANCE], M35.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Golden Throne and the Oniric Realm**

**0.666.297M35**

Thought for the day: He who lives for nothing is nothing. He who dies for the Emperor is a hero.

**Captain-General Anubis Excelsor**

The scenery is different this time.

Of course, that doesn’t mean much where his liege is concerned.

The scenery has been different every time he has been invited here. At least this time there’s not a thunderstorm raging ahead. No, this time Anubis is in the middle of stars and planets. A gigantic representation of a galactic arm, one few hololithic devices built by humanity would be able to replicated with such precision.

For the Lord the Adeptus Custodes has been protecting for over four thousand standard years, this is nothing.

There are seconds of silence. Anubis uses them to assess which part of the galaxy is represented in this original manner. Knowing his liege like he does, it is unlikely to be unimportant.

“The Eastern Fringe,” he says at last.

“Indeed,” The Captain-General looks on his right, and He is here. Or he was already here, but his focus was elsewhere and thus his power remained invisible to his senses.

His appearance is very different from the one he presented the other times. This time there is no errant warden or mysterious protector, no figure sitting on a lonely throne. His liege is presenting himself as an ancient legionary of the pre-gunpowder era; a rectangular red shield painted with the golden double eagle is carried by his right arm, while tied to his belt is a short sword. His equipment is in piteous state, but there is no blood in him...save where the terrible wound in his chest is all too visible.

“I thought the situation at Tigrus and the surrounding Sector was more or less...contained.”

There was no true lasting victory against the horrors assailing regularly the Eastern Fringe. To be triumphant, the Astronomican would need to extend further than it had ever done in the age of the Great Crusade, and even if the reparations of the vital machines proceeded apace, their liege had been deeply wounded and likely wouldn’t be able to project his light to encompass these dark regions. Not without abandoning other Sectors to the darkness at least.

“Contained is maybe the wrong word,” the man the Imperium worships as the God-Emperor muses before raising a finger and instantly, several planets turned a sour green. “But it could have been handled with minimal forces. Now the situation has changed. The Ymga Monolith has been activated.”

Anubis Excelsor grimaces. The rank of Captain-General means being made aware of many, many unpleasant secrets. And some of them can give nightmares to transhumans, no matter their training and the protection offered by their liege’s gene-therapies.

“Weaver?” He asks.

“No, it is not her fault.” The Emperor is prompt to answer. “It seems that her treaty with the Necron Dynasty of the Nerushlatset and the destruction of Commorragh angered a lot one of the most arrogant awakened Necrons. This amateur believed the threads of the future were his to control and to manipulate.”

There is only one answer Anubis can give.

“Name him, and the Ten Thousand will bring his head to you.”

HI liege chuckles weakly.

“As...amusing and satisfying it would be to throw this creature into the Dark Cells and hiding the key in my most secure vaults...the Cryptek known as Orikan the Diviner has already been captured by the Arch-Thief Trazyn the Infinite.”

Anubis raises an eyebrow.

“Given the past history we have with this kleptomaniac xenos, I am not exactly going to jump in joy and declare the matter solved, your Majesty.”

The thin smile has already disappeared and the stern expression returns.

“In this instance, the goals of the thief and our interests align sufficiently I am willing to close my eyes upon his eccentricities. Trazyn will not let Orikan escape.”

And the commander of the Ten Thousand knows sufficiently his liege to bow and close this exchange. The Emperor has seen the future and concluded it was the less risky path.

It is best to come back to the main problem at hand.

“The Ymga Monolith has been activated. Should we prepare ourselves to launch a pre-emptive attack and destroy it?”

“No. Weaver’s allies will delay the moment of confrontation and within the next decade, enough naval and ground firepower will be mustered to crack the defences of the Monolith.”

Anubis tries to sound not a bit doubtful...and he knows that in all likelihood he fails.

“My liege, the first time we try the tactic of overwhelming firepower against this xenos horror, we failed. Unless I have memory problems or the Last Report was doctored, the xenos defences *butchered the entire Second Legion*!”

Prompting one of the few instances in the early Imperial history where the Custodes made sure everything about an entire aspect of a military operation was erased by the records.

And when the dust finally settled, there was no choice but to erase the Second Legion and its Primarch too. Nobody had liked it, not the Emperor, not Valdor or Malcador, but there had been little choice. The Imperium could afford military defeats by then. It couldn’t afford the awful aftermath of that campaign becoming common knowledge.

“You will release the information we have to her.” His liege commands. “And she will soon have important information from the Necrons themselves. Weaver won’t begin the fighting as clueless as my Lost Son was.”

Anubis rarely argues with his creator and main charge, but here and now...

“With all the respect I have for your vision and your prescience, it is insanely risky.” The Captain-General flatly declares. “What happened to the Second could be repeated with the Ninth, and I don’t think I need to exaggerate when I say it would be an absolute cataclysm which would likely sunder the Imperium.”

Aside from his liege, Anubis can’t think of a figure more beloved than Sanguinius in today’s Imperium. The destruction of the Blood Angels might be one of the things the Imperium would not recover from in a thousand centuries.

“What happened to the Second can’t happen to the Ninth. I made sure of it. I can’t promise there won’t be severe military casualties, however.”

“Then why? I think that with two years of preparation and some judicious pressure upon the Navy, we could reactivate three dozen Battleships and plenty of special weapons. Let’s concentrate this in a single void fist and given the support of the five Blackstone Fortresses at our disposal...”

“It would certainly destroy the Ymga Monolith,” the Emperor agrees. “But there would be more problems born from this act of annihilation. And the billions of tons of Noctilith couldn’t play their role of bait anymore.”

Bait? But the insect-mistress of Nyx had not been under heavy pressure to launch an assault before the Monolith’s activation. Assuredly ‘billions of tons’ was more Noctilith everyone had seen in one’s life if you hadn’t set a foot on Cadia – those Pylons were off-limit for now, obviously, since no one knew the effect it would have on the Cadian Gate and the Eye of Terror if they were transformed into Aethergold.

But the Mechanicus has begun its own ‘investigations’ and now that they are actively looking for it...

“You intend to build a trap for the Traitor Legions waiting in the Eye.”

“I intend to build a new trap for every enemy which will try to oppose humanity’s rise.”

Anubis instinctively knows it is not going to be a pretty campaign. And the next words of his liege don’t negate this opinion.

“It is going to be a Crucible,” the Emperor whispers. “Millions upon millions of possibilities emerging from a single event, so many neither I nor the parasites will be able to control the pace of the future campaign.”

In many ways, it sounds like the antithesis of a Shadowpoint, as everyone can watch the future unravelling, but the effect might be the same in the end.

“My liege...sometimes you worry me.”

The smile he is given back isn’t reassuring at all. It is the smile of tyrants and conquerors, of generals and admirals, of politicians and predators. It is the face of humanity when it is at the height of cleverness...and madness.

The short sword is drawn from its scabbard and thrown into the stars, when it transforms into a gigantic regicide board.

“Step after step we will claw our way out of the oblivion our enemies have promised us. So let’s roll the dices again.”

A small golden figure moves in the distance.

Anubis sighs internally.

So ends their short-lived rest.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Brockton System**

**Neutral Space Station H-N-001**

**5.666.297M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Taylor had thought herself prepared for bad news when she had departed for the Brockton System and her meeting with Neferten.

Now, as Trazyn ended his delivery of bad news, the Basileia acknowledged she hadn’t been prepared enough for this level of bad news. On the other hand, ‘bad’ might not be adequate to describe the situation. ‘Awful’ might be more appropriate.

“Just for the sake of my personal curiosity, Phaerakh,” the young woman began, “how many of these monstrous planet-sized weapons do the Necron Dynasties have? Because while the...Throne of Oblivion will take utmost priority, I really don’t want to scream victory only to see another strategic weapon of systemic destruction enter this Sector.”

“Not many thankfully,” the mistress of the Nerushlatset Dynasty replied, “the World Engines and the Solar Harvesters were thought to be sufficient to handle anything short of the Blackstone Fortresses and the ‘Gods’ our enemies created to fight us. And most of the really important assets owned by every dynasty like the Celestial Orrery, the Twisted Catacomb, the Labyrinth of Thanotep, or the Stasis Docks of Seidon were not used offensively during the War in Heaven.”

Neferten stayed silent for several seconds before resuming her not-so-comforting speech.

“Most of what you did call ‘unique super-weapons’ were extremely expensive, both in resources and in the size of garrison which had to be detached to guard it. The Throne of Oblivion was one, of course. There is also the *Song of Oblivion*, if it wasn’t destroyed when we turned against the C’Tan.”

“According to the rumours of the Nihilakh court, it survived but most of its crippled offensive armament was discarded and replaced by massive stasis crypts,” Trazyn intervened. “I wasn’t able to confirm if they were correct or not. And no, before you ask, I don’t know where Szarekh hid it.”

This day was really getting better and better. Yes, she was sarcastic. And it appeared the supreme rule of the Necrons had a great love for the ‘Oblivion’ theme. This was anything but great.

“As far as I was able to ascertain in the short period between the Humbling of the C’Tan and the Great Sleep, the other weapons used by the Silent King to fracture our former Gods were too damaged to be repaired. Therefore the only other unique weapon to be active must be the Star Reaper Engine *Hegemony*.”

“And what does it do?”

“Anything the Silent King wishes it to,” Trazyn’s answer was a disabused cackle. “It has cutting-edge technology above the Throne of Oblivion, more elite Crypteks than two first-rate Dynasties, enough phalanxes to conquer your Sector in less time it takes to say it, and likely enormous reserves of Noctilith and anti-Empyreal defences.” The thief-collector let his sceptre twirl at an impressive speed between his hands. “Of course, Szarekh took it with him into his much unlamented exile, so we don’t have to care about it.”

And thank whatever benevolent entities still existed for this good news.

“All right, my curiosity has been satisfied. Let’s return to the Throne of Oblivion and the weapons protecting it...what is a Solar Harvester, by the way?”

“It is a variant of a Star Harvester,” Neferten informed her, and for the first time, there was a hint of disdain in her voice. “Think of it as a huge long-range gun which drains for several minutes the energy of a star before unleashing it against a target.”

“No offence Phaerakh,” Taylor said in a calm tone, “but to my ears, that sounds really terrifying.”

“The destructive power of the gun is considerable,” the female Necron ruler conceded. Who knew that their race had gained such mastery in understatements? “But there are many drawbacks which made sure few Dynasties went on to build them. First above all, if they don’t stay extremely close tactically to a star, their firepower is inferior to one of our Battleships, which is particularly galling as they cost more in rare resources to build than a World Engine. They also can’t protect themselves when the energy-loading procedure is activated; their shields are inactive until the Harvester cannon fires. As you can likely imagine, the Aeldari of Old took a malign pleasure disintegrating dozens of them while the loading phase was seconds away from completion.”

“A purely offensive weapon which needs to be escorted at all times to play its role,” yes, Taylor wasn’t an Admiral, but she could see why the design hadn’t been popular. It made her remember all too well the ‘glass cannons’ of the Fast Battleships.

“Exactly,” Neferten confirmed. “No, dealing with a Solar Harvester isn’t a problem. The Replicator Forges are the main threat of the outer defences.”

For good reason. The ability to duplicate to the infinite your fleet was a terrifying ability, given how long and expensive the building of a single ship above Cruiser tonnage was. And the Necrons had three of them to protect the Ymga Monolith.

“I’m not trying to take the cowardly option, but I have to ask: is there any reasonable scenario where we could convince the commanders of this battlestation to stop the reactivation of their assets and this military campaign before it risks ravaging the entire Eastern Fringe? Surely the sub-commanders of the Silent King are not ready to risk their lives just on the word of a single Necron based on predictions of deeds which haven’t happened yet!”

Hells, if she went to the High Lords of Terra with such flimsy ‘evidence’ to begin a Crusade, most of the members would outright laugh at her before the end of her speech.

The equivalent of a long sigh was made by Neferten voice-apparatus.

“You are giving more intelligence and cleverness to the Szarekhan commanders than they deserve,” the Nerushlatset ruler spoke. “Do keep in mind that as far as they know, this entire campaign against me or you promise to be a one-sided vermin extermination. The protocol codes they have will be sufficient to cripple my Dynasty before the first gun is fired, and as for your human forces...they won’t be considered true opponents. They will look at your technological level and laugh. You have not the psychic mastery of the Aeldari, the entropy skills of the Hrud, the unnatural genetic creations of the Rangdan, or the monstrous strength of the Krorks. And besides, the Throne of Oblivion has never been seriously endangered.”

“The fact Orikan convinced them the Throne of Oblivion was necessary in the first place has probably to do with Neferten circumventing several protocols of the Great Sleep and my own continued disobedience,” Trazyn added his opinion on the issue at hand. “We annoyed them sufficiently in the past that they figure our initial successes may require more than an average eradication fleet. You are just collateral damage in this affair.”

“How gratifying,” the insect-mistress rolled her eyes. “I suppose it would be too much to ask of them to not torch my Sector when they move against you?”

“Oh, they will transform your planets into a gigantic field of orbital debris,” the Chief Archaeovist of Solemnace was prompt to ‘reassure’ her. “In the unlikely chance the Szarekhan commander is truly reluctant about risking his phalanxes on the word of Orikan – and he won’t be – his subordinates for the task will be Sautekh and maybe Mephrit for the Solar Harvester. These two dynasties have always been noted to be what you would qualify as expansionist, warmongering, and eager to destroy the civilisations of younger species until not even bacteria are left alive.”

Some days, the Planetary Governor of Nyx was really, really glad the Necron Dynasty she had on her Suebi frontier was the Nerushlatset, and not another one.

“And of course, if I wasn’t guilty, my Dynasty wouldn’t be awake but still plunged into the Great Sleep. The evidence of sending a diplomatic envoy would be enough to confirm all suspicions of treason.”

Somehow, the parahuman didn’t find it hard to believe she would hate to live under the rule of the Silent King and the Necron society as a whole.

“Thank you for the confirmation. Peace being closed to us, I suppose war is the only choice left to me. And it is a conflict best done outside of the frontiers of the Nyx Sector.”

She would have loved to say ‘us’, but if the Necrons of Neferten were neutralised before even coming into range – and that was likely one of the best possible scenarios – the Imperium was going to have to fight alone this one.

“I am not ready to fight a campaign of this magnitude,” no one was at such short notice, so it wasn’t like it was a betrayal of military secrets. “As a result, I propose again to divert the ‘Defiler’ Orks against the Ymga Monolith. Let our two enemies fight and bleed each other while we reinforce ourselves.”

“An excellent idea, my friend!” Trazyn was prompt to reply enthusiastically. The other Necron ruler was not so optimistic.

“I find a large number of flaws with that idea,” the Nerushlatset Phaerakh said. “While the descendants of the Krorks are certainly one of the few enemies which will not retreat or be cowed by the firepower of a Solar Harvester, the Sautekh reinforcements brought by Dolmen Gates, and the Throne of Oblivion itself, their ancestors tried and failed to achieve a lasting victory. I don’t doubt this Ork muster is impressive from your perspective. This ‘Defiler’ greenskin has a lot of hulls and bodies available. But it won’t be enough to give us more than one or two of your years.”

To her surprise, it was Trazyn who answered before she had the time to think about a solution.

“Then we don’t push only this horde of greenskin against the Szarekhan, my dear.” The Chief Archaeovist switched on the hololithic table and coloured plenty of stars in green with his sceptre. “The ‘Defiler’ shipyard is hardly the only location where the greenskins are present these days. A few psychic beacons from our red-robed friends, some warning shots to rouse the beasts and convince them to follow us to the Throne of Oblivion, and we can fuel an inferno that will give even the favourites of Szarekh pause.”

“And then the Throne of Oblivion will use its faster-than-light drive to evade this greenskin horde,” Neferten replied, though there was a shadow of amusement in her voice...unless it was vindication. “They aren’t *that* stupid, you know. If they see a never-ending battle on the horizon, their Destroyers will be happy, but the commanders certainly won’t. At some point, they’re going to prioritise the extermination of a treacherous Dynasty over the purge of violent descendants of the Krorks.”

“In that case, I’d better sabotage it, no?”

Taylor gaped at that, and she was feeling confident to say that Neferten, despite a metallic body, was doing the same.

“You can do that?”

“There are...hum...protocols for the Triarchs in every Szarekhan battlestation and warship,” the Chief Archaeovist cleared his throat. “I think I can approach the Throne from sufficiently close to send a few signals which will cause several problems to its faster-than-line drive. The Szarekhan always protect heavily their command nodes, but the pure engineering sections have often glaring security flaws.”

Taylor thought this strongly implied many Szarekhan worlds and assets had received the visit of Trazyn over tens of millions of years.

“Phaerakh?” The Basileia asked.

“It could work,” grudgingly conceded Neferten. “Assuming Trazyn succeeds and we use several of our squadrons in coordinated tactics, we can push billions of greenskins against the weapons of the Throne and whatever Szarekh’s commanders will bring to bear.”

The female Necron ruler clicked her fingers and the hololith changed to reveal the Ymga Monolith.

As always since she had seen it for the first time, Taylor felt a shiver of fear course thorough her body. This was a gigantic pyramidal structure bigger than Nyx itself, and far, far more fortified than anything the Imperium had ever built, including Terra during the Heresy, and the current defences of the Cadian Gate.

“But let there be no false-understanding,” Neferten stared at her. “This is only a delay. The greenskins may be numerous and strong, but unless they somehow manage to find and repair a reality-shattering weapon of the War in Heaven, they won’t be able to bring down the shields of the Throne of Oblivion.”

“They may be able to ram them and crash-land on the surface.” The black-haired parahuman objected.

“I won’t deny they certainly are stupid enough to try, but if you don’t bring enough firepower against the shields, the capital anti-air batteries are going to destroy the overwhelming majority before they land. And there will be millions of Necron warriors ready to welcome them upon their landing. The Orks are dangerous. But the Szarekhan phalanxes will regenerate and return to the fight faster than the greenskins can kill them. The Ork spores won’t be of any use. The Szarekhan have strict sterilisation protocols which have proven their efficiency against the proto-Orks in the past.”

The golden-winged guardswoman didn’t disagree. Unless the Orks had a battle-moon ready ram the Monolith with, it was going to be hell for them...though they were certainly going to give the Necrons new memories of total war.

“This is in part why this strategy is unsatisfactory to my mind,” Neferten continued. “Faced with such a threat, it is a certainty the Szarekhan commander will call at least one and possibly more elite Sautekh Overlords, making any future battles far more difficult. Not to mention that once the flaw in the systems of the faster-than-light drive has been discovered, the Crypteks aboard the Throne of Oblivion will do their best to erase this weakness and many others we would not have though to exploit. The battle against the Orks might be enough to distract them in the first years, but it won’t last long. So I ask you the question, Lady Weaver. Do you think these years of senseless carnage where the Szarekhan surround themselves with more and more Sautekh phalanxes are going to be worth it?”

Taylor didn’t hesitate.

“I do. If the Orks give us twelve standard years, I can build an entirely new generation of Cruisers and train them hard to first-rate Imperial Navy’s standards. I will also be able to convince some Lord Admirals to put out of mothball ancient Battleships and modernise them with brand-new Nova Cannons. That’s also twelve years of power armour and heavy guns production which will be available for our infantry amongst other things.”

“And I will use these years to...move plenty of secret collections to several of my hideouts,” Trazyn approved. “You see my dear? Everyone is winning.”

The Basileia really wished sometimes Trazyn didn’t mention arguments of that nature...but his usefulness in this case granted him a reprieve. It was exceptional, needless to say.

“If my calculus with your Imperial calendar is correct, this would place the launch of the operation on 310M35.” Taylor nodded. “Will you have resources to spend on the recovery of the artefacts mentioned in our treaty?”

“That should be feasible, provided the Orks react as we want them,” the Ordo Xenos would owe her one plus there were Bacta negotiations coming. “I am not going to make promises I can’t keep, but I should be able to deploy a few Space Marine recovery teams against Necron strongholds. How many of them will be sent and the rest of specifics will have to wait a bit, however.”

“Good, now for the possible Szarekhan and Sautekh military commanders who may be called to war.”

“If we’re lucky, they won’t decide to awaken the Stormlord,” Trazyn almost groaned.

“It won’t be Imotekh, I think,” Neferten said, “his performance against the Krorks was marked by several grave defeats. Unfortunately, the Sautekh Dynasty has an abundance of brilliant Generals and the absence of the Stormlord is not necessarily great news for us...”

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Stormseer Uriyangkhadai**

The hour was late when Uriyangkhadai came back to the bridge of the Enterprise. Unsurprisingly, Lady Weaver was still here. Bermudez, Catalan, and Glycerius were the sentinels standing vigilant around her, as the insect-mistress read the data the Necrons had given them earlier in the day.

It was a bit strange for the Stormseer. The relationship Taylor Hebert enjoyed with Wei Cao was usually seen with some amusement, but hardly something vital. But now that the new Governor of Wuhan wasn’t here, the Basileia seemed to revert to working at late hours.

As he closed the distance separating him from her, the Chogoris-born Space Marine noted her troubled experience. It was perhaps not as much the absence of her Consort than the dark news which had been revealed to her today which was responsible for this long evening of work.

“The Lamenters have received your message, my Lady.” The Stormseer spoke quietly as columns of figures and xenos schematics appeared and disappeared on the hololith. “Communication clarity was good. Their Chapter Master should be informed as we speak and begin moving his warships in position.”

“The other astropathic communications?”

“Ongoing. You have given them quite a list of choirs to contact.”

In fact the number of messages which had been given was in general what was usually sent in ten or eleven days by the *Enterprise*’s mistress.

No one would ever say it wasn’t justified in this particular case, unfortunately.

“If I could send fewer messages...” the golden-winged Lady General began before breathing out heavily and not finishing her sentence.

“You do not need to justify yourself, my Lady.”

The look he was given back was not angry, it was merely...resigned.

“As long as the Ymga Monolith is out of sight and the initial plan works, you’re absolutely right I don’t. How long it is going to be true, I have no idea.” The parahuman shook her head. “Unbelievable. We destroy Commorragh, and some Necron Cryptek throws a fit and rush to tell his superiors how bad we are. Evidently, the psychic toads who governed the galaxy once upon a time were absolutely right to be wary of the Necrons.”

“We have an alliance with some of them.” Was their Lady thinking about-

“We have an alliance with Neferten and her dynasty, and Trazyn when his collecting interests are directly threatened,” the woman protected by the Dawnbreaker Guard said whimsically. “This alliance has proven extremely useful, and I have every intention to let it continue for as long as possible. But in the euphoria after Commorragh, I thought naively we may be able to extend it far and wide. This was a nice dream...but it will remain nothing more than in the domain of illusions and wishes. Two of the most important Necron Dynasties clearly want our death, despite us having not raised a single finger against their planets. How can you consider living in peace with them?”

Uriyangkhadai wasn’t sorry about the xenos revealing themselves as genocidal and duplicitous as Imperial propaganda always warned them to be, but he agreed it was a waste. The Necrons had many common enemies with humanity, the Eldar being the most prominent of this considerable list. And the metallic androids could live and thrive on worlds where the Imperium couldn’t colonise or build anything without losing millions of workers.

But the majority of the xenos were supremacist xenos. And in the end, there was only a single galaxy to rule over.

The insect-mistress yawned.

“You should consider going back to your quarters, my Lady. There are going to be a lot of tiring days ahead of you, the Emperor and the Imperium need you at peak efficiency.”

This wasn’t the Stormseer’s responsibility, but the psychically-gifted Space Marine couldn’t imagine a smaller force than a full tithe and two or three Battlefleets worth of firepower being gathered to destroy the Ymga Monolith. And this was more likely a vast underestimation of what was *truly* needed.

“In a few minutes,” Lady Weaver promised. “I’m just giving a glance at the data of the Ymga Monolith’s shields.”

A disgruntled expression escaped her lips.

“This, as you can properly imagine, isn’t good. Look at it and give me your opinion if you desire.”

It took a few seconds for the representative of the White Scars to decipher the organisation of Necron data translated into Low Gothic, but once he had a proper idea of it, it didn’t take long for him to arrive to unhappy conclusion.

“I am not a Techmarine of course, but I think that the only Imperial warships which can truly bring down these sections with a single shot are the Gloriana Battleships.”

Of which there were precious left nowadays.

“I agree,” the Basileia’s mouth twitched in a faint smile. “What an irony. I didn’t even search for it, but I may have found a lot of good reasons for the Fabricator-General to build more of these twenty kilometre-long hulls.”

Uriyangkhadai stayed silent, though if the time came, he would bring the idea of one of these formidable flagships to be used by his Chapter and their Successors. The Fifth Legion had lost their only Gloriana during the Heresy, a lost which was still regretted by the Khans of Chogoris.

“You may need more alternatives than relying on a single ship.”

“There will be more alternatives brought into play,” the back-haired ruler of Nyx reassured him. “The Enterprise’s Nemesis-Hunter Cannon is not strong enough by itself to bring down these Necron shields, but it is incredibly accurate. If we retrofit enough Nova Cannon-armed Battleships with these guns, we will be able to concentrate our fire and achieve the same result a Gloriana would.”

This was admittedly not a bad point. He would need to speak with Hakkarainen of the Emperor’s Havoc to evaluate its feasibility.

“Still, you’re right. I’m counting a lot on a Gloriana being present on the order of battle,” the golden-winged Lady General acknowledged. “If the plan consisting to let the Orks and the Necron slaughter each other work, the *Flamewrought* will have finished its cycle of repairs in the Martian shipyards by then.”

“I would advise contacting the other Chapters having a Gloriana to see if they’re available,” the White Scar Stormseer advised. “I didn’t ask where the *Eternal Crusader* went after the destruction of Biel-Tan, but I’m sure Sigenandus can impress High Marshal Barbarossa upon the threat represented by this Monolith.”

“An excellent suggestion,” the woman they had all sworn to protect quickly approved. “Are there others we can use?”

“I think the flagship of the Dark Angels is still active,” Uriyangkhadai replied cautiously. “Of course, since it is part of their assault fleet, it is certainly busy in Segmentum Pacificus right now. And given what just happened at Wuhan...”

“They might not accept this suggestion with good grace, assuming they are in position to honour it” his interlocutor sighed.

“I will check the status of the other Gloriana hulls and inform you. It shouldn’t take long.” There had never been that many Gloriana Battleships in active service, and the Heresy had drastically decreased their numbers. “Though even if we can materially put out of mothball these capital ships and all, the question is what we can offer them in exchange to make up for the sheer danger of the Ymga Monolith. The Custodes were tight-lipped, but it was enough for several of us to remember there are two Legions which went missing at some point in history. And no offence my Lady, but you haven’t the battle-experience and the science of command of a Primarch.”

“Most assuredly,” Weaver didn’t disagree. “But I have several advantages over the hypothetical Primarch who fought the Monolith before. To begin with, unlike him I will know exactly what I’m up against for the outer defences, and for the inner ones, I am ready to bet it involves C’Tan shards. And I have already fought one of those in the past. Second and most crucial, Neferten has confirmed the Canoptek Scarabs the Necrons use so much will be controllable by my power. Apparently, the Necrontyrs weren’t the only ones to go through the process of bio-transference. The C’Tan put all the fauna of their homeworld and then other planets through these monstrous devices. As such, I can control these insects; they still have the vital energy of insect life-forms and my power recognises them as such.”

Yes, it could be a game-changer. At the very least, once the enemy realised what was happening, they would stop in a hurry using these insect-shaped auxiliaries against any human invaders.

“And we have something we can bargain with, in the end. There are at least four billion tons of Noctilith stored somewhere in this xenos bastion.”

Many of the bridge crew stopped whispering after hearing this revelation.

“If it is only resources Imperial representatives are after, I imagine there will be enough to satisfy everyone’s wildest dreams.” Taylor Hebert said softly.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector**

**Lemuria System**

**Lemuria**

**6.708.297M35**

**Inquisitor Henry-Charles III Severus**

Lemuria was definitely and without argument possible a breathtaking world.

The green-blue colour of the grass, the pink cherry trees, the sublime cascades of water; everything born from nature seemed to be created to feel peaceful.

The weather was just warm enough to walk in light clothes, but not enough to make you sweating. And the best part, according to the pilgrim and touristic guides, was that this highly pleasurable climate was lasting nine days out of ten for a standard year; there was a bad season when the temperatures dropped by ten degrees, but it lasted between twenty- and twenty-four local days.

If it the description had stopped there, Lemuria would have already been the jewel of the Suebi Sub-Sector, but there were the human marvels to take into account too. The Ecclesiarchy had built the Holy Crystal Mausoleum on this planet, and millions of pilgrims came every year to pray and admire the M32 stained armaglass, the altars of white marble, and the decoration consisting of some very rare gemstones and precious metals.

Of course, Lemuria didn’t cater only for the spiritual needs of pilgrims. If you wanted to hunt some animal in a private hunt specially tailored to your tastes, you could do it here. Hunting lodges, casinos, protected beaches, aquatic yachts, villas so large the term ‘palace’ was sometimes not sufficient to describe them...Lemuria had everything.

Fine, maybe not everything. The weather was too warm for winter sports, and there was a lack of mountains for the most extreme activities like diving in grav-chutes if you didn’t want to use an aircraft.

But overall, Lemuria was indeed justifying its reputation of Paradise World.

A pity this reputation was built on foundations of falsehood, centuries of political machinations, and untold corruption.

“And this,” the representative of the Ordo Navis explained to the officer standing next to him, “is I believe the swimming pool the Hierophant built for his mistresses.”

“One second, my Lord,” Colonel Atomos rasped in a guttural voice. The Colonel of the Nyx 12th Infantry had received grave wounds during the Battle of Commorragh, and though three injections of Bacta had managed to save his life, the injury received to his throat had been coated in a poison which continued to baffle the elite Magi Biologis of Lady Weaver. Atomos had survived where other men would have died after a long and painful agony – you could trust the Drukhari for that – but his voice would never be the same again...that is until the Tech-Priests of the Nyx Mechanicus invented some new treatment. Many cogboys enjoyed the challenge, he was told.

“Yes?”

“I am aware the Ecclesiarchy rules can be different Sector by Sector but...aren’t the Priests supposed to be celibate on Lemuria and the other Cardinal Worlds?”

“They are.” Henri-Charles III politely confirmed. “And yet by a series of completely innocent coincidences, you will notice every Hierophant to have been elevated this millennium had a name which was either Indushekhar or Singh.”

“Yes, it is a strange coincidence.” The humourless reply was unsurprising, though a little sad to hear. Ah, no matter. Henri-Charles III had not requested these veteran guardsmen for their conversational skills. “Isn’t this lake somewhat a bit too big for a swimming pool? We are barely seeing the other side from here!”

“Yes, it seems our dear Hierophant – or at least his predecessor who ordered the first stages of construction – was thinking big.”

There was no need to be a psyker to guess the disgust of the Nyxian guardsmen acting as his bodyguards. In some measure, the member of the Nyxian Conclave was sharing it. People had been bleeding and dying all over the Quadrant for the last decades, and the insurrection on Sparta had been raging for three entire years before it was crushed.

And during this era, the current Hierophant had been plotting, spending hundreds of days on his personal pleasure, and manipulating with other Priests the higher figures of the Suebi Sub-Sector. Even disregarding the spectacular outcome of Operation Caribbean, this wasn’t the kind of incompetence and treachery that could be tolerated.

“This is the problem with Paradise Worlds like this one, Colonel,” the Inquisitor wearing a grand blue uniform confided to Colonel Atomos. “They are marvellous in looks and comfort, they are rather secure from the outside, and you forget everything...beginning with your duties to His Most Holy Majesty.”

“And heretics have no difficulties infiltrating them,” a Captain of the Nyx 12th spoke as the familiar noise of firing weapons echoed in the distance.

“No,” acknowledged the Inquisitor of the Ordo Navis. “And when it comes to affairs like this, the greatest sin is *indolence*. It seems I have several years of work ahead of me to hunt the heretics and the traitors. Thank the God-Emperor, Cardinal Prescott is going to provide plenty of reliable Priests to compensate, and all of them have been Moth-tested beforehand.”

“I don’t doubt your judgement, my Lord, but didn’t the Hour of the Emperor’s Judgement kill every heretic of this system?” Atomos asked as several of his guardsmen returned from their visit into the Holy Crystal Mausoleum, dragging by the arms the ex-master of the pilgrim attraction.

“The Hour of the Emperor’s Judgement killed every traitor and heretic who had sworn his or her soul to Excess, Colonel,” since these guardsmen had outright fought against the daemons and spat in the eye of the abominations, Henri-Charles III Severus could very well explain it to the officers; these loyal veterans had been chosen because they could keep secrets. “Assuredly, the fact Lemuria is a Paradise World guarantees a majority of the heretics hiding under this pleasant facade were belonging to this decadent and immoral allegiance, but I fear it failed to rid us of the entire nest. Ah gentlemen, please carry him here.”

The low-born guardsmen regarded him warily – the Inquisition reputation remained formidable among the troops after their last interventions – but they saluted and obeyed.

And yes, it was important to stay polite. There was no urgency here, and thus no reason for bad manners. Henri-Charles III Severus was an Inquisitor; it didn’t mean he had to abandon the tenets of civilised behaviour if the situation didn’t demand it.

“Do you know who I am? Release me at once!”

Something a few people including his current ‘guest’ could take lessons to, clearly.

“Hierophant Hewendu Indushekhar,” The Inquisitor of the Ordo Navis spoke pleasantly, “thank you for having the good idea to join me on this pleasant summer morning.”

His Ecclesiarchal interlocutor fiercely glared at him before answering.

“I protest vehemently against this treatment. I am the Hierophant of Lemuria and my only superiors are the Cardinal of Nyx and Her Celestial Highness. I am protected by the divine law of His Most Holy Majesty!”

“No, you’re not. An Inquisitor is above your so-called divine right to rule.” The act of revealing his rosette after that made the hatred appear for an instant in the corner of the eyes of the ‘Holy Priest’.

“I thought the Living Saint had leashed you.”

“My dear Hierophant,” Henri-Charles III murmured, “while it is possible, possible I say, certain formal or informal accords were made between Her Celestial Highness the Basileia and several Inquisitors...”

He smiled before continuing in a darker and more dangerous tone.

“I am an Inquisitor, *Hierophant*.” The man calling himself Severus told him threateningly. “I serve the God-Emperor and the Imperium of Mankind, and I do not need warrants to do my duty.”

The preliminary politeness being over, the blue-clad Inquisitor opened the small box he had been able to acquire at Nyx, and held its tiny content in the palm of his hand before slamming it against the forehead of the Hierophant of Lemuria.

“WHAT ARE YOU...ARRRGGHHH!”

Henri-Charles III Severus had expected Hierophant Hewendu Indushekhar to be a traitor. His recent actions were sufficient to prove so, and so the shard of Aethergold he had been given before his departure from Nyx was supposed to burn him heavily.

But under his eyes, what happened was something else.

There was an internal blue tendril of sorcery which appeared to resist for a few seconds the golden light of the Aethergold. And then the blue illumination vanished and powerful golden flames engulfed the Hierophant.

The screams of the man, not of the heretic, rose in intensity, as everyone took a step back given the sheer power coming from the symbol of His Divine’s wrath.

“Praise the God-Emperor for he is the bane of all heretics,” the representative of the Holy Inquisition said forcefully. “Colonel Atomos!”

“My Lord?” The Nyxian saluted perfectly, a newly gained harshness in his gaze. Good, the man understood the problem.

“The culpability of the Hierophant being proved, I think we need to test his entire entourage. Take two companies and bring me the mistresses and the children, then the rest of the high-ranked Priests. We need to extirpate this heresy until the last root is found and burned.”

Henri-Charles III had not seen tested it before with his own eyes, but the Aethergold shard would be fine and ready for more ‘testing’ the moment the heretic was consumed utterly by the golden flames. Which looked to be soon; there wasn’t much left of him after thirty seconds of exposal.

“Yes, my Lord!”

“Remember, indolence and heresy must be purged if the Imperium is to return to its glory!”

**Lemuria System**

**Lemurian Shipyards**

**Judge Missy Byron**

“Well...we’re too late.”

Missy wasn’t going to repeat this affirmation in public, but given that there were in a rather ‘high-class’ section of the Lemurian Shipyards, one the former Governor had used to entertain ‘off-world clients’ – and no, she hadn’t asked what the locals meant by it – plus there was the protection of several jamming devices, her words shouldn’t make any pict-lines.

“What I don’t understand,” Teddy spoke after drinking a particular strong herbal drink, “is why friend-Weaver sent you here if she knew the Inquisition was going to deal with the problem of the Hierophant.”

“I asked myself the same question,” the Shaker parahuman admitted. And she had sent the same question via her personal Astropath to wherever Taylor was at the moment. Unfortunately, it seemed there was trouble on the horizon as the Astropathic conduits had long queues and many orders were taking priority over her inquiry. It could only be a coincidence, as the Inquisition didn’t have the cloud to keep Taylor in the dark, but it was inconvenient. “And I arrived to the conclusion the Inquisitors of Nyx must have discovered by themselves the Hierophant and his accomplices had been involved in heretical things. Once they acknowledged that, it was game over for Lemuria and Vijayanagara.”

Missy had to admit it was a sobering reminder of the power the Holy Inquisition could wield when it felt the Planetary Governor was about to turn traitor. One of the Nyxian regiments temporarily assigned to the Nyxian Conclave had descended on Lemuria, and the Inquisitor himself – one Missy had never seen before – had made an example of the Hierophant.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the vids of the ‘high-class bar’ where she and Teddy were drinking began to play again the ‘execution via Aethergold’ suffered by Hewendu Indushekhar.

Seeing it a second or a third time didn’t make it better, obviously. And no, Missy wasn’t going to cry for the man. He was a servant of the Ruinous Powers, and one who had done his best to make sure there was blood in the streets – or in the case of Drakkar, in the sea.

“Unlike us, they seem to keep the Ecclesiarchy in power in this system,” the Rashan said disapprovingly.

“Yes, but even if we had arrived first, it’s likely the planets of Lemuria and Vijayanagara would have stayed Cardinal Worlds, Teddy. Sparta wasn’t a problem; the insurrection and the weather had killed most of the prisoners, and as long as we didn’t tell the Pontifex-Crusader about the stones, there was really nothing worth staying around save the limited extraction and refinery of promethium.”

“But Drakkar was more important, no? It’s a lot of food they send every year to Lemuria!”

And her Rashan had discovered himself a taste for the moss the Drakkar-born citizens were harvesting as part of the Administratum tithe.

“It is, but whether Drakkar is a Cardinal Agri-World or an Administratum-overseen one, the food will still go to Vijayanagara.”

As tasty as the salmons fished by these muscular playboys were, the Lemurian Priesthood preferred more expensive food for their meals...or they had preferred their food that way, before Inquisitor Henri-Charles III Severus made his grand entrance in the Lemuria System.

One thing was sure, the man likely sent by Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor wasn’t playing around. Missy had only arrived forty-eight hours after him, but by now the blue-clad representative of the Inquisition had seized enough evidence to drag in chains dozens of Priests and of course execute the Hierophant and most of his immediate family, including eight more via Aethergold flames. The Pontifex-Governor of Vijayanagara had also been burned alive by order of the Cardinal of Nyx, and several of his key subordinates were in prison.

“We haven’t made a difference, then?”

“Oh no, we have made a very big difference. Now the next authorities designated to rule over Lemuria and Vijayanagara will have to give in return a fair price for these food supplies, be they in agri-technology or something else.”

The Judge in her doubted the new Priests sent by Nyx would acquiesce to everything the Drakkar-born wanted – weapon production was never easy to sell for an Agri-World – but it would considerably improve the life of the average grox-shepherd of salmon-fisher.

“But I think all the differences we could have made in this system are already ongoing. The Inquisitor certainly doesn’t need us to hunt the heretics of Lemuria, and the envoys sent by the Cardinal seem to have things well in hand on Vijayanagara.”

Missy was going to inform Taylor of the deplorable living conditions of the population on this Mining World if the Cardinal didn’t, however. Unlike Lemuria which was a paradise of green and blue waiting immaculate in the void, Vijayanagara was a red orb of dust and heavy metal extraction for the shipyards they were waiting into. And the more one dug, the more unpleasant revelations awaited the investigator. The pollution of the air was extreme. The violent dust tempests had convinced the original architects the cities had to be subterranean, and as such there were no Hives. But the population numbers were certainly worthy of a Hive World. The latest census had indicated a population of twenty-nine billion inhabitants, the great majority living in squalor. Rumours existed the Ecclesiarchy had intended a caste system, but the multitudes of Hierophant and Pontifex-Governors had decided to abandon that and as a result there were only the rulers – the noble Priests – and the ruled – the impoverished miners.

“Returning to filling these absurd Administratum forms?” Teddy groaned. “I pass my turn.”

“Hey you requisitioned this-“

“Lady Vista! Lady Vista!” one of her subordinates began to suddenly call her via her vox-comm. “Grave news! Demented cultists are attacking Dock C-6!”

“I’m on my way,” the parahuman replied curtly before turning towards her assistant. “The Emperor is with you today, Teddy. Paperwork duties cancelled!”

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Champion of Kar Duniash***

**Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto**

Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto had not thought her life would be boring and devoid of military incidents after the inferno of Commorragh, but she had hoped for a couple of years of calm.

Evidently, she wasn’t going to have them.

“This pilgrim ship is obviously the transport the heretic cultists used to evade attention for as long as they did,” the former subordinate of Admiral von Kisher announced to her officers once the security team had finished drowning in containment foam the warrant officer who had been in communication with them. Where the Arch-Enemy was concerned, it was better not to take any risk. “Now that we have convincing evidence there are behind the violent uprising in the shipyards I want to know how in the name of the God-Emperor were they able to do it!”

“The security in the Lemurian shipyards is filled with holes, Admiral,” a Lieutenant of her staff replied hastily. “And we’re still short-handed to fix every flaw and issue which comes up. A small pilgrim ship coming from the Overhill Sector wasn’t really suspicious; there have been ten of them this year.”

“And now we have to wonder how many were filled with heretics,” another Lieutenant said grimly.

“Indeed,” the Samarkand-born Rear-Admiral agreed. “Clearly, it would be better to be in position to board it and present these heretics to the Inquisitor. I’m sure after what they’ve done, the Holy Inquisition will have plenty of questions and long sessions of vigorous interrogation in mind for them.”

The problem was that she may not be able to board the ship responsible for this crisis. Most of her armsmen had been sent onto the Lemurian shipyards to restore order and purge the heretics, and her squadron had been mostly immobile these last hours, while the false pilgrim ship registered as the *Pious Traveller* was running like hell towards the next Mandeville Point.

“Our Destroyers can intercept it,” her chief of staff assured her as two golden dots on the accelerated in pursuit of the black dot on the advanced hololith of the *Champion of Kar Duniash*. “But if they want to prevent it from having a chance to engage the Warp drives before the Mandeville Point, they will have to shoot their torpedoes at extreme range.”

Let unsaid was that while the gunners may target the engines of this lair of damnation and heretics, it was far more likely the *Pious Traveller* – or whatever true name was carved upon its treacherous hull – was going to be atomised by so many torpedoes.

“Does anyone see another possible way to neutralise the heretics?”

“Not really Admiral,” one of her astrogation officers took upon him to answer for her staff. “The *Achilles* and the *Hector* are excellent Destroyers, there’s a reason why we requested these two, but deploying them so soon with a short-staffed crew means they can’t really risk a boarding action, no matter how crippled this pilgrim ship is.”

“And they had a few hundred personnel in permission on the Lemurian Shipyards before we ordered them to pursue the heretics,” added her chief of staff.

Fujiko thought over and over the situation, but it was like at Commorragh again – sometimes there were no good options, the dilemma was only between a varieties of poisons.

“Order our Destroyer’s Captains to launch their torpedoes as soon as they are in range,” the female Rear-Admiral commanded. “Be sure to emphasize to them that the priority is to make sure the *Pious Traveller* doesn’t escape. We can always summon a few Tech-Priests afterwards to see if it is possible to discover where the cultists and the traitors who rallied their banners came from.”

It wasn’t going to stop there, of course. The lax security measures of Lemuria and Vijayanagara had rendered unavoidable a purge of the Lemurian shipyards and the nearby planets. There were too many heretics found, and the number of supposed ‘loyal citizens’ found trafficking in forbidden substances and proscribed artefacts was absolutely sickening.

“How does our troop fare on the Lemurian shipyards fare?”

“Surprisingly, rather well, Admiral,” the commander of her armsmen assured her. “Many Nyxians on permission have rallied to the emissary of Lady Weaver, and it looks like the heretics are repelled towards Dock C-6 where the Pilgrim Traveller seeded its grains of heresy.”

The scarred veteran bared his teeth into a parody of smile.

“It looks like the traitors aren’t enjoying a lot their holidays on Lemuria.”

**Voice of Decay Lord Flu-Bringer of the Seventh Mutation**

“THE GROUND IS FIGHTING AGAINST US! THE GROUND AND THE WALLS ARE CONTORTING! PLEASE! PLEASE SAVE US GRANDFATHER!”

Flu-Bringer ended the vox communication before the screams were heard by each and every servant in proximity. There were ways to improve the moral of his faithful followers, and they didn’t include making them listening to their final pleas before they die.

“Dock C-7 is lost to us.”

“It’s this horrible xenos creature,” the Scythe-Prime, as his was usual habit, tried to deflect the blame. “It repaired all the defence turrets we had sabotaged!”

“I am not interested in cutting heads for this succession of failures,” the leader of the Cult of the Seventh Mutation said in a tone which had to sound jovial. He obviously didn’t say that at the rhythm the defeats were arriving, the Cult was going to be entirely destroyed if he punished every follower for their personal failings. “We serve the Lord of Decay, we are above the petty struggles of power of the Great Liar and the Bloody-Handed Maniac. What I want are scenarios to push back the blind slaves of the False Emperor.”

“We could try to send our last three shuttles to board another pilgrim ship and...operate a strategic withdrawal?” proposed the Pox-Master, a stout believer with a green arm where seven eyes saw everything.

“Defeatist!” the Scythe-Prime immediately answered.

“I’m sorry, do you have a solution to cripple soldiers fighting in sealed power armour?” the accused loyal soul retorted. “If we had someone blessed with more powerful talents or all our Plague-Bringers hadn’t been cut down by this maniac with the green blade of doom, I might try to concoct a virulent plagues the like which will make our enemies weep in beauty before so much magnificence of diseases!”

“Be quiet! It is only a matter of time before we kill the green blade-wielder! As for her horrible xenos pet, it won’t be able to escape the judgement of the Grandfather for long!”

“Strange,” the Mistress of Bubonic Infestation intervened, “I seem to remember the ‘horrible xenos pet’ led your forces right in the middle of a killing ground with Gatling Guns and electrified wire.”

“This was only a minor reversal!” The Scythe-Prime barked. “Now we have these unbelievers exactly where we want them!”

“Wait a minute...are you suggesting the slaves of the False Emperor sterilising Dock C-5 in fire is...part of your plan? Are you a cultist of Lies?”

“Apologise for this insult or my scythe will remove your head from your shoulders!”

“I will not apologise! No one but a brain-dead simpleton can contest the strategies of our Scythe-Prime are utterly disastrous!”

Flu-Bringer felt something spreading in the former Dock C-6. It was something which had nothing to do with the blessed fetid atmosphere they had brought to please the Grandfather. It was...abnormal. It was disorderly, but not the kind of agitation any of the Three were pleased to spread and bless humanity with.

“Enough, brothers and sisters! Remember who is the true enemy!”

“The enemy are the slaves of the False Emperor!”

“Quite so,” the cultist leaders agreed. “Now we must elaborate a new strategy-“

“No!” one of the lower-ranked plague officers erupted in outrage. “We must punish the Scythe-Prime for his failures!”

“In the name of Nurgle, you will stop this behaviour! I am blessed to speak with the voice of Decay and I say-”

“Damn you with your Decay and your plagues!” the cultist spluttered to the face of the Scythe-Prime and several other lesser chosen of the Grandfather. “I say we need a change of leadership, and I humbly propose my services-“

Three scythes struck him and the attempted treachery was rendered inexistent in a matter of seconds. The dark presence which had pushed like a bothersome fly into the shadows vanished again.

Flu-Bringer felt nonetheless troubled. It didn’t feel like the work of servants of Tzeentch and Khorne. And the False Emperor had no power, everyone knew that. What had been this malign influence?

“THEY ARE COMING! THE FLOOR IS DISTORTING AGAIN! THEY ARE COMING! GRANDFATHER! PLEASE SAVE US!”

These questions would have to wait for a while, unfortunately...assuming they won.

In hindsight, the ‘great dangers’ the Grandfather’s prophets had warned him against before coming here were far too great for the ‘great blessings’ they would be rewarded for at the end of the path...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Smilodon VIII**

**Fortress-Monastery *Holy Aquila***

**5.727.297M35**

**Marshal Helman Malberg**

Normally, there should have been a long ceremony to welcome the golden Thunderhawk and its owners, but the landing pad was still in construction, and the wind was violent today over the Far Western Peaks.

Therefore Helman had to make his greeting short.

“Your Celestial Highness,” the Black Templar Marshal bowed largely, “welcome to the *Holy Aquila*. The Fortress-Monastery is yours.”

“Thank you, Marshal,” the Living Saint answered with a large smile, “lead the way.”

Without waiting any further, he and Lady Taylor Hebert’s Astartes escort, fifty of his battle-brothers forming an honour guard once the Sky Gate was passed and striking their fists on their armours in salute.

“I see you have received new warriors since your last report,” the Basileia of Nyx told him after saluting back.

“As of today, the *Holy Aquila* is defended by two hundred and seventy-two oath-sworn Space Marines, including two Castellans and myself.” Helman informed their benefactor. “There are also ten Techmarines and three Apothecaries which are on their way, as the High Marshal was courteous enough to approve my request for more support elements.”

From there their exchange went on the details of the fortress Tech-Priests and senior Sword Brethren were building around them. Helman wished he could present the Fortress-Monastery in a near-completed state, but this was years away, and to be honest no one had thought the Basileia would choose to visit them this year.

“Do you want me to prepare some refreshments?” the Black Templars commander asked as he finished showing Her Celestial Highness the rooms where the Neophytes and Initiates would train in the noble art of sword-fighting.

“No, that won’t be necessary, Marshal.” The golden-winged Chosen of the Emperor replied. “Count-Patrician Zoltan Cziffra is a good man, but I swear he tried to see if a Saint could drink barrel after barrel of amasec without drowning in it.”

“The good Planetary Governor was particularly ecstatic when your unexpected visit was announced,” Helman said politely. “I understand he will receive several brand-new trains and locomotives?”

“This was the official reason I gave him,” Helman didn’t react outwardly but internally, he began to assess what had possibly gone wrong in the galaxy. “In reality, I wanted to contact you and Dragon had the good idea to send this convoy right at the moment I wanted so for potential spies, it didn’t look like I desire to avoid the Count-Patrician and his Mining-Barons.”

Feeling the tour of the completed facilities had lasted long enough, the Marshal directed his prestigious guest and the other Space Marines towards the stone stairs which had been built to be the principal avenue towards the *Holy Aquila*’s Strategium.

“We are always at the disposal of Your Celestial Highness, of course,” Helman said formally, “may I know the primary purpose of this visit, then?”

“War,” was the unsurprising answer, “war is coming once again for us.”

“A new front has opened at Tigrus?”

“No, it is not Tigrus. It is a nearby Necron battlestation which has been activated. A few crazy xenos apparently think my alliance with the Nerushlatset Dynasty is against the nature of this galaxy, and have taken steps to remedy to it.”

“Remedy how?”

“They intend to destroy this entire Sector until there isn’t a single living being alive to witness the apocalypse they have unleashed. The Necron executioners want to kill everything, down to the last bacteria.”

Helman Malberg frowned and felt the familiar emotion of anger course through his vein. He was no stranger to the devastation caused by highly-intensive conflicts, but that kind of destruction was way over what the Black Templars inflicted to their enemies.

It was senseless. To achieve such a level of destruction meant each planet would be for all intents and purposes subjected to a thorough Exterminatus. There would be no new colonisation, no salvage operations, nothing.

“And these xenos are coming here.”

“I have taken steps to delay their arrival,” the Saint promised him, “and for now, the plan is to intercept their engines of destruction and other murderous assets outside the Nyx Sector. You have been witness of what some of the Necron Battleships were capable at Commorragh. The leaders of the faction who want us dead are far more dangerous than that.”

“What are we speaking exactly about, your Celestial Highness?” Like all Chapter Masters of the Adeptus Astartes having participated in the Ovation, Helman had been briefed on the ‘World Engines’ of the Necrons. And while these offensive planetoids were extremely tough engines of destruction, there were far from invulnerable. Casualties would be immense, yes, but several Chapters acting together could defeat this threat.

“We are speaking about the Ymga Monolith, that the Necrons call the Throne of Oblivion. It is a planet-sized pyramid which can replicate in less than a minute a Battleship provided the material resources are available. It has energy shields so powerful only the Gloriana Battleships and top-of-the-art bastions like Phalanx have a chance of bringing them down. Its escort fleet alone can torch a Sub-Sector and annihilate trillions of lives. We don’t have a full pict of the infantry numbers defending it, but they have to be in the billions of warriors, and the masters of this monstrosity can bring an endless tide of reinforcements via modified Webway portals.”

“God-Emperor preserves us,” Helman answered shocked. “This is a primary-grade threat on the level of a Black Crusade!”

“It is.”

“I will of course answer your call to arms against this xenos citadel, but the Black Templars alone can’t achieve victory there.” Maybe if the entire Chapter did what had never been done since the War of the Cacodominus and gathered all Crusade fleets under the High Marshal’s banner...but that would mean abandoning countless campaigns...

“I am not going to send you alone,” the Saint reacted promptly as she agitated her large wings. “But the Ymga Monolith is a treacherous battleground where your Chapter may be truly what is needed to defeat the Necron elite warriors. You see, the xenos have refined the Noctilith into something which is an extremely powerful repellent for the Warp. As such, the battlefield we will have to fight upon is a null-zone.”

“Yes,” the Marshal answered slowly, “in this regard our respect of the Edict of Nikea proves a considerable boon. In a null-zone, the psykers will be useless, but we have no psykers and as such we won’t be handicapped by their absence in our lines.” However, there was a problem the Saint may not have fully considered. “I have never heard of a null-zone having an area of effect so large however, your Celestial Highness. I am partial to battlefields where the enemy can’t use fell sorcery against us, but blocking the Warp on such a large scale has certainly secondary effects.”

The end of the walk to the Strategium ended in silence. It was only when the Living Saint and Helman had taken their seats around the hololith of the Strategium that the Basileia spoke again.

“The first stage of this operation, that I have called provisionally the Hunt for the Monolith, is to push as many Ork WAAGHs against the Necrons as materially possible, while the Nyx Sector and all Adeptuses forces we can possibly convince to join us will be united in a single force.”

The Ultramarines would certainly not agree with this strategy, Helman internally remarked with some light amusement. It went against a lot of tenets of the *Codex Astartes*.

“Optimistically, if the sabotage of the Monolith’s FTL drive succeeds, we may be granted twelve years of respite before launching our full-fledged assault against the Necrons. Therefore I came to you to know what kind of force you would be able to commit if the Black Templars have over a decade to rearm.”

Helman replayed the numbers he had been given yesterday in his head. At the time, they had been reassuring. Now, there were far less so.

“Per your instructions, we completed the tests of gene-seed compatibility twenty-days ago and began the first physical and mental trials of our aspirant-Neophytes immediately. There have been a couple of failures, but between the three main mining-cities of Smilodon Octavian, we were able to recruit six hundred and twenty aspirants.”

“Impressive,” the Saint congratulated him.

“Thank you, your Celestial Highness, but my oaths compel me to admit that given our exacting standards, the initial numbers are at least divided by two once the full trials are completed.”

“The standards?”

“We do not lower them lightly, and in this instance it would be a death sentence.”

The Saint watched him with a stony expression for several seconds before conceding the point.

“I suppose you will be able to only train a single generation of new Astartes in twelve years.”

“With the numbers available to me, I’m afraid this is true,” the Marshal acknowledged before elaborating. “Between the instant an aspirant begins his first trials and the moment a Neophyte is to be considered ready to swear his vows of Initiate battle-brother, on average ten years have passed. Each Neophyte also needs the guidance of his elders.”

And though he would push the maximum of his battle-brothers to take Neophytes under his wing, the truth was Helman’s effectives were limited.

“I will make new requests to High Marshal Barbarossa.” The veteran Astartes said. “They may find more good will if a message of your Celestial Highness accompanies my words.”

“Consider it approved. As is your shipbuilding request of five new Strike Cruisers.”

Helman had thought it would be approved...gradually. To have the request approved in block was quite unusual...but then the circumstances weren’t exactly normal, no?

“I’m sure you are aware of the contract signed with Count-Patrician Zoltan Cziffra, so assuming we really have twelve years we will have the production line able to deliver us a full complement of Rhinos and the Whirlwinds...”

The discussion lasted for another four hours without pause – he had to order refreshments at the end. Four hours to forge the still weakened Battle-Companies which had survived the Commorragh Crusade into what was coming to be the tip of an implacable sword destined to crush xenos and everything rising to oppose the will of the God-Emperor.

And when Lady Weaver departed, Helman Malberg knew one thing for sure.

The Living Saint would lead them to a war the stars themselves would remember.