**Sentinel 3.1**

**A Short Detour**

*I can say without lying I’ve lost count of the number of times people have asked me why I hate so much the Eldars.*

*I hear their whispers, behind my back. Perhaps I am angry I found a xenos species which makes my blue-blooded arrogance small and unimpressive. There are also hints I tried to spare an Eldar during my first battle with the Fay 20th and the same xenos humiliated me afterwards. Another motive which arrived to my ears was that my infamous commanding officer psycho-indoctrinated every member of her staff to hate one xenos species specifically. I –supposedly – was the one chosen to hate the Eldars.*

*In the end, these rumours are just that: rumours.*

*I do not hate Eldars because I want to twist and cut their Warp-forsaken long ears. Not that the temptation isn’t great. I do not curse them because they have fielded on thousands of occasions technological devices which are more akin to sorcery. Lasguns, shells and bayonets may be underwhelming from a certain point of view, but I can say safely thousands of this perfidious species have lost their lives to them.*

*No, I hate them because they are hypocrites to a point challenging the very concept of imagination. Humans are not perfect, but our claims are often backed by something like reality. Eldars have not that problem. All in one, the long ears love to pretend they are at the apex of the predator chain, they are the most technologically advanced species in this galaxy, they are the rampart against Chaos and they are so wise every one must bow to their supreme greatness.*

*It’s infuriating how much stupidity these arrogant xenos can voice. One might think that annihilating their very own empire and ravaging the Galaxy by sheer decadence would have taught them a thing or two like moderation, tolerance and self-introspection.*

*After all, even the orks, amusing war-lovers idiots, can sometimes learn of their errors.*

*Unfortunately, on this very subject like on thousands of others, Eldars have proved themselves inferior to the greenskins.*

*The Ork leaders may not be geniuses, but they understood faster than the Farseers attacking the Fay 20th in anything but overwhelming strength was going to result in disaster...*

Extract from *Memories of the Fay 20th and the 35th Millennium*, by Wei Cao.

“*The Eldar are a capricious and fickle xenos race, attacking without cause or warning. There is no understanding them for there is nothing to understand – they are a random force in the universe*.” Extract from a common Imperial Guard speech often evoked by the Commissars before fighting the Eldar.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan II**

**7.423.289M35**

Thought for the Day: Information is power.

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

The Primarch Perturabo was a traitor and a mass-murdering monster. That much could not be contested. On the other hand, the writings and directives he had given to his Legion of corpse-grinders had been short and to the point.

According to him, a Training Sergeant had to be cruel, merciless and be granted a despotic power bordering on absolute tyranny to make sure his recruits were worthy to be considered real soldiers.

But it was Perturabo and the Primarch of the Fourth had forgotten something as usual.

Taking the title of Training Sergeant was *fun*.

“FASTER, BAND OF LARVAE! THIS IS TOO SLOW! A ONE-LEGGED MAN NEEDS TEN SECONDS LESS THAN YOUR MISERABLE SKULLS TO COMPLETE THIS OBSTACLE COURSE!”

It went without saying it was fun for him, not for those he was training. He had the opportunity to scream and lambast these whiteshields for all the mistakes they made – and they were a lot of them, by the ashes of Caliban.

“YOU CALL THIS A PUSH-UP? YOU WILL DO IT CORRECTLY! WHAT WAS THAT, A PROTESTATION? I WANT ONE HUNDRED MORE AND I WANT A BIG HAPPY SMILE ON YOUR UGLY FACE!”

Gavreel was nearly certain the hundred or so of young men and women running between the different obstacles and physical exercises were cursing his name and his ancestry for all eternity. But it was for their own good!

His transhuman eyes examined the rest of the training field he had requisitioned for the next three hours. For the moment, it served his purposes though it was by no means perfect. For one, this amount of space was the sole place where the three Imperial Guard regiments could train. Contrary to one might think, they weren’t on Wuhan soil, this was just the walls simulating a wasteland and the ceiling simulating a smog-covered sky. He and the rest of these recruits were aboard a purposed-built army transport named the *Courageous Traveller*, orbiting the Hive World.

The facilities were far inferior to the facilities the Solar Auxilia had taken for granted during the Great Crusade, but they did the job. Gavreel had been forced to swallow it like everything else, though the technological decline the Imperium suffered worried him immensely.

“YOU CALL THIS SHOOTING?” He screamed to a dozen of recruits which had to strip, assemble and shoot a lasgun before resuming the obstacle course. “I SAW BABIES TAKING FIVE MINUTES TO DO IT! FIVE NOT FIFTEEN! AND YOUR SHOOTING SKILLS ARE A DISGRACE TO YOUR FAMILIES! I’M BEGINNING TO THINK I WILL NEED TO USE THE WORST SHOOTERS AS TARGETS TO IMPROVE YOUR SCORES!”

The effect would have been even better if he was in his power armour. Towering like a big black shadow over them would have encouraged the most recalcitrant trainees to improve. But the Tech-Priests were working on his new Aquila equipment at the moment, and so he had to use a long black uniform specially tailored for him a few more days.

Still, the effect of being trained by a Space Marine was doing wonders for morale inside the *Courageous Traveller*. Simply by being who he was, Gavreel could draw on from a succession of countless victories from the Great Crusade and thousands of victories won by the Emperor’s finest. It was somewhat humbling, to be honest.

There were a few bad seeds in this lot, nevertheless. It was bound to happen; no regiment was ever free of this particular problem. They thought themselves intelligent and clever, but they underestimated his senses. These enemies of discipline and order did not take the training seriously. Gavreel could not wait to tell them the average time of survival on the frontlines was around nineteen hours. But for the guardsmen who screwed up and angered their supervisors, it should be somewhere between nineteen seconds and nineteen minutes, depending on the level of the opposition.

Pointing his right fist to one of the worst troublemakers he had noticed, he shouted a new tirade.

“YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY? TEN MORE LAPS AND I WANT THEM DONE YESTERDAY!”

The arrogant brat raced to obey. At the very least, the troublemakers were not stupid enough to disobey him. He would have to keep one eye on them nonetheless.

The light sound of human footsteps from the training field entrance informed him well before he turned his head that Major Taylor Hebert had arrived. Wearing the basic black-grey uniform of her Guard regiment, the young woman he owned his life was grinning at the spectacle of exhausted trainees training desperately not to attract his attention.

“You appear to have the situation well in hand,” the bug-controller was looking far better these days. While he had not personally taken part in the creation of her schedule, the former Dark Angels Legionary knew Questor Wismer and her own staff had been concerned the Major was way too thin. She also loved to overwork herself, and several rest periods had to be established.

Because Taylor Hebert was unfortunately mentally and physically able to impose herself a blade lesson with him after an entire day of work. Gavreel had been more than once forced to salute her determination to improve herself – if girls could become Astartes, he would have recommended her immediately for the Astartes transformation procedure – but sometimes it was too much. A reminder like many others a parahuman was like a psyker on certain aspects.

“The training is proceeding a bit better than the planning I gave you a Terran month ago,” he said in a low tone. It wouldn’t do for the trainees to think they were becoming good little soldiers before they were ready, by the Sword of the Lion. “I think in three weeks your 4th Company will be ready to fight next to the other veterans.”

“Good,” the satisfaction in Weaver’s voice was evident. “We leave Wuhan in two days and I prefer to have a well-trained force to deploy when we need to shoot something.”

His eyes met the ones of Taylor Hebert, and he knew the ‘when’ had not been chosen by mistake. The Major was expecting trouble...and given they were all under the supreme authority of a Magos Explorator, he was not going to tell her she was wrong.

“Are they problems I should be aware of?”

“As a matter of fact there is one,” Gavreel knew he was going to touch something which was technically not included in his duties, but better saying it now than mourning how unfair the galaxy was when you agonised on a bloody trench. “I came a bit earlier to the training field this morning and I saw the ‘exercises’ of the Wuhan Infantry 23rd. They are...not good.”

By respect, the Sergeant had not uttered any insult but he could not say anything positive about the display he had watched. By the Major’s grimace, he saw his remark was not completely unexpected.

“You were aware of it.”

“Let’s just say I had my suspicions and I sent Valeriya from my staff to spy a bit on them,” she corrected him. “Magos Lankovar told me they falsified a lot their numbers...”

“And you don’t trust them.” He didn’t blame her.

Taylor Hebert shrugged.

“The Guard exists to protect the citizens of the Imperium and the moment they had the opportunity to do the right thing, they refused to fight and protect their home planet.”

But the two other Guard regiments, the Andes Artillery 10th and of course the Fay Mechanised Infantry 20th, had fought and bled for the Wuhanese population.

“I can understand their fear of the Inquisition, but it was their people who were dying and they chose to do nothing,” the insect mistress continued. “I can’t say I will enjoy fighting sides by sides with officers like them...eleven thousand more men would have been really useful in Hive Asao.”

Tactically, this was indeed true. The Fay Regiment was now five thousand and three hundred strong while the Andes force had four thousand men and women to fire their artillery batteries.

“They are also regular clashes between their troopers and the other regiments in the corridors.”

“We are working on it, but they’re no obvious solution.” There was no smile on the bug-controller young visage and she was nearly gritting her teeth. “Colonel Ricardo and his officers have the same problem. The truth is Colonel Ta is a misogynist pig and the Wuhan Infantry 23rd is an all-male regiment. They don’t want women giving them orders and many of their officers think any woman firing weapons is some kind of provocation.”

“This is going to be problematic.” Although nowhere near the bad blood existing between the Fourth and the Seventh. He had not been shocked to learn these two Legions had fought on opposite sides during the Great heresy.

“They are an infantry regiment and a big one; they can afford to take losses we can’t.” Major Hebert said before changing the subject. “How fares the latest addition to my staff?”

**Corporal Wei Cao**

Wei had known from the moment she was able to walk she was of the purest most prestigious line of Wuhan. She was a daughter of House Cao. She was born to rule and command. Her destiny was to oversee the productivity of the lesser classes and make sure all tithes the Imperium demanded of the Hive World were met in time and hour. She had received the most expensive tutors and received beautiful dresses to participate in great ceremonies.

Wei was a noblewoman of Wuhan. Her father had been granted many influent positions in Wuhan governance and her planet was the sub-sector capital. Her future in the circles frequented by Wuhan elite was assured from the moment she was born.

And then two traitors – the Adeptus Arbites was still investigating if they had been real Inquisitors or not – had decimated Wuhan nobility and everything had gone downhill there.

Suddenly, Wei was not the second daughter of the Praetor-Maximus Hongfeng Cao, fifth in line of succession to the title of Ruler of Hive Cao-Lai. No, she was the daughter of Governor Hongfeng Cao of Wuhan...and her two eldest half-brothers and eldest half-sister had begun watching her like she had suddenly become their mortal enemy. Tragic accidents and accidents had come closer day after day and two younger half-sisters had officially taken their own lives – like anything more intelligent save a servitor was going to believe that.

It had been urgent to find an escape exit, but she was a noblewoman and in her veins flew the purest bloodline of Wuhan. Wei had been sure that should a challenge present herself in front of her, she could handle it easily.

After a few queries, Wei Cao had rapidly determined it was the marriage with a hero of the Imperial Guard which offered the best opportunity to build her own power base and one day return to seize the Governorship from her father cold hands.

It had partially failed and the assassins had begun to act openly in front of hundred witnesses. Leaving Wuhan had been more and more a necessity for her continued survival.

It had taken her only a few hours to realise that all her family name and all the influence at her disposal were not going to give her a regimental command or any prestigious position she was aware of. No, she had been granted the grade of Corporal and she had a good idea it was because of her mastery of High and Low Gothic.

“FASTER, BAND OF LARVAE! THIS IS TOO SLOW! A ONE-LEGGED MAN NEEDS TEN SECONDS LESS THAN YOUR MISERABLE SKULLS TO COMPLETE THIS OBSTACLE COURSE!”

She jumped from the top of the three meters-high climbing wall...directly in the brown foam the Mechanicus had placed to simulate mud and other viscous things. The sensation was disgusting and doing it nearly every day had not made it more pleasant.

She did not shout or protest, despite the fact that she wanted a long and hot shower in a porcelain-decorated bathroom. Wei knew she wasn’t going to get it now. Instead she ran and managed to last long enough to finish the course, out of breath.

“Twenty seconds better than your previous time Corporal,” the declaration came from the Sergeant of the 2nd Company overseeing the chronometric displays. She was a very large woman, with her tattooed arms the width of her legs. “You’ve done enough for today. Get a shower and go back to your staff duties, there are other trainees waiting for their turn.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” Wei saluted before obeying. On the first day, she had tried protesting and collapsed totally exhausted before the end of the obstacle course. This had been the sole and only time she did it. Sergeants might not look it, but they knew how much she could handle before being wiped out physically and mentally.

The shower was far too short to her taste. Water was far from rationed on the *Courageous Traveller* – she knew from the logistical requirements they were going to be resupplied in a few hours before their departure – but it did not mean the regulations for the showers were anything but plebeian.

Just for this, she wanted to be a senior officer and enjoy her private bathroom once more...before remembering all the women including the Major and the Captains were using these showers. She could not say she was a noblewoman and not imitate them when it was a question of noblesse oblige, no?

The clean grey-black uniform was donned in seconds and the boots came after. Wei took a few seconds to watch herself in the old mirror of the locker room. Her hair had been cut short and she tied them up in a short ponytail. The azure shade mixed with the black was still visible, but since she could not bring her stylist with her it was fading away. In ten days, her fabulous hairs were going to return to their natural obsidian colour.

Wei was even less satisfied with the uniform, her nails and the rest of her visage. The harsh training she had been forced to endure with the rest of the recruits arrived from Fay had ruined a decade of intensive cosmetic and dressing sessions. And yet...there was no denying there was a certain pleasure in her appearance. For the first time, Wei watched herself and knew there was something dangerous in her. The belt she tied around her waist had a laspistol holster and it was not empty. On her left side, she had the standard Guard-produced long knife to defend herself at close-quarters. Wei had lost rapidly several kilograms. She had muscles. Her grip felt stronger. And it was just two standard months of training...she had a feeling that in one year the girl she was last year would be unable to recognise her future-self.

This might not be a bad thing. As much as she didn’t want to admit it, she had survived the ball by random luck. Her half-siblings had just been too busy plotting against each other to care about the delegation of the Imperial Guard. There had been the battle of poisoned cream after one hour, the violin assassination six minutes past this mark and two dozen honour duels to spice the end of the night.

The feeling of vulnerability was not a pleasant thing, and each day in the Guard she was more than aware that the real killers of this Sector could end her life in mere seconds without any effort.

Admiring herself in the mirror had to be stopped there, however. Soon somebody was going to need the room, and the paperwork was not going to disappear by itself.

Ten minutes later, her prediction was more than verified. There was only one member of the ‘Weaver’s staff’ when she entered the room: Alex Dev, a young blonde-haired young man. He looked like he was swimming under the piles of files – a bit of an exaggeration but not that much. The office had been devoted to deal with all the documentation an Imperial Regiment of His Most Divine Majesty needed a month a half ago, but it was too small for their purposes.

Likely, they would need to find new places of work and storage before the secret and not-so secret documents before it spiralled in the grey corridors of the ship.

“What are the reasons of this mess?” She asked a bit frostily. “We completed this morning the spare parts problems. If this is the Cartel agents causing more difficulties, I swear heads are going to roll.”

Before she would have made it an idle threat, but since they were leaving the system and her influence might not survive her unofficial exile, the temptation was strong to remove the insipid worms unable to do their jobs.

“The fuel,” the two words were uttered like a curse. “The authorities on the planet are dragging their feet now that we are really a Mechanised Infantry Regiment. The Wuhan scribes did not protest when the Governor offered us the vehicles, because it was the Governor and they love having their heads attached to their body.”

“But they don’t want to deliver the promethium.”

“Not at the prices they are forced to sell their promethium stocks to a Guard regiment.”

Wei winced. The ‘gift’ had been her idea after all, and she had really dismissed firsthand the issue of fuel, because it wasn’t like there was a scarcity of it in the Wuhan System.

“Is it that bad?”

“No, it’s not,” answered the Fay Guardsmen. “But if they manage to delay us by a few more days, the regiment will need to borrow fuel from the Andes 10th or buy it somewhere else. And there are not many planets in the Sector having so much promethium available.”

“I will contact the administrators to remind them how much the Wuhan-Cao Cartel has invested in recently.” Wei was not qualified in any way to drive a Chimera or discuss the tactics of a mechanised infantry regiment. But she was aware vehicles without promethium were like a Hive without raw resources to transform into finished products. It was an impressive construction yes, but the utility to the God-Emperor and the Imperium of Mankind was nil. “There are always administrators which need to be reminded of their place. Is the rest of the data-slates and paper coming from the same sources?”

“No, part of it is the obscure laws we somehow broke when we assaulted Hive Asao. The Governor and the Lord Magnates wrote a general amnesty for those, but there are always more factory owners and dumb scribblers who have not got the message.”

“And the rest?” Wei demanded, looking at a differently ordered stack of files awaiting reading.

“Oh, these are the demands linked to the Major’s pet project.” She must have raised an eyebrow in interest because Alex Dev launched himself in a long explanation. “Major Hebert gave some of the funds she was awarded on Fay to build orphanages for the children whose parents died in the orks invasion. She didn’t like the model of the Schola Progenium, I believe. The goal is for these kids to have a roof to sleep under, be correctly fed and have as normal of a childhood as possible. There were talks between her and Governor Dalten to make sure apprenticeships and qualified work was opened to them...according to the data we received one month ago, the first orphanage had opened and the concept is getting popular.”

“Interesting,” Wei commented before beginning to read a long and boring document where nothing important was written in incredibly tiny letters. She had never thought about charity efforts to build herself a nice reputation, but Taylor Hebert had obviously not been blind to the opportunities it offered. “Please give me an update once you’re done with it, I would like to give suggestions of my own...”

Ultimately, she had not manage to invite herself in the bed of her superior, but it did not mean there were no other ways to make yourself valuable.

**Magos Desmerius Lankovar**

A very young and credulous menial named Desmerius Lankovar had once believed that the Adeptus Mechanicus of Blessed Mars was not the Administratum of Holy Terra. Surely the great Fabricator General and the Archmagos Primus of the Red Planet had found in their millennia of studies and researches the solution to the dread human curse named paperwork.

Magos Explorator Desmerius Lankovar, centuries older and made far wiser by the hundreds of experiences where he had nearly lost his life, was aware this miraculous salvation had not yet been provided by the servants of the Omnissiah. To be sure, unlike the miserable Curators and Scribes of the Administratum, the Tech-Priests had powerful bionic implants to deal with the massive flux of information. The knowledge and the messages they required were easily accessible by the noosphere provided they had the correct authorisations and passwords. Management, regulations, doctrine and requisition demands were dealt with in the holy binary language, the langua-technis, as it was proper.

Yes, it was a language optimised for quick communication of technical data. It was something they said to the young Tech-Priests who did not know better. But there was always indexed documentation to provide, productivity reports to send, and after-action data to compile. Desmerius was well-aware he and his fellow Magos of Wuhan did not generate more than eleven percent of the bureaucratic maze the Administratum created on the Hive World.

But it was still a colossal flux of information, and as a Magos Explorator he had been many standard years out of contact. The moment some of his peers knew where to find him – and he had stayed at Wuhan one hundred and sixty percent the time necessary for contact to be established – the requests had come like an ork running to battle: eagerly and leaving him no respite.

No simulation showed him a way to cut short these hundreds of thousands irritating details. The *Magos Laurentis* had participated in enough skirmishes and battles during his Quest for Knowledge that the overhaul in Wuhan dockyards was one hundred percent necessary. Two standard months of reparations and resupply would not erase every technical problem, but there was a probability of twenty-ninth percent he would be able to operate his cruiser for the rest of the century.

Omnissiah willing, Stygies VIII would receive his report and deliver him the funds and the necessary codes before this future date.

But until this eventual recognition of the risks and efforts he had taken in the name of Blessed Mars, Lankovar was on his own to negotiate and advance the interests of his Forge-World of birth. He had a small squadron answering his precise directives, which increased by a factor of twelve the technical documentation generated by the Tech-Priests under his command.

It had severely cut back the number of cogitator cycles he could affect to anything which wasn’t maintenance and resupply. Wismer faced the same problems. It was one of the reasons he couldn’t wait but depart Wuhan.

Idly, the Magos Explorator calculated the probability of his former superior Archmagos Dorville adopting the same attitude. The result shown on one of his lateral screens was 0,004 percent. Desmerius was anything but surprised. The ancient Archmagos of Venatoria had had very little patience for anything which was not a STC or a bomb. If the Omnissiah was good, his expeditionary fleet was not anywhere in a thousand light-years radius.

He was studying the last status report sent by the Wuhan destroyer *Star Lizard* which had been loaned to his expeditionary squadron when the thrill of a highly encrypted demand of communication interrupted him.

The channel used and the familiar encryption told him who was trying to contact him several processor cycles before the image of a familiar red robe appeared on his main display.

“Magos Suvrex-Gamma, may your forges productivity continue to rise,” Desmerius saluted the highest-ranking representative of the Mechanicus on Wuhan.

“Magos Explorator Desmerius Lankovar, may your Quest for Knowledge illuminate the Great Cog,” his interlocutor returned the salute before revealing the reason of his call. “You intend to travel to the S-4697X5T4 System in two standard days.”

“I am.” His travel plans across the Nyx Sector were not under a veil of secret. “There are several ruins and animal species I wanted to study during my last visit and I have now the means to do so.” His augmented eyes watched the image of the other Magos. “The Administratum is causing problems?”

“The usual protestations,” the noise emitted by Wuhan Magos was almost worth a shrug. “But until one of their colonisation fleets manage to settle and claim the planets, none that can’t be ignored.”

A mechadendrite pushed several runic commands and the image of a fortress built on a M31-pattern flashed into existence.

“I have received a priority communication from Andes. Magos Artisan Troy Alpha-Karon-1462 affirms in an Astropath message having made an Alpha-level discovery.”

Desmerius tried not to show his wrath at hearing that name. Just as he had thought of his past moments ago, now the present was forcing him to acknowledge the disaster which had almost ended his career.

“*Magos*,” he uttered the word like an insult, “Troy Alpha-Karon-1462 was accused of unsanctioned innovation, heretek behaviour and mass-murder of the Omnissiah servants. Cog and oil damn him, an entire stellar system was destroyed in a supernova because of his actions!”

The fault could be shared with Archmagos Dorville, yes. The great Archmagos should have verified the works of Troy. But it was the Magos Artisan who had built his cursed device and if the *Magos Laurentis* had not had its Warp engines hot and ready to jump, neither Lankovar nor anyone in the Naga System would have survived.

“Magos Artisan Troy Alpha-Karon-1462 was sent in exile to the Feral World of Andes Primus,” countered Suvrex-Gamma.

“May his components rust until the stars grow cold,” Lankovar murmured. The Archmagos had obviously used some of his impressive connections and favours to avoid his favourite a traitor’s death. In two seconds, he absorbed the totality of the knowledge available on Andes Primus. It was a swamp world with one minor fortress and an even smaller spaceport. Nothing of value to discover and the insects there were pathetic for Major Hebert’s arsenal. Andes Primus was nothing but one of those millions of Solutio-Quintus systems in the galaxy: humanity could live on these planets but Civilised or Hive development was too costly and never started. Xenos and hostile powers never attacked these systems, since there was nothing to steal or gain from a raid there. “The probability of him making an Alpha-level discovery is below one percent. The Magos Artisan wants his exile to end and is overestimating his contributions to the Adeptus.”

“And what if the discovery is real?”

“The chances of this are negligible.”

The mechadendrites of Suvrex-Gamma clicked and buzzed.

“The Mechanicus of Wuhan has concluded the potential rewards of sending a messenger to Andes outweigh the drawbacks. The planet is your path to the S-4697X5T4 System. It is not a great detour.”

“Agreed,” Lankovar replied. Saying anything else would invite accusations and generated bad relationships with the tech-Priests of Wuhan. “But the detour will bring nothing valuable, record my words.”

“Long Live the Quest for Knowledge.”

“Ave Deus Mechanicus.”

**Major Taylor Hebert**

Projected like this, the planet of Andes Primus did not look so bad. The image on their hololith was a ball of green, blue and white, making the planet very similar to the rare images taken from orbit of Earth Bet before the Simurgh decided to stop humanity attempts to expand in the Solar System.

The rapid text accompanying the information was giving a far more pessimistic view of Andes Primus. A lot of the data stream was concerning details way over her head, but the humidity rates and the average temperatures were rather...uncomfortable. Thirty-two degrees Celsius might not seem too terrible, but it was an average. When you added the gravity of 1.2G, the humidity levels never going below eighty percent and the swamp-like terrain, it was somewhat understandable humanity had decided they were far more welcoming planets to colonise.

Yeah, it was not place where Taylor would recommend spending holidays. She would be fine – the illnesses and other infections were due to a sort of fist-sized insect name the glutton-mosquito – but it did not mean walking in this green treacle filled her with enthusiasm.

Apparently even the orks avoided the place and if that wasn’t saying something, nothing would. The planet was the very definition of what the Imperium considered a backwater and if there wasn’t the Mining World of Andes Secundus next to it, it was likely the world would have been forgotten long ago.

“The world is lightly populated,” she remarked. The image of Magos Lankovar, communicating them from his cruiser’s bridge, nodded in agreement.

On the corner of the hololith room occupied by the Andes officers, Colonel Ricardo spoke.

“According to the latest Imperial census five years ago, the population numbers is under twenty million and consists roughly of nomadic tribes. There are two settlements big enough to deserve the term ‘towns’ but they’re hardly permanent: they have been destroyed several times in the last decade and rebuilt on different locations.”

“Andes Primus is not Andes Secundus,” added a Captain with a skin so tanned it was almost dark. “There are no mineral resources to exploit, the asteroid belt of our system is further away from it and there is no way this planet can be made an Agri-World or any Civilised World without expending hundreds of trillions Throne Gelts.”

“I suppose,” said Colonel Larkine, outwardly telling what everyone was thinking inside their heads, “the real question is why should we go there, Magos?”

Her commanding officer enumerated the diverse points rendering this detour...strange.

“There are no Imperial lives at stake. According to our latest strategic update on the Nyx Sector, neither the orks nor other xenos have decided to attack there. We will need to land at least a few companies to show the flag, which will cost us at least a few days since landing and re-embarking takes a considerable amount of time. The men and the women on the ground will need to respect the basic decontamination procedures because it’s a Feral World and it’s out of question we transform the *Courageous Traveller* into a mass cemetery. With due respect Magos I fail to see how travelling to Andes Primus is going to result in any sort of gain.”

“My Mechanicus counterparts of Wuhan will owe me a favour,” somehow Taylor didn’t think the statement of Lankovar was completely sincere. But after a few seconds of silence, it was obvious they would not get more information. “It is a short inspection which should be over in less than five days.”

“What sort of deployment are we looking at?” asked the second of the Wuhan Infantry 23rd. Weaver did not know why, but Colonel Ta and his men had arrived in parade uniforms like they always did for meetings like these. This was curious, but as long as they didn’t arrive on a battlefield dressed like this...

“The only notable military citadel of the planet is still garrisoned by an Imperial regiment,” noted Colonel Ricardo. “By pure courtesy, we can send a company of our respective commands to give our respects.”

By the mocking expressions on their visages, Taylor thought ‘respect’ was not exactly what the Wuhanese men had in mind. But raising the point in front of the senior Guard officers was not going to be productive.

“6th Company can benefit from this experience,” on average the men and the women of the 6th had had the worst training scores during last week. Hopefully, this visit at Andes would give them the signal to improve themselves. She looked at Larkine and understood the silent message she was given. “They will escort Magos Lankovar and I will lead them.”

“I think I can cover the spaceport with my 2nd Company and send a delegation with your men, Major Hebert,” said the Andes Colonel after a moment of consultation with his subordinates.

“The 9th Company will march forwards in the swamps,” Colonel Ta did not look pleased at all and the former supervillain had the neat impression no one important was going to be in the shuttles bound for Andes Primus.

The rest of the meeting was over in a few minutes, and it consisted mainly of more logistics and minor issues which had not been yet resolved. Contrary to the next steps in the Nyx Sector, the chances of meeting something more hostile than small insects in the Andes System were almost non-existent.

One by one, they departed to join back the sections assigned to their regiments. It was quite a walk: the Courageous Traveller was a purpose-built Guard transport, and its maximal capacity was around sixty thousand. The Wuhan 23rd, the Andes 10th and the Fay 20th had less than twenty-five thousand men including civilian support, Mechanicus Tech-Priests and last arrived but certainly not least in their impressive garbs, the Priests of the Ecclesiarchy. As a result, many sections of the starship were empty and silent like the one she was walking to return to her quarters. Thanks to her insects and several markers, finding her way into this labyrinth of corridors was no longer a problem after one month and a half.

“You wanted to speak to me, Tech-priest Morkys?” Taylor had seen aware the red robe of the senior Tech-Priest in the regiment was following her for the next minutes, but it was better to wait until she was sure he had stopped agitating his mechadendrites and stopped his communication with whoever was on the other end of his vox-conversation. Tech-Priests who were surprised tended to react poorly.

“Yes I did,” replied brusquely the metallic humanoid. Any other person, she would have been rather offended but Taylor had concluded that unfortunately when the Tech-priests had in mind something else, politeness and good manners were not invited to stay in the allows they used for their heads. “Based on the discussion spoken approximately eighteen days and five hours ago, I found in our data-bases a blessed device which fulfilled several of the criteria you gave me.”

A mechadendrite emerged from the red robes with an object at its extremity. Like with every object the Mechanicus built, it looked somewhat weird and was decorated with the half-black half-white skull of his order. On the outside it looked like a big whistle stuck to several test tubes from a chemistry class.

“Behold the pheromone-disperser!” proclaimed Arcturus Morkys. “Once you will have collected the blood of a particular insect species, this holy and sanctified device will extract the pheromones from it and disperse it in the air to attract more of its species.”

Taylor grinned. This was far more than she had expected when they had spoke of it. To be honest, she had half-forgotten it when Morkys didn’t speak of it once more but it seemed the Tech-Priest had just required a few more days to use.

“Thank you for the pheromone-disperser,” it was going to be very useful in zones where she had not enough insects at her disposal.

“The thanks are unimportant compared to logic,” the answer was so typical of the cogboys it almost made her burst into laughter. And then the Tech-Priest turned away after leaving a data-slate containing the ‘holy instructions to please the machine-spirit’, burbling something in his unintelligible language.

The young Major looked at the pheromone-dispersal in her hands with satisfaction. Lankovar had put a ban on many insect species, but thanks to this machine, she would not need to have them in her arsenal.

Taylor could not remember who had said on Earth that quantity was a quality on its own, but in her case it was somewhat appropriate. The pheromones would attract a swarm and give her an army in minutes.

This galaxy was dangerous, but she doubted there were a lot of enemies able to conjure reinforcements out of thin air...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Andes System**

**Andes I**

**7.426.289M35**

**Colonel Karl Mack**

The wind was alternating between cold and warm gusts today. The sky was a dark grey auguring nothing good. There was no thunder or lightning, but Karl knew from the pain in his knees there was a storm on its way. The air was too unpleasant for it to be otherwise. Emperor willing, he would have the time to finish his afternoon walk before it the deluge began to soak the grounds.

“Is it too much asking to have two consecutive days of good weather?” He grumbled like he had done in several hundred occasions.

“The weather stations are reporting a lull once this storm will be spent,” declared soberly his second, Major Sigismund Riesch.

Colonel Karl Mack grinned. The optimism of his second was truly something. Even the two decades they had lived in this backwater had not managed to destroy it. The regimental commander of the Ulm 2nd sometimes dreamt he had his inexhaustible supply of faith but he could not.

“The stations and the satellites’ lack of success do not fill me with great confidence,” nine times out of ten, their predictions were worth less than the document they were written on. This was what happened when you had incompetents in charge of it. “But maybe this time they will prove me wrong.”

It was not like it mattered one way or another. Storm or not, good weather or bad weather, he and the rest of his regiment would still be here next year.

His eyes stared for a few seconds at the turret supposed to protect a defensive anti-air battery on his right before he watched again the monotonous landscape. When the Imperium had landed on Andes Primus thousands of years ago, the Mechanicus and huge labour parties had flattened the landscape next to the mountain range where Fort Lama was about to be built.

Maybe the cogboys and the Administratum had intended to do more; there was no trail of data to confirm or deny it. But by the time he had landed on this planet, Andes Primus had been all but forgotten by the Sector authorities.

It was unfortunately not hard to see why. When the three inhabitable continents were covered in swamps, humid waters and jungles, there was not exactly a surplus of volunteers to send on new colonisation expeditions. There were humans living in these green wastes, but they had regressed and were now nothing more than feral tribes. Thus the Administratum had designated this world as a Feral World of His Most Holy Majesty. The tithe the world was collecting was Solutio Quintus – one of the lowest levels enacted by the great machine of the scribes – and nothing more important than a few mining and some algae substances were stored for the occasional tithe ship.

“It is a terrible world for soldiers,” he whispered to himself.

Andes Primus had avoided all conflicts having found their way to the Nyx Sector. Even the orks, brutal and barbarians xenos, had avoided it. It was the last evidence atop the mountain of previous clues that there was really nothing interesting here. Fort Lama and the small spaceport two kilometres south of it were the most valuable things on this planet.

“Has there been anything I should know about before dinner?” He finally asked as the artificial plain and the ugly terrain further away refused to show the slimmest change.

“Sixteen fights started by excessive consumption of badly-distilled liquor,” announced Sigismund. “No one was severely wounded this time, thanks the Emperor.”

Because serious injuries would have to be reported, paperwork would have to be written and court-martials would not be far. Karl didn’t curse these men. There was simply nothing to do except a light physical training in the morning and caring for their horses. As a consequence, many of his most devious subordinated had too much time in their hands and somehow spent their days trying to brew local alcohols with the pitiful tools at their disposal.

“We will administer the discipline after the meal. Ten days of diminished rations for those who were involved in the brawls and ten lash strikes for each,” it would not do anything to change the minds of the drunkards or the illegal alcohol producers, of course. But the regimental Commissar would not be satisfied if a smaller punishment was administered.

The walk resumed and they went northwards, saluting the few men and cogboys who were working on the maintenance of the great wall of Fort Lama.

“We will have near six thousand men fit for duty for Founding’s Day,” added Sigismund as the sky continued to grow darker and breathing was getting harder. The two officers were transpiring a lot too and the glutton-mosquitoes were showing in greater numbers.

Six thousand sounded like an impressive number. But when they were fourteen thousand men of the Ulm Light Cavalry 2nd garrisoned at Fort Lama, it was in reality somewhat pathetic. The reasons of unfitness were abundant: sicknesses, self-mutilations, rampant alcoholism, mental issues, drugs, infected wounds and countless others. By this point, the excuses were not investigated properly, since he had not the men for it. Guardsmen who had spirit and moral worked and got the best rations; those who didn’t stayed in their barracks and tried their best not to give excuses to the Commissar.

“What a disgrace,” Karl Mack admitted. “There was a time our white uniform stood for something glorious.”

“We could regain our honour Sir, if the Sector Command was ready to give us a chance.”

The Ulm Colonel laughed but there was no joy behind it.

“There will be no chance and you know it, Sigismund. Not after Wertingen.”

There was no smile when the Major nodded. The mention of this disaster still haunted every man having survived this butchery – explaining in part their willingness to drink their sorrows when he wasn’t in the vicinity.

The Ulm 2nd, newly founded regiment, fifty thousand strong, had arrived on the rebel world with the firm intention to teach their enemies one did not challenge the name of the Imperium in vain. They had realised far too late the Lord Commander in charge of this retribution force was utterly unsuited to command. The inbred idiot had no idea how to read a map, according to the latest rumours they had heard.

For their first offensive, the horse-mounted regiment had been ordered to charge a fortress on open ground. The casualties had been horrendous. For three days, they had fought like lions – and died for nothing. They had no artillery support to breach the walls, no weapons allowing them to be more than nuisances to the rebels.

And when their commanding officer, General Neuburg, had gone to protest the orders his men were supposed to obey, he had disappeared like he had never existed. The Lord Commander had been finally shot by the Lord Commissar after twenty days of massacre, but after this bloodbath the Administratum toadies were more interested in hiding this disaster than giving medals. The sixteen thousand Ulm guardsmen still breathing were shipped to Andes, half of a galaxy away from the Wertingen System.

And it was there they had stayed for the last twenty years, relegated to garrison duty of a world no one wanted. There was no glory, no victory and no promotion or any of the perks promised by the Imperial recruiters. Twenty of their twenty-five years of service were spent doing a work the nearby inhabitants of Andes Secundus could have done without great effort.

But Andes had to be a convenient hole where the great and mighty got rid of the people who remembered their less-than-brilliant ideas. Mechanicus, Administratum, Arbites and Guard: if you were dropped on Andes without a return ticket, you had annoyed someone important and you were going to stay there for decades.

“Let’s go to the Mechanicus workshop,” Karl said as the storm and the lightning became far too close to continue his walk on top of the fortifications. “I want to see why Troy wanted to send an astropathic message to Wuhan.”

“It must have something to do with the underground depot he found last year.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong Sigismund, but then why wait so much time to inform his superiors?”

“I don’t know,” replied the blonde-haired officer. “But then cogboys aren’t exactly forthcoming at the best of times.”

The two men shared dismal expressions. The Adeptus Mechanicus was an Empire within the Imperium and obeyed its own rules. The average cogboy was considerably eccentric compared to the average guardsman, logically. But at Andes, they had not average Tech-Priests to deal with. They had the screw-ups, the incompetent, the psychopaths and the ones threading at the line where heresy began. Strangely, despite the regular arrivals of new red robes on Andes, the mechanical men sworn to Mars were not increasing their numbers.

A few of his Captains had proposed an investigation in the fortress underground. Karl had refused. Boredom was a heavy burden, but it beat angering the Mechanicus. As long as the red robes kept their problems internal, the walls stood, the electricity and the running water functioned, there was enough food for everyone and the Guard was not called for the clean-up, the Ulm Colonel was not going to poke his nose where it didn’t belong.

They descended to the entrance of the Mechanicus compound by the great mag-elevator. The descent was fluid, though the place was really making a lot of noise. The ruckus it made was more than compensated however by the ability of moving hundreds of men and tons of materials in mere seconds.

The Emperor was smiling on them, this afternoon: Magos Troy Alpha-Karon-1462 was marching out of his lair when they arrived.

The high-ranked Mechanicus servant was a familiar sight and still Karl Mack was never at ease. Where a visage should have been visible, there was a metallic gasmask or something looking like it. A guardsman had arms – the Magos had metallic rods and mechadendrites to give his commands physically and manipulate heavy objects. Mechadendrites, metal plates, cables and green artificial lights were visible over the red robe decorated by an intricate blue and white skull. Underneath it the men of his regiment were forced to guess, but the metallic clangs and the motor noises were not indicators of muscles, legs and human parts.

The crowd of red robes, minor Tech-Priests and unfeeling servitors surrounding him was the norm.

The tank towed by a modified Atlas hull behind them obviously was not.

“Ah Colonel,” the inhuman metallic voice of the cogboy called him. “You arrive at a perfect moment to see the triumph of the Mechanicus efforts.”

Karl had a sudden envy to ask the Magos if it was a ‘triumph’ like this which had sent him to Andes. To his knowledge, Troy Alpha-Karon-1462 had revealed to no one on Andes Primus why his superiors had commanded him to land on this abandoned planet and rust in inactivity.

Uncertain if the cogboy would recognise the sarcasm, he preferred answering by something which was not going to get him pierced by the hundreds of mechadendrites he could see in front of him.

“I suppose you are referring to this tank.”

“Indeed, indeed.” Something like satisfaction could be hinted in the metallic tone. “The ancient venerated machines we found in the old depots were incomplete, but after thousands of hours of productive research, we have rebuilt one model. The fidelity is 94.67 percent when compared with the incomplete data-banks.”

Force was to admit, the tank they towed towards the mag-elevator was war-like. But then Colonel Karl Mack had only experience in horses, infantry and fortifications. Tanks were not really his area of expertise. The armoured machine was far lower in height than the Leman Russ they watched on archived picts and vids-captures. It had a long cannon and a horizontally-lengthened shape, like a predator about to jump. At first sight, he was not qualified to say more.

“This tank, the Karon Battle-Tank Pattern Dragon,” boasted Magos Troy, “is about to make the Leman Russ obsolete. Soon my colleagues will be forced to recognise their mistake and apologise...”

The next sentences were spoken in the mysterious language of the Mechanicus, the ‘binaric’, and Karl could swear on every Holy Book of the Church he had not understood a single word.

He was not ready to support the Magos optimistic views, of course. If there was a tank beating the production quotas of the Leman Russ in His Divine Majesty’s Imperium, he wasn’t aware of it. And production quotas on a scale of thousands of planets implied fantastic sums of money. This ‘Karon Battle Tank’ could be whatever the Magos said and more, the Ulm Colonel somewhat doubted shifting production from one tank to another was going to make people happy.

“By simple curiosity Magos,” intervened Sigismund. “Why have you chosen the name ‘Dragon’ for Pattern?”

“Because it was my new second, Tech-Priest Dragon Richter who resolved the issues we met with the power plant.” Several tendrils and other metallic cables designated a female tech-priest which looked like a normal human once she had removed her red cloak. Of course, one was never too prudent when it came to appearances with the Tech-Priests. “Wuhan is going to send a representative soon. I expect a perfect welcoming parade from your regiment, Colonel.”

Inwardly, Karl Mack grimaced. This was definitely going to be a problem.

**Seer Maea Teallysis**

One cycle ago, the waters of this mangrove had been an unpleasant green with shades of brown and blue added to it. There was little beauty to find in this sort of environment and the fact it was a Maiden World somehow worsened the disappointment felt. But the planet was not Warp-touched and whatever disaster had caused the lands to take this desolating appearance, it had happened tens of thousands cycles ago.

Maea knew by her lecture of the runes there was no one to remember where the creation of the verdant world had gone wrong. The Eldar had not used the Web Gate hidden here since the Fall, and the Mon-keigh had too short-memories to have the relevant knowledge. For thousands of cycles, the green foam and the parasites had been the unpleasant reality.

Now the red and the black were the dominant colours.

The blood of the Mon-keigh the Biel-Tan Dire Avengers had slain was soaking the water and the marsh, agitating the Sea of Souls and provoking an exodus of the fauna living here.

Now that she had the opportunity to see the two visions, Maea Teallysis, Seer of Malan’tai, knew she preferred the green over the red.

Fortunately, she was wearing her Seer mask thus her expression was hidden to Farseer Kaeran. The Path of the Seer was also binding firmly her emotions in a secure manner. Her disgust was already echoing in her mind severely; absent a mask words and actions she would have regretted may have already been spoken.

This was the curse of her race, Maea knew. Their feelings were too bright, too violent and too dangerous for their society as a whole and for their individual souls. The Paths were the only existing alternative against this curse born of their very nature.

This was what she had been taught in her Craftworld. Maea was not sure intellectually it applied to the Biel-Tan warriors reforming their ranks a short distance away.

“They butchered these Mon-keigh like corsairs,” said Gilfarian, the senior Ranger of her escort. The disapproval in his voice was limpid.

“I fail to see what threat these savages could have posed to our mission,” added a second Ranger taking position in the shadows.

“Is it not evident?” answered the third Ranger, almost invisible as his cloak was imitating the green colour of the local conditions. “Our Biel-Tan cousins want to purge this planet from the Mon-keigh infestation.”

“Madness,” murmured Gilfarian. “No Asuryani colony I know of will accept to find a new home on this insult to the Maiden Worlds. And changing the very air and earth to renew the ancient body of this aster would demand hundreds of ships and artisans we can’t give away.”

Maea cast the runes in order to be sure, but she had arrived to the same conclusion.

“The Asuryani will not create a new home here, whether in hundreds of thousands of cycles.”

“They just wanted to sate their thirst for violence.”

Maea thought it better to ignore the last remark, especially as her thoughts were driving her to this very conclusion.

The Biel-Tan force could have avoided the Mon-keigh, this was undeniable. This unsightly lesser race was loud, ugly, their senses were pathetic and the group was barbaric even by the standards of the Mon-keigh ‘Imperium’.

They had no armours; their body were painted in symbols of prey birds and other animals. What little advanced devices they had were clearly gifted to them by a more advanced part of their species, not built in the mangrove.

Their weapons had been even more pathetic. Lances built from the inelegant wood of the curbed trees, curbed and primitive bows an Exodite warrior would mock with deserved scorn and small knives and short swords in fragile metal.

They had not stood a chance when the Biel-Tan Aspect Warriors had ambushed them. The Mon-keigh must have been three or four times the size of the Asuryani effectives, but in the first seconds the Catapults of the Dire Avengers must have cut down half of them. The next wave of Striking Scorpions, Dire Avengers and Fire Dragoons had left no survivors.

It had been a quick and easy victory...but Maea had never felt so disturbed. The corpses of the Mon-keigh females and young, butchered in the blink of an eye, were awful to look at. The Mon-keigh had certainly not been warriors and with their pitiful short lives, they had never met Eldar before. Killing them had no purpose other than murder and annihilation.

“They are far more aggressive than the Aspect Warriors of Malan’tai,” told Gilfarian. “Their talks of rebuilding the Empire we lost are pushing them further on the Path of War.”

“It is worrying,” Maea admitted. “It is the sum of the Paths which define us as Asuryani. If we begin to ignore all Paths save the ones of the Aspect Warriors, we will lose important parts of our culture.”

And by the tears of Isha, Maea knew the Eldar race had already lost too much. Every tiny fragment of history they still had from their ancient history was treasured and taught to the new generations in hope it was never forgotten.

“The Path of War isn’t the solution,” echoed one of the Rangers of her escort. “I dislike the Mon-keigh, but we could continue killing them for a thousand cycles and we would not make a dent in their vermin-like numbers.”

“They are like the green brutes in that aspect,” recognised Gilfarian. “No matter how many of them you get rid of, there is always more coming for a fight.”

The Mon-keigh similarity with the other horde-like race aside, Maea was starting to be a bit ill-at-ease by the arrogance of Farseer Vyrion ‘Sunsight’ Kaeran. The Biel-Tan Asuryani lost on the Path of the Seer was using his abilities constantly. Moderation and calls to prudence were not part of his approach to the threads of the future. Since their meeting in the Webway, he had not removed his mask and the young Seer could not escape the suspicion the Farseer was no longer able to.

This ‘alliance’ between the two Craftworld had barely begun, and Maea already prayed it was soon going to end.

“The noble Farseer has still not deigned revealing us what the Mon-keigh have to protect the Sword of Vaul.” Gilfarian did not make it a question.

“No, but his confidence means the gene-modified Mon-keigh colossi are not going to be involved.” Kaeran was arrogant, but fighting the elite of the Seer-Corpse with a small-sized force like theirs was foolhardy in the extreme. The Seer she had become didn’t think the Biel-Tan leader was that desperate.

“Let’s wait until the blades are drawn to judge,” advised the Senior Ranger and she bowed her head in acknowledgement.

Yvraine Kaydinn chose this moment to join back their little group. The other Eldar was doing acrobatics like she had been born to do it; Maea knew many of her moves were not and would probably never be in her ability to perform.

Her green-white armour was neat without a trace of blood, but it didn’t mean anything. The best Aspect Warriors decided which drop of Mon-keigh remains was allowed to touch their protections and Yvraine had largely the skills to be considered among their numbers.

Maea Teallysis didn’t know the goals of this young female Asuryani. That Yvraine was not one of the ‘Sunsight’ prized subordinates was obvious. Maybe another Exarch of Biel-Tan was distrustful of Vyrion Kaeran and Exarch Ythel Da’ioc. Or it could be another reason entirely, like Yvraine being too undisciplined and sent to different strike forces when the Exarchs and the Farseers abandoned the idea of making her an obedient soldier.

“The noble Farseer is in a hurry and suggest,” the accentuation on the last word told her how much this was a suggestion, “to hurry. We have a long travel ahead of us.” Orange eyes fixed her with amusement. “Unless you want to stay the next dozen cycles studying the planet’s insects.”

Under her mask, the Malan’tai Asuryani grimaced. Staying on this world no matter the circumstances was going to be a punishment, so studying the insects...

“Of course, we do not want to disappoint the noble and glorious Farseer.”

She and the Rangers abandoned their immobility to run after the Biel-Tan force. Unofficially since the Farseer had closed the Web Gate, they were forming the rear-guard though it had not been acknowledged as such when they camped.

Her worries didn’t dissipate step after step. The threads of her future and her companions were becoming fluctuant and difficult to read. The future was troubled and clouded like never before. Maea didn’t like it all, but at this point there was no choice but to continue.

Towards the Sword of Vaul and whatever destiny awaited them.

**Author’s note**: The third arc of the Weaver Option is started! Taylor and the rest of the Lankovar are on their way to Andes, and the welcoming committed promised to be rather warm...

More links for support or if you want to comment on the Weaver Option:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

I’ve also updated on the latter website a map of the Nyx Sector for the readers.