

THE SHAPE OF THE
NIGHTMARE
TO
COME



THE SHAPE OF THE NIGHTMARE TO COME...

The following was written and posted by LordLucan, of the www.heresy-online.net forums, from 2009 to 2010. The Shape Of The Nightmare To Come 50k was his imagining of how the universe of Warhammer 40,000 would change by the year 50,000. As might be guessed from the title, it was an especially grimdark outlook.

Regardless, the writing represents some of the finest Warhammer 40k fanfiction that has ever been posted to theInternet. It is with that in mind that the writing has been copied and posted here, almost word-for-word. After all, posting the stories to two sites better ensures that fans will always be able to access and enjoy the writings in times to come.



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WARHAMMER 50,000

THE SHAPE OF THE NIGHTMARE TO COME

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It is the 51st Millennium, and the war continues...

OVERVIEW OF THE SECOND AGE OF STRIFE

There was no great conflagration or calamitous final battle.

Across the vastness of the galaxy, the Imperium died; not with a bang, but with a whimper. The galactic empire of humanity crumbled, its enemies too many, too powerful and too terrible to imagine. The great conflict of Octavius had no victory, a war without end. In the fiery chasm of strife, the locust and the green holocaust fused, as beast looked upon barbarian and both saw the other as kin. The new entity spread with a speed undreamt of by Ork or Tyranid. War and hunger melded into a singular desire to ravage, rape and remake all in the image of the New Devourer.

The Devourer's hybrid nightmares were regenerative, and spore-born, combining into a grand horror which murdered the galaxy, leaving naught but fragments as it left. Metallic sentinels of unflinching dread rose up on some worlds, leaving them safe from the New Devourer Waaagh, but instead made them slaves to the silver sentinels, and fodder for their glowing metal gods.

The Aeldari race who had held onto life for so long, slowly winked out of existence, one Craftworld at a time. Eventually, even the rumbling hearts of the Avatars fell silent. For a time... In the dead Craftworlds, something slithers through the Infinity Circuit to this day. Alas, the great God of the Dead, Ynnead, is trapped within the circuit, howling its mournful song into the darkness, eternally hungry in its desire to wreak vengeance on She Who Thirsts.

The T'au, naive in their hope of unity, expanded into a realm of corpses and ash. Every world they came across was dead. The hard and unpleasant task

of terraforming each world turned the T'au into bitter, self-righteous beings. They were disgusted at the actions of their predecessors, and vowed to not understand their fellow races, but to purge them. Only the T'au could be trusted with worlds. They decided that all others must be cast out. Watching, their patron laughed his sardonic laugh as his puppets were twisted into terrors.

The Golden Throne finally failed. No-one knew for certain what happened to the Emperor. For once the throne fell, no vox or astropathic transmissions ever came from Terra again as warp storms engulfed the planet. The shattered remains of humanity had neither the power nor the will to return. All that is known is that the Astronomican died with the death of Terra, sputtering to nothing over the course of five hundred years.



The death of the God-Emperor of Mankind, interred so long upon His Golden Throne, was a body-blow from which the Imperium of Man would never truly recover. All that had been wrought these past ten thousand years and more was lost in a maelstrom of madness and violence that swept through the galaxy, emanating from the cold, silent heart of now-dead Terra.

Eventually, the Imperium, its coherency lost by the splitting of its forces against the New Devourer and the sudden surge in warp storms, was shattered like glass. Chaotic cults stampeded through humanity, like electrical surges in an ancient power grid.

With the death of the Emperor, The Inquisition finally lost its facade of unity, and most died, killed by the more powerful within its once hallowed ranks. The greatest Inquisitor Lords seized whole systems for themselves, becoming feudal Kings and Regents. Uniting scattered mobs of their deadly fellows around them in order to wrestle power from local governors.

The Church also shattered, becoming nothing more than a series of minor sectarian cults. All save Ophelia. The Adepta Sororitas withdrew from as many worlds as they could, and gathered around Ophelia and nearby systems. Ophelia became a vile charnel house for the Ecclesiarch, who had been driven insane by all he had seen.

He gathered his Canonesses, Abbesses and Witchhunters together and put billions to the torch. Any system within range of short warp jumps (as navigators could no longer make long jumps, due to the warp storms) of Ophelia were terrorized by the Imperial Church, who searched desperately for someone to blame for this nightmare.

It was said that in those days, a hundred thousand 'Petty Imperia' were created from the carved up corpse of the Imperium of Man. Each claimed legitimacy and claiming to be led by a leader chosen by the Emperor as he finally died. Some even claimed to be the Emperor reborn. Humanity, so scared in their huddled masses, believed this heresy without question, too afraid to imagine a universe without their father and protector.

The noble Space Marines fared little better. Most Chapters utterly disintegrated as their forces, who fought individual missions across the galaxy, found they could not return to their Chapter Masters. In the darkness and loneliness, many Marines chose the only path they knew: War. They became rogues and near bandits, pillaging Imperial worlds for the war effort as they would say in justification for their actions. It was said the White Scar and Raven Guard war bands were the worst, as they were so swift and ruthless in their pillaging.

The Black Templars retained the most of their original fervor, and merely continued their crusades. They became full worshipers of the God-Emperor, and High Marshall Dorstros declared a new and greater crusade - To destroy every human that did not submit to them and the God-Emperor, and purging everything and everyone else. Their zealotry blinded them to their own heresies, as more and leaderless Marines,



desperate for orders and purpose, tagged alongside the Black Templars' crusade. Millions of rag tag former Imperial Guard and massive mobs of flagellating Imperial Cultists quickly joined the crusades' march across the stars. Soon, their depleted numbers, drained from the wars with the New Devourer, had nearly reached two thousand Astartes, representing the second largest single group of Imperial Marines still in existence (second only to Grand Sicarium). Yet, no matter how large their crusade got, the Templars were naught but a band of raving fanatics.

Ultramar was renamed Grand Sicarium, under their new ruler, Cato Sicarius. His realm became a holy site for the other Ultramarine successors. Their fractured remnants gathering around Ultramar like a swarm of flies. Sicarius declared himself High King, decreeing that those under his protection should worship him as the god he was. Sicarius became the ruler of his own little empire, the angelic Marines and ordinary mortals under his decree became his worshipers. Upon Macragge itself, the fortress of obsidian was crafted; the heads of Agemman and Calgar were stuck upon great steel pikes. A grim demonstration of Sicarius' desire to rule all. Ultramar became a darker place in those centuries.

Those Forge Worlds still intact after the collapse of the Imperium either fell to chaotic or Dragon-cult invasions. Some were ransacked by rival warbands, desperate for tech priest slaves to help them work their stolen technologies. These slaves became bartered like currency amongst the various larger Petty Imperia, as they became known now. Some Forge Worlds simply sealed themselves off from the galaxy entirely, their Fabricators for once preferring ignorance over knowledge of what lay beyond.

Chaos became a raging torrent in these dark millennia, rising to levels of corruption not seen since the Age of Strife. Worlds were dragged into the Warp as whole planets were overrun by rogue psykers, madmen, and monstrous Space Marines. The Chaos Legions became virtually indistinguishable from rabid bands of former loyalists. Some groups slaughtered in the name of Dark Gods, others just slaughtered.

Abaddon the Despoiler seized massive swathes of space around the Eye, being careful to not disturb the New Devourer, as it blundered around him. Dodging like a skilled swimmer giving a swarm of predatory fish a wide berth, he avoided them. Abaddon and his 200th Black Crusade plunged into the Sol system. It is there that legend tells of the war of two spheres. Here, Abaddon faced the army of the Dragon transcendent, a vast army of fallen Mechanicus and those same silver

sentinels that already plagued thousands of worlds.

The confrontation was epic in scale. Warped-spawned magic and daemonic machinery and weaponry battled arcane weapons of unimaginable power. The vast serried ranks of Necron and Pariah, which covered nearly every solid world in the Sol system like a silver carpet. In the end, Abaddon was forced to merely surround the Oort Cloud. The Dragon had ensured the solar system was his.

His, save for a single orb of diamond-hard stubbornness: Titan. It stood a stony fortress, its doors sealed from the Necrons by adamantium and heavy cannons, its soul sealed from Abaddon by the cold steel cage of faith encasing the hearts of the Grey Knights and Custodian Guard trapped upon the world. All other humans on the world had perished a thousand years previously, yet the ancient warriors stood firm, a shadow of the Imperium's past glory.

In the turbulent energies of the Warp, the Chaos Gods also suffered. For with the end of the Emperor, something else was stirred. Birthed upon the death of the Carrion Lord on Terra, the Starchild suckled upon the raged religious lunacy of the dying Imperium, consuming every soul remaining upon Terra in its birth pangs. This is what killed the Astronomicon. Ophelia became a focus for this dark zeal. At the dawn of the 50th millennium, the Starchild became the Star Father, and the Warp became a battleground. For a brief instance (or perhaps an eternity. In the warp, none can tell for sure) the Star Father became dominant over the Chaos foes. Then, with the sickening inevitability of the great game of Chaos, the Star Father became one amongst the five, a god of order amongst gods of chaos.

Where they spread chaos, He spread oppression. Where their daemons were feral nightmares that rend souls, His daemons were faceless automata, enslaving the souls of humans into servitude. The Star Father's daemon worlds sprung up in the Eye and across the galaxy in the closing millenia of this dark age. They were globes of featureless gold, with golden faceless daemons and billions of mindless, empty humans. The inhabitants of these worlds shuffled across the surface for no particular reason until they simply died of starvation or fatigue.

It is the 51st Millennium and I cannot wake up from this nightmare! I cannot wake up!



**SECTION I:
CADIA, ABADDON AND THE
WESTERN CHAOS IMPERIUM**

In those dark, early decades of the ten thousand years of pain, before hope had completely died, the forces of the Despoiler made their move. As the whole galaxy convulsed in pain and terror, as the Imperium was gutted by the New Devourer's rampages, Abaddon and his 20th Crusade finally, irrevocably, defeated the Imperial blockade around the Eye of Terror. At last, Cadia fell to his forces. Beasts, daemons, madmen and monstrous Astartes swarmed over every world in the systems surrounding the tear in reality. Though pockets of resistance held out for far longer than expected, each Imperial bastion, Inquisitorial fortress and Space Marine Chapter were overcome in those centuries of woe.



The Imperium was finally overreaching itself, and Abaddon punished it for its laxity, carving out a domain spanning nearly an entire segmentum. Yet, of all the myriad worlds Abaddon conquered, none was more precious to him than the great bastion itself: Cadia.

Cadia was a symbol of his ultimate triumph over the High Lords of Terra, and his defiance of their feeble attempts to contain him. Though initially the world burned in slaughter and barbarism, eventually, Abad-

don forged the planet into something else entirely. He repaired the ravaged Kasrs, their formidable fortifications admired by Abaddon. He had learned to grimly respect Cadia, as it had thwarted him again and again for millennia before. He remade Cadia into a dark and twisted reflection of its former glory. The Despoiler wished to show to all that while Chaos was a destroyer and unmaker of things, it could also represent glory and creation.

Vast banners and triumphal arches were built by countless toiling, broken slaves. Statues of great horned Daemon Princes and Chaos Space Marines lined boulevards and avenues. The Imperial Aquila remained in view everywhere, but each was carefully defaced with the sign of the eight-pointed star of Chaos in place of the twin heads of the eagle.

Though most Cadians had been murdered during the first weeks of the invasion, some had survived. Fallen Kasrkin and traitor guardsmen, numbering in their hundreds only, were kept alive by Abaddon. He promised them wondrous gifts and power, but demanded that they create him a force like the Cadian regiments of old. Thus, the twisted inhabitants of New Cadia were forcibly made to learn the way of war, from the ancient remnants of the original Traitor Cadians. Within a century, Abaddon had crafted a new force within his empire. These new 'dark Cadians' named themselves simply 'The Despoiled'. They were elite, brutal, and utterly loyal to Abaddon, who they worshipped as the voice of the Chaos Gods themselves.

Inevitably, following the defeat of the Imperials, the chaotic alliance fractured, as each of the Legions and chaotic war bands fought amongst themselves, each Lord or Daemon Prince desiring dominance over the other equally arrogant and selfish rulers of their rival war bands. Abaddon was no different, and he joined in the fighting, seeking to consolidate his realm of chaotic madness into a new Dark Imperium. Many of his rivals, the Daemonic Primarchs Angron and Perturabo in particular, were disgusted that Abaddon wanted to bring order to the blessed chaos of their current situation. They forged an alliance, and declared war upon Abaddon's Dark Imperium. This declaration was a miscalculation on the two Primarchs' part. This forced other Chaos warbands to choose sides.





The Word Bearers, for the most part, joined Abaddon almost immediately, as their visions of a Dark Imperium fitted with his to a certain extent. This brought a considerable number of Marines under Abaddon's control, and the Word Bearers also brought with them truly phenomenally huge hordes of slave-soldiers and cultists. The Black Legion of course sided with Abaddon, as they were to benefit the most from his ascendancy to rule of the Chaotic realm. The other Legions, utterly decentralized by thousands of years of distrust and civil war, were formed into warbands, attached to no one ruler in particular. They shifted allegiance between the alliance of Angron and Perturabo and Abaddon's camp almost annually during the conflict, although the majority of warbands followed Abaddon at any given time. Also, where most of the human vassal forces controlled by the Angron and Perturabo alliance were simply rabbles of mutants and cultist scum militia, Abaddon had crafted the vast force of 'The Despoiled', whose numbers swelled massively by more and more traitor Guardsmen recruits, from either Cadia herself or coming from other planets, desperate for some military discipline once more.

In naval terms the Primarch forces seemed outmatched once more. Abaddon's navy was one third larger than that of Perturabo and Angron, who were still reliant upon the Eye of Terror to sustain them. Abaddon was

free to seize and command more of the fallen Imperial vessels beyond the Eye. In addition, the Despoiler still had the Planet Killer and the remaining Blackstone Fortresses under his control.

The war was a long and bloody one, like most of the wars Chaos ever fights are. Abaddon's forces initially reeled from the violent assault of the two Primarch's furious forces. Attempting to mimic Horus' lightning swift assault upon Terra, Angron sent his forces directly for New Cadia, smashing aside blockades and ravaging worlds in his way. Abaddon, though, was no fool. He had helped Horus formulate this very strategy, and predicted that Angron would be foolish enough to try it. His navy was seemingly absent when Angron's forces made planetfall upon New Cadia. However, they had been waiting. His vast fleet struck at the berserker Primarch's supply vessels. Unaware of the sudden danger until it was too late, they were decimated. Stranded upon New Cadia, Angron nevertheless reaped a massive toll upon the planet. Yet, weakened by the pylons and the waves upon waves of human blanks Abaddon forced to charge at the berserker, he eventually succumbed, defeated by a group of the Black Legions' highest ranked chosen, combined perfectly with a well timed orbital strike, which banished Angron from Cadia.



Angron's seemingly foolish charge into Abaddon's den, however, had been a mere distraction to give Perturabo time to complete his great work. With the aid of several Dark Mechanicus clans, and a sacrifice of a billion souls to the Soul Forge, the Daemon Primarch had completed the Goliath Engine.

A vast construction of daemonic iron, coiling semi-organic machinery, cursed runes, injected Obliterator virus and other hateful devices and technologies were combined perfectly in the titanic vessel. Supplanting even the Planet Killer in its scale, the daemonic machine soon thundered from Perturabo's forge docks, at the head of the largest fleet he could muster around him. Such was the dark powers crafted within the vessel, it allowed Perturabo to command his battle fleet personally, even beyond the Eye's nourishing anarchy. Over the ravaged Nurgle Daemon World of Thrashing Puxshar, the two vast forces, one serving anarchy and disintegration, the other merely Chaos, clashed for supremacy. Despite the size of Abaddon's fleet, Perturabo was a Primarch, and his naval skill was formidable. One of the Blackstone Fortresses succumbed to the Goliath Engine's massive weapons and crashed into the stagnant Daemon World beneath them.

Thousands of ships clashed together in the sprawling melee in the void. Daemonic gunships dueled with multi-tiered ex-Imperial vessels, and Legion cruisers smashed into other, equally chaotic vessels. Space inside the swirling madness of the Eye was further filled with the myriad exchanges of devastating fire-power flung between the disparate fleets. At the height of the battle, the Planet Killer and the Goliath Engine clashed. Broadships, torpedoes, daemonic fire, putrid tendrils of Warp-stuff: all were cast against the other in the brutal and blistering engagement. Abaddon's flagship even managed to fire its most deadly guns upon the Goliath Engine, but to no avail. In the Eye, the ship was immortal, the living machinery of the ship dragging itself together after each exchange.

Seemingly bested, the Planet Killer fled before the might of the Goliath Engine. Perturabo, eager for final crushing victory, roared off in pursuit. He caught the extremely damaged Planet Killer, fleeing in the void between worlds, in the Illirax system. Confident of victory, the Primarch engaged the Planet Killer and the few escorts that had fled with Abaddon. However, when it seemed victory was finally certain, the tables turned once again. Exiting from the warp a month previously, the Terminus Est and attendant fleet of disgusting Nurglish vessels had lingered in the Illirax

system, on the request of Abaddon. Upon exiting the warp, the Goliath Engine soon came under attack from its eastern quadrant as an entire fleet descended upon it. Later known as the Battle of Bile and Iron, Perturabo's Goliath Engine was outmatched. Abaddon had skillfully drawn him away from the Eye's daemonic sustenance, and weakened the vessel. No longer was it invulnerable. However, it was still formidable, and Typhus lost many vessels in the resulting battle.

As the Engine burned and collapsed around him, Perturabo raged, and determined to finish it once and for all. The death of Abaddon would end the war instantly. He ordered his surviving Iron Warriors to teleport with him, onto the planet Killer, and engage Abaddon in single combat. However, unlike Horus, Abaddon was no fool. The teleport failed miserably, as Abaddon's shields remained firmly up. Perturabo was flung back into the Goliath Engine, in time to witness the Planet Killer fire its doomsday cannon. The warp cannon smashed through the crippled machine, and detonated its daemonic heart. Screaming in impotent rage, Perturabo was banished back to the warp. Soon after the battle Typhus withdrew to the Eye, taking his fleet with him. When inquired as to why Typhus had aided Abaddon, he cryptically responded:

"Flowers bloom, flowers rot. Rot is nothing without order to decay."

Deprived of both leaders, Perturabo and Angron's alliance soon collapsed, and the more unified forces of the Dark Imperium triumphed, driving their foes into the deepest depths of the Eye. Following this victory Abaddon expanded his Dark Imperium into an empire of hundreds upon hundreds of worlds around New Cadia. Oddly enough, many worlds submitted to his rule instantly, even worlds who despised Chaos and still worshipped the Emperor. In a time of such horrendous anarchy, any order is craved by the civilized.

Ironically, the only thing resembling order in Segmentum Obscurus was Abaddon's Dark Imperium. Former Imperial Worlds hid their signs of worship to the Emperor and openly welcomed The Despoiled regiments, who swiftly took over the main PDF centres. Often, there was little to no opposition to this. This was not a religious matter. This was intensely secular. Most governor knew that the only way to survive in the millennium of pain was to be part of something bigger.



**SECTION II:
THE SITUATION IN THE EAST:
THE T'AU EMPIRE**

The Eastern fringe. Ever a realm barely touched by Imperial influence, it was initially the least affected by the fall of the Imperium (No Petty Imperia ever formed from the ashes of Imperial rule in the Eastern Fringe). The area merely became marginally more anarchic and barbarous. However, the devastation of Hive Fleet Kraken, and later Hive Fleet Talos, ravaged the Fringe horrendously. Soon after, the New Devourer surged from the west, murdering thousands of worlds. A hundred dozen civilizations were wiped out, and when the various hordes of monsters left the Fringe was utterly fragmented. Countless worlds were left as nothing but bare rocks.

Of course, as with most genocides and disasters, history and life did not disappear. Some races, and even empires, managed to evade destruction either through guile, luck or sheer bloody-mindedness. The largest of the surviving empires was the T'au Empire. In fact, because the T'au did not rely upon the 'deep' Warp for travel, the crippling warp storms throughout the galaxy did little to hamper them. With little opposition, the

T'au embarked upon multiple expansions, on multiple fronts. Their optimism and hope seemed frankly surreal to the crippled, dying civilizations around them. However, this idealism and hope soon faded, just like everything else. Everywhere they tried to bring the Greater Good was dead. The T'au expanded into their inheritance. They were, however, inheriting a galaxy of ash. Ash and cold misery.

Sometime around M43, during the eighteenth and nineteenth sphere expansions, T'au policy began to subtly change. The Ethereals no longer recommended offering civilizations the chance to join the Greater Good. It was decided, at the Aun Council of 234. M43 (presided over by Aun'Va himself), that the other races of the galaxy were hopelessly barbarous. The other races allowed their worlds to die, they made war with each other, even when unity would be the best option in the wake of such an atrocity. In short, they must be forced into submission, and their people ruled over by the only beings capable of logical, spiritual thought: the Ethereals.



By 003. M44, a dozen decades into the hundredth sphere expansion, the T'au Empire stretched from the dead worlds of Ichar to the barren howling worlds of Alsanta. In total, it spanned roughly two dozen sectors, and comprised just over a thousand worlds. Perhaps a little over half of these worlds were dead. And during the slow, agonizing process of terraforming (involving constant bombardment with bio-engineered algae and various Pechoid plant accelerants, which nonetheless took millennia to make worlds fully habitable) the T'au had become slightly more xenophobic. For instance, client races were forbidden from electing leaders of the various Sept systems and were confined to the poorest habitations upon worlds. This was the T'au Empire, and the T'au wanted everyone to understand this. The other races were inferior, as they had ruined paradise with their wars.

Communication was slow but frequent in this expanded T'au Empire. Without astropaths, they relied on the billions of communication drones and messenger boats which pulsed near constantly between Septs, only leaving the 'shallow' warp when delivering messages. As the Empire's borders advanced, so did its technology. Their ships became more heavily armed and protected than ever before. Limited cloning and genetic technology allowed greater medical care, with each T'au having access to multiple cloned blood samples, limbs, and even eyes. Drone technology gained greater and greater sophistication, and the first entirely drone-controlled battle computer was released in 103. M44. Pulse weaponry became more reliable and effective, and gunships and battlesuits of unprecedented quality were invented during this period. In the Segmentum Tempestus, the T'au were at the center of power.

Yet, for all its unity and promise, the T'au empire could not maintain a completely centralized Empire, despite their best efforts. Space was too vast, and their vessels too slow. Some Septs were barely visited by the central authorities, while others had vast Aun control set upon them. However, most continued to follow the Greater Good according to Aun'Va and the orthodox council of the Ethereals. There were, however, two major exceptions.

The Enclaves, T'au colonies cut off from the Empire by warp anomalies in late M41, became all the more isolated in the 42nd millennium as the anomaly became a raging warp storm. It was not until M43 that

news of the Enclaves were heard, and they had changed markedly. Without the Ethereals, the Enclaves became a realm dominated by the Fire Caste. The Greater Good, as a concept, had been rejected by these T'au. Only grim resolve and a strong arm allowed survival in a hostile galaxy. The Caste system was virtually abolished, and inter-caste mingling was not outlawed. Only the Fire Caste, the new military elite, remained aloof of caste interbreeding. However, though not enforced, the caste system remained in spirit, as each caste intrinsically distrusted the other. Even more strangely, the Farsight Enclaves now operated under a sort of decentralized vassal system. Territories upon Enclave worlds were carved up between the new Caste-within-a-Caste, the Shas'Kasar. Each of these powerful warlords had acquired battlesuits, and each of these Kasar maintained their own little fiefdom. They maintained many Fire Caste soldiers as their vassals. Each of these fiefs sheltered other Caste members, on the assumption they would provide a tax to their lords, in exchange for protection. The Shas'Kasar, in turn owed allegiance to the Shas'O'Shovah'Kasar, the overall grand Kasar of the Enclaves. For many centuries this rank was held by Farsight himself. However, after his death this rank passed to his sons, and became, in effect, hereditary (Though through the centuries, the position of Grand Kasar has been disputed and the line of succession is a tangled web, far too complex to go into here). Upon the passing of a Grand Kasar, the ceremonial armour of Farsight is granted to them, and they are anointed Grand Kasar, by kissing the hilt of the Dawnblade, the symbol of Enclave liberty (a blade no longer drawn by Enclave T'au, but instead enshrined within Farsight's tomb upon the world of Fio-Mon'Tarra).

To survive, the Enclaves abandoned the concept of refining their technology. Instead, they relied on trade between rival empires and between merchants and the like. Thus, the Enclaves became a melting pot of differing technologies, all utilized by the Kasar in order to survive. Though not as technologically advanced as their T'au neighbors, the Enclaves have large numbers of Fire Caste warriors and a willingness to use xenos equipment should the need arise. For instance, there are several occasions where Enclave troopers have been seen wielding Imperial lasguns and carapace armour, Daconial nano-crystalline armour, digital weapons or other such gear. These in conjunction with T'au technology in some strange hybridization of technology. So far, it has kept them relatively powerful and resistant to sporadic T'au Empire assaults.

The second subversive element came into being much later. By M43, the Empire was in full expansive operations. However, it took several centuries until the process of colonization and organisation of Water Caste administration could be fully implemented on every Sept world and system. One such neglected Sept colony was the To'Kaan Sept, located on the northern border of T'au expansion across the Fringe, and one of the most distant colonies in the Empire. Though a verdant world, it was colonized late on, as the Aun were only being able to spare a single exploration fleet to inhabit it. To bolster numbers in the colonial army, many Gue'Vesa auxiliary troops were utilized. To'Kaan was subdued by this combined force, though the battle was difficult, due to the fanatical resolve of the native warrior Hu'Sta, a human tribal culture that made excellent use of captured T'au equipment during the year-long invasion. Aun'Kais, the commanding ethereal on the expedition, was so impressed with the Hu'Sta's abilities that he offered them roles within the occupying T'au forces. Though the T'au Fire Caste were skeptical of these uncivilized warriors, the Gue'Vesa took to them very well, instructing them on the philosophies of the Greater Good and training them in the use of T'au equipment (even though the Hu'Sta had utilized much of the T'au equipment already, during the war). In turn, the Hu'Sta explained how they worshipped the Great White Serpent, and also taught the Gue'Vesa some of their ambush techniques and unique battle tactics.

As the colony became less and less visited by the T'au central authority, Aun'Kais became more and more reliant upon his various Gue'Vesa subjects to fend off threats to his colony. Though the expedition was well-staffed by Water, Earth and Air Caste, the Fire Caste sent had been a smaller number to begin with. The wars against the Hu'Sta depleted them further and over the centuries, the Fire Warriors became less and less viable as a fighting force as their numbers weren't being replaced as well as their Gue'Vesa-He'Sta allies could. The Gue'O of the He'Sta contingent, Baldan Rar, got closer to Aun'Kais than any other commander. The two often consulted one another upon tactics and strategies. Aun'Kais would often get advice from Baldan on how to keep the majority of the human population of the Sept colony appeased. As a result, Aun'Kais would entrust more and more duties to them. The Hu'Sta converted to the philosophy of the Greater

Good rather well, incorporating their serpent god into the myriad meanings of it.

Upon the death of Aun'Kais, a dispute broke out among the remaining subordinate Ethereals. Several of them recommended themselves for the role of overall colonial leader. There was an important distinction between the two main groups that built up amongst the Ethereals. There were the Traditionalists, who argued that upon becoming supreme Sept Aun, the Fire Caste should be put in overall command of defense once more. The other group were the pro-Gue, who believed the Gue'Vesa had been doing a perfectly fine job of defending the realm.

In the end, through honour duels, personal and public elections, and outright intrigue, the pro-Gue group got their wish, and Baldan remained overall military commander. Oddly for the Traditionalists, Baldan's supporters were not just from the Gue'Vesa and the general human population, but also from the majority of the Earth and Water Castes. The successor to the Aunship of the Sept fell to Aun'J'Karra. As it would transpire, this Ethereal was rather weak as a leader and was virtually a puppet for Baldan and his successors.

By the time more regular contact had been established by the T'au Empire with To'Kaan, in 335.M46, it was barely recognizable as a T'au Sept world. Humans and T'au were almost treated as equals, with the T'au filling in most non-military roles, while the militant 'Gue Caste' sat on the council of castes and fought at the front of most assaults, while the only Fire Caste remaining piloted the battlesuits (tailored as they were, for T'au alone). Chief Commander Moonheart of the T'au Empire forces, even requested permission to invade To'Kaan, and 'cleanse' it of its perceived subversion of the Greater Good. Aun'Va however, vetoed this plan, and decided to instead recognize the right of To'Kaan, nicknamed the 'human colony', as being part of the Empire. This was mainly because the Hu'Sta had completely converted to the Greater Good, only their brutal tribal war clubs (wielded in battle by every Hu'Sta Gue'Vesa) remained of their old culture. The Gue'Vesa contingent were there to stay, and would eventually become a key ally to the T'au Empire in the long war against the Thexian Elite (which will be documented at a later date).



**SECTION III:
THE 'PETTY IMPERIA'**

With the collapse of the Astronomicon and the fall of Terra, the Imperium, as previously noted, was shattered utterly. From M43 onwards, even the concept of a united human Empire became nearly impossible, as local powers and selfish megalomaniacs took their moments to strike. No longer was there an Imperium. That monolithic concept had died in the fires of anarchy. From now on, there were merely hundreds of petty Imperia and kingdoms. Some were the size of sectors, others merely consisting of a single world or system. Some of these Imperia claimed authority from Terra, and tried to unify, others abandoned the Imperium, declaring themselves avatars for Him, or even trying to supplant Him entirely. Some maintained the xenophobic stance of the old Imperium, while others

grew lax or simply ignored the teachings of the church. Some, such as Ophelia, took their fervour too far.

(We must also remember that many, many Imperial worlds simply collapsed, as warp storms cut them off from essential supplies. This was particularly a problem for many hive worlds, who simply starved to death within a couple of years, as their agri worlds severed links with them, through warp storms, or through mad warlords stealing the supplies before they got there.)

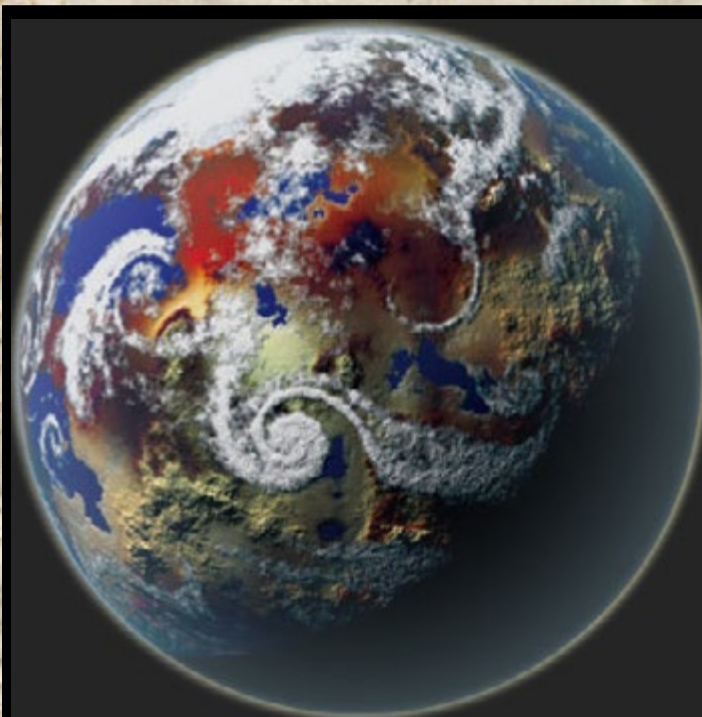
It would take years to explain every Imperium created at this time, and every situation that they entailed. However, I shall endeavour to depict the largest and most influential petty Imperia created (along with monikers created to differentiate between them. In reality, each of the petty Imperia merely called themselves 'The Imperium', as they refused to admit the legitimacy of their rivals).



The Rogue Trader Imperium

The most eastern of the petty Imperia, the Imperium of Gerhed Lussor is possibly the most changed of the Imperia. During the first few decades of utter chaos following the Astronomicon's collapse, the extremely successful Rogue Trader, Lussor, was forced to break warp in the System of Corrin, along with his large, well stocked (and well armed) 'trading fleet'. Lussor was a shrewd and learned man, and the death of all his astropaths told him that the Imperium was no more. He wasted no time with incredulity or shock, but instead set to work.

He knew that, in order to protect his assets in the wake of the collapse, he needed to form a base of operations, and to acquire territory and property. Corrin would have to do. He made planet fall on Corrin II, a populous hive world and the capital of the system, and discussed various 'protection' deals for the planet, entering negotiations with the Lord Governor's staff



Ophelia VII is the site of the Synod Ministra and the Adepta Sororitas' Convent Sanctorum. The world is given over entirely to the worship of the Emperor. Its surface is covered in mile-high cathedrals and bell towers, linked by avenues lined with the statues of thousands of Imperial Saints. Dungeons plunge deep into the bowels of the world, where heretics are made to repent their sins, subject to such methods of soul-cleansing as Arco-flagellation, death-masking, soul-scouring and the Trial of Castigation.

Ophelia VII was the centre of the Adeptus Ministorum from the time of Ecclesiarch Benedin IV to Greigor XI and is still one of the main centres of Ministorum power to this day, second only to Terra. It is located far from its sister planet of Terra, in the galactic south

and government. His scribes and law-scholars, using complex litigation and jargon, managed to swindle Lussor into the governmental process, insinuating him into the essential position of Defense and culture chamberlain. Over the years, this role branched into other areas, like weapons manufacture and internal security, though he wisely kept the Adeptus Arbites on as enforcers, though now their role expanded to overall system security, rather than just enforcing of Imperial Law. Using his acquired wealth, and his vast resources, he bought the southern Hive spire for himself, and built himself a lavish apartment complex, with extensive grounds.



Rogue Trager Correus Lussor, c.a. 230 M.42. Ambitious and politically astute, Lussor was able to create a surprisingly large and stable Empire in the Eastern Fringes before economic strife and unwelcome external attentions led to its collapse. This is one of the few portraits remaining, hidden away in the ruins of his Capitol on Corrin II for 8,000 years before a Scavenger mission discovered it near a charred corpse and a fig tree.

His ambitions went further, however. When the elections for the next governor came around, two decades later, Lussor was there, patronising a promising candidate for the role. The eventual governor picked was his man, and this gave him unprecedented power on the system. He integrated his fleet with the large fleets of monitors and system defence ships, before using them to secure other worlds in the system (such as the prison moon, orbiting Corrin V). Crucially, Lussor recognised the need for an effective fighting force, beyond the PDF, in order for him to secure territories beyond the Corrin system. Corrin was a roughly average system, except for the fact that, upon Corrin II, a vast Adeptus Mechanicus storage facility was located on the western continent.

Using the corrupted local law, he used his powers to order the storage yards searched. What he found there would alter the course of the 'Rogue Trader' Imperium's history notably. Thousands upon thousands of Corvus pattern suits of space marine power armour. He threatened to have the remaining Tech Priests upon the world destroyed, unless they adapted these suits for human soldiery. They, realising they were cut off from the rest of their brethren, accepted these terms. Pragmatically, Lussor realised he couldn't make perfect human-sized power armour from the suits, so had them combined with elements of carapace armour, in order to mass produce them better.

However, he still needed bodies to fill. He did not want to deplete the PDF or their reserves, and refused to relinquish his own personal army for this task. Thus, he turned to the dregs of Corrin: the under-hivers of the hive worlds, and the convicts imprisoned upon Corrin V's cold moon. He persuaded many thousands to volunteer, offering pardons, free food, and the prospect of drugs and violence to these hard-bitten killers, in exchange for service. These brutes were trained by the very best soldiers on Corrin, and even the one Astartes upon Lussor's staff, Sergeant Procur of the White Scars. Their were equipped with the cheapest, oldest bolters Lussor could scrounge up (as they were the only one available). Even then, there weren't really enough, so many of the armoured shock troops had to make do with heavy calibre auto guns instead. Worried about loyalty, Lussor devised a cunning strategy. He gave the soldiers lots of combat-enhancing drugs and stimulants. This made them rather strong and fast, and had the added benefit of being rather addictive. These

shock troops became dependent upon these drugs, and ensured their constant loyalty. Lussor, ever the rogue, presumptuously called them 'Space Marines'.

Within a few hundred years, the Corrin system Imperium faced a major problem. The reserves of food were running dangerously low, after so many years cut off from any trade with the local agri world. Fortunately, the warp storms had somewhat cleared by this point, and Lussor took this opportunity with both hands. He ordered his fleets to the agri world as swiftly as they could. Led by Locur, he also dispatched his 'space marines' as well. Using a series of short warp jumps, the fleet only took a couple of months to reach the agri world (which normally only took a week to travel too before the collapse of the Emperor's guiding light.)

Eventually, they made it to the agri world. Initially the world refused to submit to the 'Imperium', and so Locur led the space marines into battle. The sacking of the world took only a couple of weeks. The borderline psychotic and lethally efficient 'space marines' utterly bested the sparse and inexperienced PDF defenders. The planet was subdued, and trade resumed with Corrin within the year. This was to be the first action amongst many that the 'space marines' of Corrin would undertake. Over the next few decades, the petty Imperium swelled to over twenty five worlds. With this, the size of the Space Marine force expanded too, along with the auxiliary, non-power armoured Army that soon sprang up in their wake, which was used to garrison captured worlds. This empire under Lussor was a profoundly poor one, but was nevertheless ingenious. Any scraps of technology, no matter how bizarre and incomplete, were used by Lussor's captured Adeptes, and made into things that could almost be called useful. Remote controlled bombs, converted land speeder chassis, poor-quality programmable robots, and various other bizarre pieces of technology. Everything found a use. He was also open in his recruitment, allowing mutants and scum into his 'Imperial Army', each with their own regiments.

Thus, a rogue became a ruler, and rebuilt his own little Imperium into something resembling civilisation.

The 'Ophelian Imperium'

In those dark, chaotic early days of the cataclysm, when the Emperor finally died, it seemed as though the centre of the Imperial Church was ripped out forever,

and stamped into the dust. However, the Ecclesiarch managed to flee Terra, even as the daemons began to pour from the Imperial Palace like a vile fanged tide.

Though the majority of his fleet were either destroyed in the escape, or were dragged into insanity during the insanely turbulent warp transit, the head of the Ministorum survived, and descended upon Ophelia, the second most holy site in the whole Imperium.

War and anarchy tore across the Imperium, and he quickly realised the Imperium needed a rallying point. Thus, the Ecclesiarch, Pius Guia, gathered together all the astropaths that had not been consumed by the sudden loss of their anchor point in the warp, and ordered them to send out a message.



This message was a summons to the Adepta Sororitas, ordering all of them, no matter where they were, to return to their spiritual centre. Over the next decade, the Orders made their way back to Ophelia, fighting through the consuming madness and chaos, to get back to their home. Over half of the Sisters of Battle, the militant orders, had died in the terrible wars against the new devourer, and less than half of these survivors, made it back to Ophelia. Most either died in transit, got stranded on isolated worlds, or were otherwise slain by the ravenous monsters that crawled from the depths of madness, the fall of the Imperium emboldening these terrors enough to act.

Yet, still, the Sisters came, and Ophelia was secured. Xenos and demonic forces were driven from the surrounding worlds within short-transit to Ophelia, and an Imperium of roughly thirty worlds was brought under the direct rule of the Ministorum-in-exile. Pius soon declared that his Imperium was the one true Imperium, and only his Imperium truly followed the dictates of the Emperor. He refused to acknowledge the Emperor's death, and merely reformed his Imperium's laws, making them fulfill the rules of the Church much more closely. His Imperium became a theocracy far more strict and powerful, than any Imperium before it. Broken Naval fleets who survived their warp transits, flocked to this new Imperium, and with them came a reasonable amount of Imperial Guardsmen, who were quick to convert to the Ophelian Imperium's new, more pious doctrines.

Pathetically grateful to their saviours, the humans upon these worlds swiftly re-converted to the Imperial church. Fanatics clogged the streets of every world, flagellants, doomsayers, and receptionists filling the air with the fevered sounds of desperate prayers to their dead-god.

Ophelia itself, the vast world-spanning Cathedral, was filled with gibbering and despairing pilgrims and

desperate civilians. They all demanded to understand why their god had forsaken them. How could the Emperor lose? Was not humanity the dominant force in the universe? Many Ascensionist cults arose on the Ophelian worlds. They held the view that the Emperor had not died, but had instead ascended to full godhood.

The fall of the Imperium was His divine judgement upon Man.

Pius Guia, who had been steadily growing more and more unhinged, latched upon this idea. Canoness Superior Kiralicus, one of the Ecclesiarch's new ruling body, the council of three, recommended caution. Unfortunately, the final member of the council of three was Inquisitor Lord Karamazov, the infamous Pyrophant of Salem Proctor. He agreed with the Ascensionists and the Ecclesiarch, and so the new reforms were passed.

The Emperor, hence, had ascended, and He was punishing the decadent Imperium. This was the official view now. The only way to save their souls now, Karamazov declared, was sacrifice, and the punishment of the obvious heretics within their society. Mankind was lax and monstrous, and he had the cure: fire.



Across the Imperium, Pius' Sisters, and Karamazov's baying mobs of recently converted Frateris militia, invaded their own worlds, denouncing millions as heretics, before either beating them to death with rods and flails, or dragging them away on the Witch-ships of the Ophelian Imperium.

Night and day, Ophelia glowed with a baleful orange light, which played across the towering domes and noble, baroque spires of the holy world, as the furnaces beneath the giant Cathedral blazed near-constantly, as thousands of heretics were shipped in, only to be herded into the cleansing flames one by one. Priests stood on great lecterns either side of the horrific furnaces, babbling some insane rhetoric from the various holy books that Ophelia had hoarded over the millennia. Karamazov personally executed a thousand heretics, his throne of judgement in near constant use.

The people of Ophelia, however, did not resist these insane zealots. In fact, many of the most insane Ascensionists threw themselves into the fires, crying hymnals as their bodies blistered and burned to ash.

For twenty years, this reign of murderous terror continued. It was said that the process only stopped when a young girl, barely six terran years old, ran to the Ecclesiarch, evading guards, and kissed his feet, in religious adoration. Before he could respond, the girl was shot by a wild-eyed Frateris Militia-man. In a terrible rage, Pius ordered the man's innards boiled, and he was taken away to be executed. The genocide stopped soon after that day, as Pius realised his orders had destroyed even the faithful.

He had come to this realisation despairingly late, and the Ophelian Imperium was left severely weak following this period of witch hunts. Almost a third of the population was killed, and the Imperium's industry was terribly understaffed by then.

After another twenty years, the Imperium was still struggling, and it took the Tallarn War to open the new Ecclesiarch Honostorian's eyes to this conspicuous lack of resources.

It was in 234.M45, that the Ophelian Imperium first came into conflict with the Tallarn Empire. The Tallarns were located just to the galactic east of the Ophelians. The Tallarns had been a tiny empire under

the rule of the original Imperium, and their greatest contribution to it had been merely desert-specialist Imperial Guard regiments. With the loss of the Imperium, Tallarn had survived surprisingly well, having already a small Empire with its own resources. The lack of an Imperial Tithe for soldiers had allowed them to expand their PDF force far beyond what was once capable. In fact, so much did it expand, that they inevitably developed an active offensive force, and managed to maintain a fleet of starships, using captured Ad Mech expertise and an abundance of natural resources on one of their periphery colonies, which soon became one giant shipyard.

The Tallarn believed strongly in the Emperor, but their views were far more traditionalist than Ophelia's radical reforms. Thus, when Tallarn expanded westwards, and encountered Ophelian worlds, they offered these worlds an alternative to Ophelian insanity. Many civilians on these outlying worlds, disgruntled with the massive death toll of the Ophelian regime, openly pleaded to the Tallarn to save them (or so the Tallarn Empire claimed). Thus, when the Sororitas came to put down these revolts, the Tallarn fleets were there to engage them. And so, the war began. The Tallarn vessels were of poor quality, and most of their conscript armies were nowhere near as effective as the highly disciplined Adepta Sororitas. However, the Sororitas had incredibly weak supply lines, and their resources were woefully depleted. It was said at the battle of Caninie, the Sisters fought without bolters, for their supplies of bolter shells were so low. In contrast, the Tallarns had a well developed, and above all, extensive logistic train, with numerous way stations supplying their vessels between each short warp jump. Their ships were cheap and terrible, but numerous, and they overwhelmed the Sisters of Battle. The Ophelians lost sixteen worlds in the war, and were driven back from their former territory. All because of their depleted resources.

Thus, Honostorian instigated his 'heathen levy' reforms. These new Ecclesiarchal Bulls tasked the large Witch-ship fleets to change their tactics. They were to spread out from Ophelian space, and find heathen worlds. The populations of these worlds, due to their heresies, were to be subjugated. However, they would not be offered conversion as a way out. Instead, all non-Ophelian Imperial Cultists, be they Thorians, Haemovores, machine cultists or anyone else, were to

be set to work as slaves and serfs. They would work the fields of the surviving Ophelian agri worlds, and they were put to work in the industrial worlds that the Ecclesiarch permitted to be built on worlds within the empire.

“The Emperor,” Honostorian was quoted as saying. “Desires the Imperium be rebuilt in His Divine image. He destroyed the old realm, so shall we rebuild it to His exaltations. Our penance has been paid now in blood and ash. Now, the time of reformation is at hand.”

Thus began the second phase of the Ophelian Imperium. In many ways, this phase of the Ophelian Imperium was even more terrible than the initial phase.



However, that is a story for a later date.

The ‘Delphain’ Imperium

Lord Inquisitor Delphain was a very powerful Inquisitor, and was leading a vast conglomeration of Imperial forces, in the cleansing of the Carpathis system, when the Astronomicon finally collapsed. Many thousands of his fleet’s vessels were lost in the warp, and the rest were spat out somewhere within the Ultima Segmentum. Delphain’s astropaths and navigators all died, save for one, named Orichi. Using her talents, Delphain discovered several nearby systems, and he persuaded the Fleet Admiral to make a series of short warp jumps to reach these nearby worlds. Within six months, they had made it to these systems.

The Inquisitor dispensed with pleasantries, and instantly seized the Governor’s palace of the Capital world, Harken. When he discovered that Harken and

its fellow in-system worlds, had all suffered losses of Astropaths, and widespread riots in the streets, he knew something very wrong had happened.

This realisation became more and more evident as M43 continued onwards. For thirteen years, the Inquisitor and his crusade forces desperately fought off constant pirate attacks and xenos incursions, that seemed to be a near constant occurrence across the entire sub sector. As they fought, they unconsciously began to utilise Harken and its systems more and more. Reserves for lost Guardsmen came from within Harkenian PDF ranks, munitions and supplies were gifted by the Governors and provincial Lords of Harken and the outlying worlds in adjacent systems.

The Harken system was always in an unofficial league of governors, even before the death of the Emperor. Whereas before, the inquisitor would have probably destroyed the League due to the potential for subversive behaviour inherent to their league, he now openly encouraged it. The close ties between worlds was utilised to its fullest by the cunning Inquisitor. Using his crusade force of Red Hunters marines, Deathwatch, and vast regiments of Inquisitorial Stormtroopers and Imperial Guardsmen, Delphain kept the League of Planetary Governors (or LPG) relatively intact. However, it became clear that there was no one else coming to relieve the Inquisitor and his forces. The Emperor was dead, and so was his Imperium. Yet, this was not a particularly terrible problem for the pragmatic Delphain. Over years of fighting, the infrastructure of his crusade, and that of the governments of the LPG, had merged significantly. His crusade was divided, fighting on all fronts across the LPG’s border’s, and many of his generals had agreed to defence contracts with local power magnates and Lords, offering protection in exchange for supplies and limited leadership of the aforementioned provinces.

Delphain himself became famous, and many called him the ‘breaker’, due to a legendary battle on the borders, where the Inquisitor used his thunder hammer to smash the gates of a rebellious city open, allowing his troops to enter the city and slaughter the enemy. When the old Governor of Harken died, it was with popular support that Delphain, flanked by his Red Hunter Aspartes bodyguards, entered the central city, and seized the leadership officially. Though the LPG technically was a council of equals, the Harken seat was always the

most powerful. With Delphain on the throne, it became clear that this was no longer a mere alliance. It was an empire.

Delphain, intoxicated by his success in crafting a functioning state from the ashes of a shattered Imperium, declared that this was the new Imperium, the sole legitimate power in the Universe. And, in a bold move, he declared himself Holy king, chosen of the Emperor. While the more primitive worlds of his fifty-world Imperium could readily accept this, the more urban hive worlds and agri worlds became uneasy. During this period, there were hundreds of rebellions. Each was easily crushed by the feudal military of Delphain. The largest of these rebellions was led by Orichi, who was declared oracle of the future, and denounced Delphain as Apostate and anti-Emperor. Crucially, she gained the support of a number of Lords on the outskirts, who rallied around her. A large naval engagement over the world of Fancit decided this rebellion, and Orichi was killed during the battle.

Unified once more, the Delphain Imperium seemed set to maintain itself as a sated power. However, in 444.M45, the now-ancient Delphain finally died. The Vassal-Governors each claimed they should take his place, while the Red Hunters backed Delphain's son, Abar Delphain, as next in line. Unwilling to challenge the dread Astartes, the governors acceded without incident.

Abar was young and impetuous. Deluded by the distorted tales of the past Imperium told to him by his father, Abar declared that they must expand into the Galaxy, and re-establish the Imperium. However, he did not take into account the fact most worlds were still recovering from almost a century of civil war.

The belligerent King ordered expeditions into neighbouring systems. However, these 'occupations' could never work, as he hadn't the resources for such actions. In the end, these turned into raids and wars of plunder, where greedy former-crusade generals, power magnates and local Lords (who, increasingly, became indistinguishable from each other, so similar in power and prestige the three strata were) would make planet fall on various human and xenos worlds, smash their cities and slaughter hundreds of thousands of people in random, brutal slaughter, rape women and men, burn down perceived 'heathen' churches, and steal all things considered valuable. Abar Delphain allowed this practice, however, as it provided a ready stream of income into his Imperium.

However, it soon drew the attention of other powerful forces, who soon descended upon this Imperium. This Imperium, which considered itself so very mighty, but who would soon be proven entirely wrong...





**SECTION IV:
ANGELS UNLEASHED:
THE SPACE MARINE 'FREE
COMPANIES'**

The Fall of the Imperium, while not instantaneous, was brutal and swift. The astronomicon was hacked into pieces, sputtering and dying. Whole Fleets and worlds lost contact with one another. This one action may not have caused the collapse of the Imperium, but compounded by the sudden upsurge of warp storms and uprisings, it certainly hastened it.

Just as the Imperium fragmented, so too did each and every Space marine chapter. At a stroke, all marines on campaign across the Imperium immediately lost contact with their segmentum commands and chapter fortresses. Ten thousand years worth of warp charts became obsolete in a single heartbeat.

A few chapters had the good fortune to see most of their marines in one system, or a few of their navigators survive. These chapters managed to gather their forces together in numbers almost comparable to those before the cataclysm. However, these lucky few shall be covered in a later section.

The majority of chapters were shattered into their constituent parts, be they companies or mere squads. These companies became known as the Orphan Companies, and spent their time desperately searching the void for their lost brothers rather than campaigning. They stumbled through the galaxy near-blindly, their navigators and astropaths all either dead or maimed. Many Orphan Squads were picked off by opportunistic pirates, or rogue Empires eager for a quick dose of vengeance against the fallen Imperium.

However, the grit and fighting prowess of a space marine is not so easily overcome. Even with the loss of so much, some larger companies managed to survive and even thrive in the vacuum left by the Imperium's collapse. Most of these space marine companies marched on undaunted by the prospect of a universe without Him. This may seem strange, but a quote from Brother Burber 'the Eagle blade', one of the leaders of one such Space marine force, may go some way to explaining this mindset: *"You ask me what I fight for? Not Him. Not anymore. The great monolith of Imperial authority perchance? Nay, I say again nay! We fight for a question. You may scoff, but our question is one which drives us on, beyond sense, or reason, when hope*

and fear are dead. The question which drives us is thus: What else do we have? What else?"

Having no desire to retire or serve a new master, and no marketable skills beyond the blade and gun, these marines found purpose by simply continuing to do what they had been created for.

Whatever their justifications, these self-styled 'Free companies' needed supplies and equipment if they were to continue their Long Wars. These companies rented their services to whomsoever would supply them with boltshells, repairs to armour, and the vast quantities of calories needed for Astartes physiology. These 'Astartes for hire' were employed against rival Imperiums, xenos incursions, and daemon-led uprisings. They only stipulated that the client must be a true human. Mutant-led Imperiums, such as the Vile-Born Imperium, were repeatedly shunned by all but the most unscrupulous of Free Companies.

Other, less reputable Free Companies merely raided human colonies, taking what they needed and burning the rest. What right did these mortals have to deny their betters? Why should the strong protect these weaklings? Surely punishment was all they deserved. Such was the reasoning of these honorless renegade Astartes. The Free Companies which formed from fragments of the Marines Malevolent were particularly infamous for atrocities. By M46, many Free Companies' savagery made them indistinguishable from the chaotic renegades of legions such as the Night Lords or Dark Tuskers. Only the Raven Guard's fragments, who were used to fighting in smaller groups, maintained their dignity and honour through this dark time. They continued to answer desperate pleas for help, and they stole only from their enemies, refusing to assault human empires.

Yet, they were only one chapter amongst many thousands. The other Free Companies spent the next millenia gleefully plaguing the divided and panic-stricken galaxy.

The Adeptus Astartes know no Fear. Now they would know no mercy either... well, so much for the chaplains.







**SECTION V:
THE ADAMANTINE WORLDS:
THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS,
THE AWAKENING, AND THE
WAR OF TWO SPHERES**

The Adeptus Mechanicus, unlike all other branches of the ruined Imperium, did not collapse with the loss of the Astronomicon. Their end came from a far more shameful reason.

The Machine Cult had always been distinct from the rest of the Imperial society. Always there have been Ministorum clerics who frown on calling the Emperor 'Ommissiah', and magi who chafe at the idea of some unaugmented Terran claiming lordship over their church. As a result of this friction, the Forge Worlds had always operated more independently than the average Imperial world. Forge Worlds communicated through the Mechanicus' esoteric Manifold system rather than standard astrotelepathy, further widening the cultural divide.

During the collapse of the Imperium, the Mechanicus continued on much as they did before, albeit with less active personnel since they could no longer receive food shipments from agri-worlds to feed all their adepts. Physical contact between Forge Worlds and outlying research stations was also mostly extinguished, as the explorer fleets had not yet invented a replacement for Navigators. Yet, the Mechanicus could not capitalize upon this advantageous position. Each

individual Forge World possessed massive strategic resources, but these were too valuable to be risked in the dangers of warp travel, and so meant nothing at the galactic level. Seeing this weakness, the more opportunistic Petty Imperiums began using their superior numbers to raid the starving Forge Worlds. Those Tech Priests stationed on non-Mechanicus worlds and starships were indentured by their employers. These isolated Machine Cultists were forced to declare oaths of servitude to their new masters. Inquisitor Delphain's Imperium greatly benefited from this practice, filling his arsenals with many terrible weapons.

The Petty Imperiums (not to mention the countless pirate bands and daemon-worshipping cults), realized they desperately required Mechanicus expertise in order to maintain the technology looted from the late Imperium. Trafficking in Tech Priests quickly became a very lucrative trade. Mechanicum vessels were ambushed when they burst back into the materium after perilous warp transits, their under-supplied crews no match for the highly motivated raiders. Forge Worlds were besieged in some extreme cases, often assaulted by brief alliances of several Petty Imperiums. These alliances would quickly crumble once their leaders



began to squabble over who would get the largest shares of the human and technological plunder.

To combat this, the Forge Worlds were forced to pour their dwindling resources into their military forces. Each Skitarii army would have to defend its own Forge World, without any hope of off-world support. Thus, they had to expand into nearby resource worlds. Forge Worlds lucky enough to have some Agri Worlds or mining colonies nearby lost no time in subjugating these precious areas, setting up vast defence stations around these worlds. It was said any world without a dense forest of gun platforms and space stations was doomed. Agri-Worlds controlled by a Forge World became known as 'bullet farms', as every plantation had a battalion of Skitarii stationed in it.

Most Forge Worlds followed this policy, but others followed different doctrines of the Cult Mechanicus. Some Forges were heavily influenced by the dreaded Innovator Cults, and contemplated the worst heresy possible: developing new technology and armaments. The Forge World of Griminnar was the main forge to actually put this policy into practice. The dead ruins of Griminnar still howl with the mechanical cries of orphaned monsters, and technologies that shouldn't be trifled with.

Some Forge Worlds, like dread Caltar, became even more isolationist than before, sealing their worlds from the outside universe. The Magi of Caltar sent out their few remaining Naval vessels to every world within reach. Those not already left barren by the New Devourer, were made so by multiple virus barrages, before the ash-fields left in the exterminatus' wake were then laced with toxic chemicals, which prevented any terra-forming to ever take place again. Thus, surrounded by a network of dead worlds, these forges sealed shut, and many of the highest Magi retreated deep under the surface. To survive, the workforce were slowed, over the course of a thousand years, rendered down into fleshy substances, remade as servitors, or fed to the few remaining Magi, via feeding tubes and osmosis chambers. These worlds became underground, twisted metal hellscapes, filled with cybernetic zombies, and ruled by ravenous, cannibalistic Tech Priests, who were now virtually nothing more than spidery, cloaked machines, covered in twisted structures, which barely kept their wasted rotten flesh from dying.

Of course, some forge worlds were subverted by a previously weak cult, following their respective periods of isolation; the Cult of the Dragon. These forge worlds seemed to churn out technology far above their skills, and this technology diffused into every strata of the hierarchy. Serfs and Slave Workers began using the sophisticated cutting tools brought to them, the thick green beams far in advance of anything previously seen. Mid range tech Adepts began to utilise strange technologies, apparently from the dark age, which could teleport them around the forges safely, without fear of daemonic attack, for the teleportation devices did not send them through the warp. Even the highest level, the Fabricator and his Magi, would begin to use sophisticated semi-solid metal alloys, which apparently resisted the aging process entirely. Of course, day by day, inch by inch, the forge world was subverted. When the great silver vessels came for them, and they moved to attack these forces, they found their weapons useless, as their technology itself rebelled against their masters. Their odd green energy weapons failed to fire, teleporters teleported unfortunates inside ferrocrete walls, or simply into the void. The great silver fleets arrived, and enslaved the worlds within hours, as the tiny Dragon Cults on the worlds struck deals with their silver overlords. These worlds' central forge complexes were stripped down and converted, becoming great glowing green gates, which pulsed with vile un-life.

The populations of these worlds were herded into the vast gates, where they were stripped down into their component atoms, and pulsed away somewhere. Those Cultists who loyally stood by and watched, as their brethren were destroyed, were rewarded the gift of immortality. Their bodies were painfully broken, and metallic additions were grafted into their still living bodies. Their minds were scoured. Those who showed signs of blankness were remade as tall, strong-limbed Pariah machines, while the others were simply stripped of all conscious thought, and were grafted into the workings of the machines themselves, by the mechanical spyders which roamed across these cold metallic Forge Worlds.

Across the collapsing galaxy, hundreds of forge worlds fell this way, the souls of their populace fed into the central core of a vast web of ethereal horror, all channeled into the world whose name lived in infamy for countless millennia to come: Mars.

Mars was near the centre of the Emperor's fall. The Tech Priests were driven utterly insane by this sudden realisation that their Omnissiah was no more. Some tried vainly to claim He had merely turned into nought but information, the Machine God made pure, but their voices were drowned out by the increasingly insane ramblings of the divided rival cults across the planet. Fanning the flames of this madness was the nauseating waves of warp psychosis, rippling through the void, and driving their souls to madness. The Cult Of the Dragon grew marginally in numbers, but mostly retreated to the Noctis Labyrinth, where the taint of the warp was extinguished by powerful, mysterious wards. Here, they awaited the awakening of their true master, the true Machine God incarnate (in their opinion of course); The Void Dragon.

During the 41st Millennium, five of the Dragon's silver vessels managed to land upon Mars, depositing an item of extreme importance to the Star God's dread plans. The item was a vast, monolithic block of metal. It writhed with unseen power, and seemed to exist in a rectangular shape through choice, rather than through physical necessity. It was the Dragon's Necrodermis, his metal flesh. However, it was not until the fall of the Emperor, that the Void Dragon's essence was finally free from its binding. Unlike the other star gods, it did not burst forth then and attack. It was not rash and foolish, like the Night-bringer. It instead waited, as the converted Forge Worlds across the galaxy, fed into its chamber, filling it with revitalising and delicious energy.

Once it did arise, however, it was almost as powerful as it had been before it had ever been struck by the Talisman of Vault. With cold fury, the Void Dragon conquered Mars, easily batting aside the sporadic, gibbering armies of the Martians. The vaults were plundered. All the lethal, forbidden technologies, were fixed and perfected, and those weapons kept only due to stupid ignorance, were discarded. The Solar System, at this moment, was not equipped to face the Dragon's sudden onslaught, and world after world fell, and every fleet was combated and defeated. Only Titan held out against the Star God, but we shall discuss the valiant and stubborn defence of Titan, by the Custodes-in-exile and the Grey Knights, at a later stage.

Thus, with the Solar System secured, the Void Dragon turned its ancient gaze outwards, coveting the realm of

life and sentience, denied him for so long. Fortunately for the Galaxy, an unlikely saviour intervened in that same year.

Screaming across the void, streaming for the eye like a vile spew of vomit and pus, Abaddon the Despoiler, the dark leader of the Western Chaos Imperium, was expanding beyond his already extensive borders. With his Legions of monstrous Astartes, his countless billions of the Despoiled, his fallen Cadian army, backed up by countless demonic engines and vile, semi-living demonic vessels, and renegade formerly-Imperial fleets, the chaos lord promised that he would finally seize the Solar System, and make his ultimate victory complete. As it transpired, he was beaten to it by the great C'tan.

The War of the Two Spheres began in earnest, when his initial vanguard fleets surged forth from the warp, and were instantly engaged and destroyed by vast, silver ships, shimmering with arcane power. The Despoiler, in his fury, deployed more and more vessels, hoping to engage and destroy these interlopers. He would not be denied his prize!

The Necron Vessels of the Dragon, however, were far too powerful and, above all, maneuverable. Only the most corrupt and demonic vessels could effectively hold off the Necron Ships. Slowly, it seemed as though the Forces of the dragon Ascendant, would push back Abaddon, and perhaps even begin counter-invasion. The battles fought in the war could fill a library themselves, such was the dark legends birthed from that cataclysmic war. From the lead-melting hell of Venus, where specially-designed molten Necron constructs battled hellfire daemons, and Astartes and mortal vapourized in the heat, to the unforgivably cold expanses of Europa, where mighty Necron-tainted titans, and spidery metallic creatures from ancient myth, wrestled great tentacled Tzeentchian nightmares, and monsters dragged all below the icy crust, to their doom; all seemed to be turning against Abaddon. No matter the infernal fury of his constructs, Legions of fanatics and daemons, he could not match the dreadful majesty of the Void Dragon's forces. It was master of the Void, and everything in it. On the very surface of the sun, it strangled the life from a summoned Skarbrand. It slew the entire army of Fellshan Torben, a dread Daemon Prince that was old when humanity was young.

Abaddon grew desperate. Throughout the Oort cloud, the hollow sphere region of comets which orbited Sol, the Despoiler dropped spawn. All the billions of spawn birthed by aborted ascensions were dumped on the frozen comets. Using vile sorcery, these spawn were filled with the dreadful Obliterator virus, driving their bodies to expand and twist ever more than before, as billions of tons of machinery and weaponry were spewed forth from the chaotic monsters, fusing into horrific merged constructs barely resembling anything in reality should ever resemble. Through ruined lungs, and innumerable twisted vox mouths, Abaddon's Dark Mechanicus servants pumped scrap code and logic daemons, distorting reality itself for light minutes in all directions.

Even as the Void Dragon slaughtered the last of Abaddon's forces within the Solar System, Abaddon and the majority of his forces outside the Solar System, beyond the Oort Cloud, sealed the trap. The giant obliterator spawn were spewing forth anti-machine energies, straight from the warp, in a perfect sphere around the entire Solar System. The void dragon tried to send his forces beyond the cloud. However, as soon as they tried to push their way through the cloud, their machines would fail, and self destruct, lest chaos contami-

nate the Necron Nodal net.

The howl of the Dragon at that moment, so the legend goes, reverberated throughout the galaxy. He had escaped one trap, only to be lured into another.

Abaddon had sealed the Dragon away in the Solar System out of mere hate and spite, yet unbeknownst to him, he had possibly saved the entire galaxy, as it cut the awakening Necron forces from their master, and thus they returned to dormant mode across the galaxy, merely securing the local area around their Tomb Worlds, in preparation for the next call to arms.

Of course, saving the galaxy is a relative term. For thousands of years after this period, things went from bad to worse for every inhabitant of the Milky Way. False gods rose, tyrants butchered millions, Forge Worlds became ever more violent and isolated, and humanity fragmented into ever more ignorant and brutish factions, as a new, far worse power arose in the hearts of the deluded. Also, the Necrons only had to wait a few thousand years, before they returned to their original destiny. For, as the galaxy at large would come to realise, the Void Dragon was only one C'tan...







**SECTION VI:
CHURCH OF THE DELUDED:
GRAND SICARIUM**

Ultramar, during the tempest that engulfed the galaxy, became, at least initially, a bastion of sanity and security for the huddled and fearful servants of the Imperium. As their empire collapsed around them, Ultramar was seen by many as the only option left to the Emperor's people.

The Ultramarine Successors tried their best to return to Ultramar, to their ancestral home. Some could not abandon their worlds, due to their gene fortresses being located there. However, most managed to convert their chapters into fleet based chapters. This was the only way to avoid the new devourer relatively intact, and the only way to travel to Ultramar. In the dark early days of the M42, the small Empire within an Empire expanded its area of effect, with defenceless, leaderless post-Imperial worlds eagerly joining the union of Ultramarines and successors. This expansion was not just a humanitarian one, for the sudden influx of successor chapters necessitated a massive increase in recruitment and training worlds, in addition to a larger infrastructure to accommodate these new arrivals.

By the close of M42, almost three thousand Astartes had come to Ultramar, and continued to desperately help fight off the devilish xenos invaders and heretical monsters, that poured from all directions near constantly. The remnants of the Eagle Warriors and the Genesis Chapter, in particular, were instrumental in defending the nearby systems around and



within Ultramarian borders. As the first thousand years of the second Age of Strife ploughed onwards, the successors and the ultramarines became an almost homogenous mass, as reinforcements for under strength companies came from anywhere they could find them, be they parent or successor. In general, Ultramarian armies of the period appeared to be strange multi-coloured groups, with each company often having marines from up to six different chapters within their organisation. Geneseed was used in Ultramarine recruits, and that same stock used in other chapters, regardless. During the period, any former guardsmen or PDF left within Ultramar, were press ganged into service in these haphazard affairs.

Calgar tried to keep to his father's codex, but inevitably, compromises had to be made. They had never encountered a situation like this before. Whatever troops he could muster were pressed into multiple running battles across the sub sector. The organisation of the worlds would come later, he just needed to hang onto the ones he already had.

Quality of life in the Ultramar worlds became much lower than the comfortable conditions of M41. Overcrowding and overpopulation due to refugees made resources scarce, and intense rationing and high taxes were thrust upon the general populace. As memory of the Emperor became more distant, and rumours of his death spread, devotion and prayer eventually began to drift towards the protectors of the Realm: the Angels Astartes. Cults of personality began to spread across the various worlds of Ultramar, and the Marines became figures of divine judgement and awe. No tithe was ever rejected by these ignorant peasants. Even as they died in the street, blind devotion grew in intensity. Some would say despicably, none of the marines discouraged this. Many secretly believed themselves superior than mortal men, and confirmation of this by the laity must have inflated their self importance to monstrous levels. None more so than the famous Cato Sicarius.

Formerly of the Ultramarines second Company, Sicarius became Centurion Maximal of the defence effort, a rank created by Calgar, who was becoming a very ancient man by this point. Sicarius commanded the offensive war effort, to keep the heretics, horrific xenos, and rival Imperiums, from tearing down what they had won, whilst Calgar instructed Agemman, Regent of

Ultramar (and Sicarius' rival) to look after the administration and regulation of the realm, in cooperation with Calgar himself.

By 455.M42, Calgar had grown restless. He desired for the expansion of Ultramar, to bring sanity back to the galaxy, and remake the Imperium. He saw himself as like unto Guilliman himself, who had pulled the Imperium from chaos back into Order following the Horus Heresy. He was supremely angry that Sicarius was not expanding, and demanded an explanation. Sicarius tried to explain that he was too pressed simply with keeping the realm secure, and that to expand would be to leave other worlds vulnerable.

Nevertheless, Calgar began to accompany Sicarius, and led some expeditions of his own. However, in the people's minds, Sicarius was the true hero, and many began to praise him openly. Sicarius's supporters began to turn his points about security, into ones about racial purity. 'Ultramar for the Ultramarians' began to be heard in the filthy overcrowded cities across the Realm.

It was in 553.M42, that this mounting distrust between the three men came to a head. A great chaos Warlord called Vashnaraman, had gathered a vast army of insane and deluded minions, backed up by demonic engines and a huge fleet of vessels, and had ravaged the Goldian Imperium, and the Imperium of the Thorians. Calgar called for a vast force of Ultramar, to sally forth from his realm, and engage this force in battle, for

glory and for the Emperor. Sicarius, amazingly, openly dissented, claiming this was a fool's folly. The Ravager's forces were not on a path to Ultramar. Why risk a war they could not win, which would leave the realm weak?

Sicarius was not alone in this, and several Vassal-Chapter Masters lobbied Calgar to reconsider.

He did not. Thus, a force of 500 marines, with their attendant fleet vessels and human Auxiliaries, surged forth to engage the Warlord. Notably, Sicarius remained within Ultramar's borders, while Aagemman, keen to curry favour with Calgar, joined the crusade (the second largest marine force since the fall of the Imperium) as it plunged into the dark, uncharted region beyond the border worlds of Ultramar.

It was upon the world of Thracis, that Calgar engaged the Warlord and his forces. A seven million strong force of frothing madmen and callous mercenaries, faced Calgar's force of 3000, only 500 of which were Marines. The battle upon the plain of Canthor was legendary. Calgar used every trick and ploy T'aught in the codex, and even some improvisations suggested by Telion and the dreadnought Uriel. The war was thuggish, brutal and short. Calgar simply could not defeat the huge force which assailed him. It was grim testimony to how far even Ultramar had fallen, that it could not longer defeat a force such as this. Calgar determined that he would be the one to end the war. He fought his way through the press of foul chaotic



bodies, Agemman and the Honour guard following in his wake. The Chapter Master reached to within fourteen feet of the skull-helmed Vashnaraman. However, tragically, a venomous dart, fired by a sickening depraved Aeldari mercenary, struck the great man in the throat. The Aeldari was said to have told Calgar, as he lay dying, that the bolt had been from a prominent lord of the Shadow realm. The Vile thing had not managed to tell Calgar who it was, as Agemman struck its head from its shoulders, and dragged Calgar from the fighting.

Bloodied and broken, after weeks of fighting, the few survivors of the ill-fated crusade managed to claw their way back to their vessels, and made haste back to Ultramar. However, when Agemman and the few survivors returned, Ultramar was not how they remembered it.

Banners proclaiming Sicarius' ascension to Chapter Master fluttered in the wind, from banner poles across every world. Work was beginning upon statues and memorials to Sicarius. As Agemman was to learn, Cato had informed the Council of Chapter masters that Calgar, upon heading for the Crusade, had promised him leadership of Ultramar, knowing that he would die on his crusade. Sicarius had denounced Calgar as a dreaded Codex-breaker (which had become the gravest heresy according to Sicarius), and accused Agemman of corrupting Calgar's mind.

The defence monitors and warships that engaged the returning fleet gave them two options: surrender Agemman, and be welcomed back into the fold of Ultramar, or be slain as heretics of the highest order. Heroically, they refused. They were promptly boarded by the vile sycophant Master Titus, of the Genesis Chapter, who had become regent in the absence of Agemman. His forces overwhelmed the crusaders, and Agemman was brought back to Macragge in chains.

Of Telion and his contingent, no trace was found. Some said he died on Crusade, while the most prevalent theory is that, upon seeing what his Ultramarines had become, he had cast off his armour in disgust, cursing, "Oh Imperium! What has Man fashioned of ye?", before he and his closest acolytes donned simple hooded robes, and vanished into the wilderness beyond Ultramar.

Agemman was executed by Sicarius' own Talassar-ian blade, before millions of adoring subjects.

Over the next millennia, Ultramar became more internally concentrated, and Sicarius' cult of personality grew and grew, until the Chapter Master now demanded that he be worshipped as the apparent God he was. The Marines became semi-divine Angels, and were worshipped alongside him. The Sons of Orar were particularly concerned with ensuring worship of Sicarius was regulated tightly. Holy books and histories grew up about him, and myth became fact, and fact became lies, and all the while, Sicarius grew more and more insane. He was the descendant of the God-Emperor. Thus, as the God-Emperor was dead, he, Cato Sicarius was God. He had the great Obsidian Fortress built on Macragge, the titanic structure sprawled across the back of the former polar defence fortress. Tapestries depicting him fighting and killing Behemoth single-handedly, or battling the monstrous daemon-infested Calgar, began to spring up across the fortress' monolithic interior.

In M43, Ultramar was renamed Grand Sicarium, in honour of their God. He was king of all Space marines, and he demanded they treated him as such. Though powerful beyond measure, he was always paranoid, and the secretive, hollow-eyed special force of Chapter Serfs, known as Idoltrators, moved amongst the squalid societies of Grand Sicarium, from the ash fields of Tarsis, to the Mines of Colchis. Anyone even so much as voicing a concern about Sicarius was arrested and tortured.

His vast throne room within the Obsidian fortress, was said to be lavishly decorated, in all the finest decorations and adornments. His guards flanked every door, and he allowed no one to enter his sanctum, and all business of state was handled by Titus, the miserable and base Regent of Grand Sicarium. Upon great pikes lining the citadel, Calgar and Agemman's heads were struck upon spikes. It was a stark reminder that Ultramar, and all the glory that came with it, was dead. Only the madness and abomination of Sicarius remained.



SECTION VII:

THE CRUSADE OF INSANITY:

THE TEMPLARS ON THE RAMPAGE

The Templars, easily the most pious of the Adeptus Astartes, second only to the Red Hunters in their religious fervour, became something far worse, as their Imperium fell into factionalised and monstrous realms, petty kingdoms and protectorates.

The Templars, always distrustful of degenerate Navigators and Astropaths, seemed justified in their hatred, as the fall of the Astronomicon drove these psykers into destruction. Across the galaxy, the Templars, at a stroke, were hacked into hundreds of separate crusades. Again, this affected the fanatics little, as they were always a divided chapter, and all that changed was that they were forced to remain divided.

However, it was the psychological effect upon the Templars, following this calamity, that was far more profound. The various smaller crusades, devoid of their central mission, simply resorted to what they always did. They fought, in the name of the Emperor and Dorn. They suicidally attacked worlds and petty Imperiums, regardless of alliances or real/imagined heresies. This gained them no friends, as they attacked whoever they could. These isolated crusader forces were, for the most part, ambushed, overwhelmed, or otherwise destroyed, by vengeful and cruel local power magnates.

However, the largest force of Templars, one thousand strong, cut a bloody swathe against their foes. This was the central Templar fleet, led by High Marshal Dorstros, from his flagship the Eternal Crusader.

The Templars travelled from world to world, desperately seeking righteousness. What they saw, on every world, sickened them. Heresy, laxity and impiety were rife, as every human world and Imperium sought to follow their own destinies amongst the callous stars. The grand ideals of the Imperium were forgotten by all. Save, of course, the Templars. The more they saw, the more their own insane ideologies seemed to make sense, and the more warped their world view became.

Dorstros moved from world to world, travelling by short warp jumps, in an increasingly un-mappable galaxy. His Templars would offer two options to human colonies: re-convert to the Imperial faith, or be totally destroyed. To xenos, no option was given, and they were massacred wherever the Templars found them. Thus, the Black Templars invaded world after world, recruiting those insane or desperate

enough, and putting the rest to the flame and the sword. Cities were torched, or cleansed by nuclear fire. Sword Brethren and wild-eyed initiates moved amongst the fearful enemy, singing delirious hymns, all the while crying with glee, as they maimed and crushed and burned, all in the Emperor's name.

As they moved slowly across the already war torn and brutalised galaxy, the zealous and insane detritus of human society. Gibbering priests, flagellating cultists and rogue clergy attached themselves to the Templars' rapidly expanding rag tag fleet. As more and more religious fanatics merged with the fleets, chanting their devotional hymns throughout the fleet, the Templars began to move more and more to believing the Emperor was indeed God-made-manifest, and the loss of the Astronomicon was merely the final sign, the rallying call of the Templars. They were to purge the galaxy clean, and only then, in His mercy, the Emperor could return.

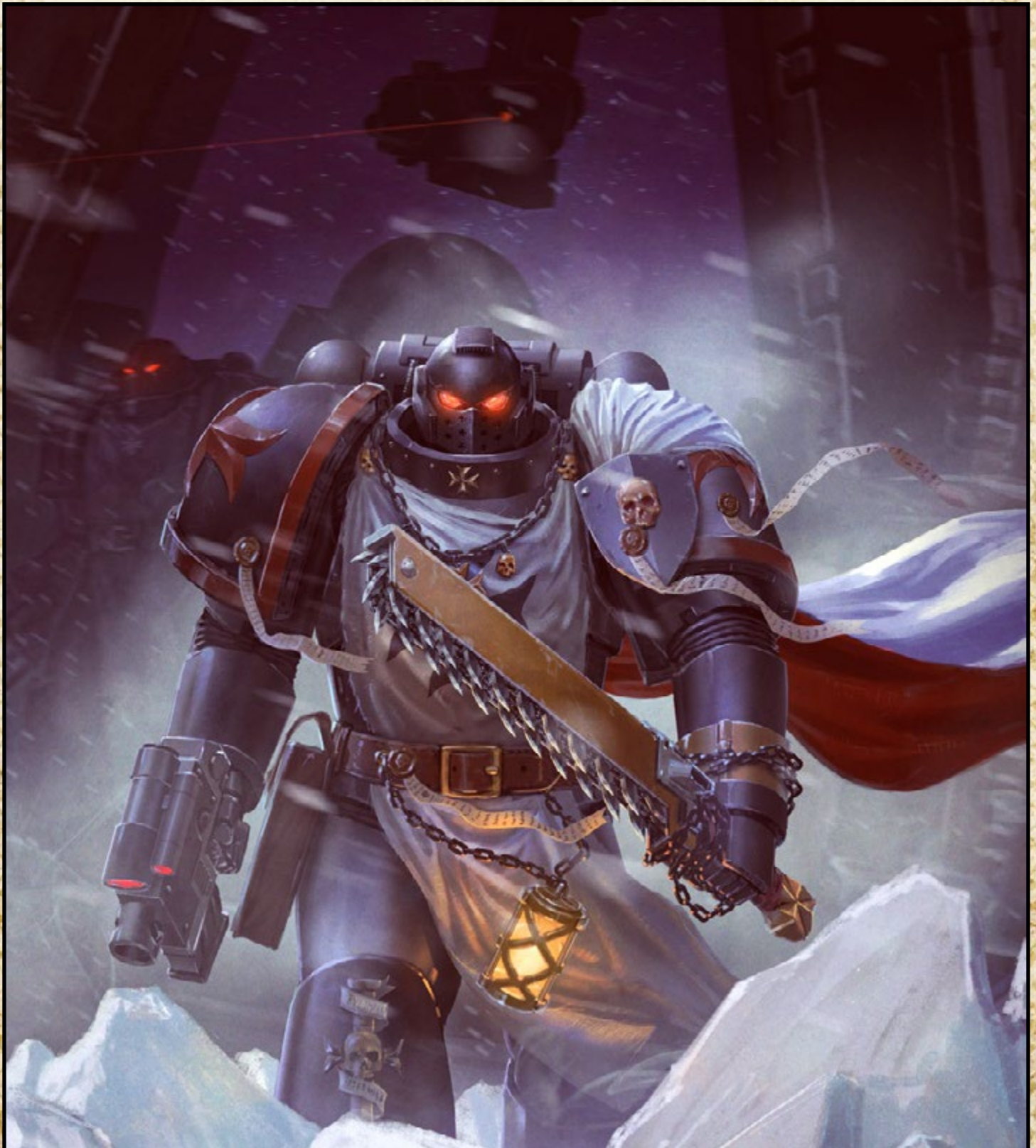
Some of the Sisters of Battle, stranded on remote worlds, were incorporated into this crusade, and found themselves caught up in the self-perpetuating religious psychosis the rest of the Crusade found itself in.

Hundreds of rogue marines from various free companies tagged alongside the rambling, murderous Crusade, along with plenty of former pirates and rogues, and their attendant private armies. While openly they gibbered praises to the Emperor like everyone else in the crusade, these malcontents and deceitful mercenaries and murderers all secretly knew why they fought: just for the sheer murderous joy of it, and the simple fact that they could. Some of the Marines were even actually traitors, who just used the religious motives of the Crusade to justify their joining in. For instance, it was noted that several marines within the crusade may have, in fact, been Night Lord Chaos Space Marines (though this couldn't be confirmed), fighting with the Templars simply because the two forces had similar motives in mind: destruction and fear.

The Crusade swelled to almost two thousand Astartes, millions of raving human fanatics and semi-elite soldiery, as well as thousands of vessels. It was the second greatest concentration of Marines in the galaxy during this period. Despite this, the Crusade could never reunite the Imperium, or try to bring order to the relentless anarchy. No, because the Templars had believed

their own rhetoric. They were not on a Crusade of redemption, but one of punishment, and pain. They blundered from system to system, near aimlessly, attacking and brutalising whoever they came across. Planets were ransacked, their people put to death or simply beaten until they could fight no more.

This relentless process of murder and prayer would have continued indefinitely, one would assume, as the Templars' Crusade grew in numbers every time a world was ransacked. This was to change when they encountered, high in the galactic North, the Eastern Chaos Imperium, led by the legendary Huron Blackheart.







**SECTION VIII:
RAVAGERS AND ROGUES:
PIRACY IN THE SECOND AGE OF
STRIFE**

As with any major disaster, the collapse of the Imperium was exploited by the scum and dishonourable filth of the universe, which oozed up from the widening cracks in Imperial authority, like wriggling maggots crawling free of a corpse. With no centralised Imperial authority, and with a non-existent interstellar communication system, any Imperial Battlefleets or sector fleets which survived the initial hell-storm of the new devourer, were utterly lost and aimless in this new, shattered galaxy. All warp routes were rendered useless, and all warp charts and mapping of the universe instantly became out of date. The universe became a bigger, more incomprehensible place. Not only this, but the few coherent battle fleets could only travel as fast as the short warp transit systems onboard their vessels would allow. The main body of the Navigator houses were destroyed when Terra was overrun by daemons, and many more were simply driven utterly insane by the sudden surge in chaotic activity in the dreadful wake of the collapse. Thus, without any opposition the criminal, and some-

times heretical, scum of the universe sprang up in greater numbers than ever before. Disorientated or lost merchant fleets were ransacked, their people either butchered or brutalised in a variety of interesting and, above all, nasty ways. 'Wolf Packs', composed of rogue frigates and other human detritus, blockaded whole systems, holding their people for ransom. Other, more insane or reckless pirates, chased convoys and transports for many light-years, just for the thrill of the hunt. It was said this Age of Strife was a veritable paradise for the impious and the criminal.

Throughout this period, there were several general varieties of raiding forces operating at any given time across the galaxy, which we shall detail here. Of course, these categories are by no means exclusive. Such is the rag tag nature of pirate and ravagers fleets, that often they are composed of mixtures of several different kinds of raider, each sharing the similar goals of savagery, plunder and profit.



The Wolf Packs

Rogue Frigate captains, disgruntled former merchants, political dissidents turned profiteering privateers and just plain pirates. These are not a new phenomenon, and were certainly present throughout the 41st millennium, as well as the 51st. Yet, it was the scale of these piratical groups which increased across the Second Age of Strife. They became bolder and more vicious, picking off larger targets who, stripped of their protectors, were relatively easy prey for these bands of renegades.

Sometimes these packs of predators and scavengers would be founded by dissident ex-navy personnel, other times they would be formed by ambitious local crime lords, who, through bribery, murder and betrayal, managed to gain enough power and resources to commandeer, or commission to be built for them, several starships. These would be outfitted with whatever weapons and crew they could scrounge, be they mercenary scum, thieves, or murderers, and from simple missile pods and projectile cannons, to stolen plasma batteries or lance emplacements. Such cobbled together forces would be no problem for a fully equipped military fleet. Unfortunately, none were forthcoming to challenge these cowardly villains.

One prominent example of this sort of fleet was the fleet of Captain Tastando Markus. During a failed warp transit, during M42, this Dauntless-Class Light Cruiser Captain found himself alone, his Cruiser lost amid the sea of stars. The Captain was a greedy man, and cared little for the Imperium while he was within it. Now he and his crew were alone, his greed turned to open dissent. He used his ship's substantial offensive power, to terrify isolated worlds into submission, or used his bloodthirsty crew to board ships, or invade particularly primitive worlds, plundering them of anything of value, raping anyone they chose to, and generally being unpleasant.

His crew were not uniformly greedy and malicious, though those honourable souls on board were soon double-crossed or betrayed by their more unscrupulous ship mates. Markus kept order through the promise of bounty and rewards, and a system of violent meritocracy prevailed onboard. Soon, as word spread of The Shark's (his vessel was renamed thusly) criminal successes, a small following of captured vessels, from frigates to crudely home-built converted cargo freighters, tagged alongside the unusually powerful pirate vessel. In general, his wolf pack, like most of this sort, stayed around a single system (or local 'net' of systems that they had visited before), not daring to risk warping off into unknown areas.



The Corsairs

Easily the rarest form of pirate abroad in the galaxy during this period. These near-mythic forces consist of those scant few Aeldari, locked on the path of the Outcast, who lost everything. Their Craftworlds were either dead, or imprisoned within the Ynnead web.

These outcasts found their race was gone. There would never, ever be any redemption for them. Thus, with great wrath and hatred, they turned upon the perceived causes of their misery: humanity being one of them.

The Aeldari, whose race had become a myth to almost all beings in the galaxy, darted between the various overlapping jurisdictions of the countless Petty Empires of the galaxy, murdering and stealing, howling curses through lyrical throats. They never left a trace of their presence. Only bodies. Their overly emotional minds turned to dark thoughts, which they could not escape from. Some said Yriel 'the mad' led them, but no one can be sure. Indeed, no one is sure these Corsairs exist at all.

Of course, *something* is killing the isolated human colonies, and stealing supplies from anyone they can.

The Scavenge

Some pirate fleets seem to consist of scratch-built, cobbled together starships, built from ruins and wrecks, but repaired. Some say these fleets are remnants of the fabled pure-Orks. However, no one takes those claims seriously. Everyone knew what happened to the Orks...

Thus, these vessels were not Orkish in design. Yet, some great cunning must have built these crude wonders. Encounters with these vessels, and their piratical crews, gives us better clues.

Mutants. Every single encounter was orchestrated, performed, and carried out by mutants. These deformed and hideous creatures, hiding their humps, bestial tails and wasting limbs beneath thick robes and clunky respirator equipment, boarded vulnerable vessels, using flamers, stub guns and other, homemade weapons, stealing whatever they needed.

They simply called themselves 'the Scavenge'. It is thought that these disparate fleets, operating nearby the Flurian system, in the Segmentum Pacificus, are

said to have a base within that region, possibly even a captured industrial world. Legends tell of the Scavenger, a young boy, cursed by a dreadful wasting affliction, making him feeble and ugly. The young boy was driven into the underhive of his world, by the hateful 'normals' of society.

He found a loving family amongst the mutant slave population of the world, who were all hunched, twisted monsters, but who loved him as one of their own. This boy was, by any accounts, a savant and genius, of the most dangerous variety. He was an innovator. He swiftly became leader of the underground mutant coven, and got them to steal machinery from the surface, to bring to him. They did so, and in the dark, he began to create.

No one knows the end of the tale, but soon after, the Scavenge became a notoriously dangerous pirate faction, using whatever machinery they could to devise ever more ingenious and lethal technologies.





**SECTION IX:
THE UNSEEN WARS**

The 51st millennium is a period of immense distrust and mutual loathing. Man turned upon man, as he is depressingly wont to do throughout history, and the Petty Imperiums, Xenos conglomerates, and various other interstellar nations and powers, closed off their borders in deathly fear of taint. Interstellar traffic became isolated into pockets, focussed around the grim little clusters of systems carved out by their ruthless feudal masters.

Espionage, assassinations and spying missions became far more common than in any period previously. Many mundane spies, from millions of worlds, sauntered undetected upon rival enemy soil, watching, interfered and occasionally, murdering. All to advance the agendas of their individual employers.

Of course, like a viper amongst grass snakes, these relatively harmless snoops were far from the only unseen forces, plying their deadly and deceitful trades across the harsh galaxy.

On the dark day of the Emperor's death, survivor's claim a series of most mysterious events occurred. It was claimed that the Custodians were abroad in Terras streets. All of them. No explanation was given, and any Arbites patrols which challenged them were instantly swatted aside. Valdor himself led the march, his eyes aflame with sorrow, mixed with mute fury. Nobody knew why they moved through the city, until they entered the grounds of the Assassinorum temples. Supposedly hidden from all, the custodies found it instantly, and, with great fury, they battered down the doors. Upon doing so, they found each and every temple empty. Well, not quite empty. The Grand Master, obviously expecting guests, had left almost a thousand Eversor Assassins behind. The battle was fierce and brutal. Many Custodes died, as did Eversor. Eventually, the fight spilled out into the pilgrim-choked streets. Though only a few hundred Eversor were left, they used the swelling crowds to their advantage, attacking the golden giants while bogged down amongst millions of terrified, screaming pilgrims. However, the Custodes, with great wrath and fury, slew all the Eversors, which blew up all around, collapsing buildings and cratering roads, as thousands of men and women suddenly died in these biological detonations.

Instead of returning to the palace, these apparently-heretical Custodes requisitioned transports, and made all speed to Titan. It was said their leader had tears in his

eyes, mouthing the words 'Absolution'.

By the time various Inquisitors had managed to wrangle a large enough force of Imperial Guard, Terran PDF bio-supermen, Imperial Fists, and Arbites, and charged into the palace to defend the now-defenceless Emperor. However, it was too late. The throne had failed. The Emperor was dead, and a tide of pure warpish nightmares was pouring forth. The Inquisitors and Fists tried their best, but soon the entire palace was overrun, and soon after, the whole world.

Though the rest of the Fists off world (who we will discuss later) never saw the battle, it was said the last living beings on Terra were the Imperial Fists, who fought the thick tide of daemons, until the twisted daemon flesh literally buried them, and even then, beneath the seething tide of filth, rumbling detonations signaled the Fists still lived below, at least for a few defiant hours after being overwhelmed.

These witness accounts raise serious questions. Why did the custodians flee? Or were they ordered to? If so, what had the Emperor seen? Why did the Custodes assault the Assassin Temples so viciously? Where was the Grand Master and his disciples? And, most importantly, what happened to the Emperor?

Of these questions, only a few have potential answers. The question of the Assassinorum is one such question. The Officio seemed to vanish in the first five hundred years of M42. However, eventually, brief glimpses of black-garbed beings cropped up, across every Imperium, from the western Chaos Imperium, to the ash fields of the Imperium of the White Eyed Devils.

Some were obviously rogue assassins, randomly striking at centres of government, because they had no orders, and had no idea how to integrate into normal society. These twisted, delusional beings believed that the natural state of affairs of planets was to have no Governors or Officials. They had been raised since childhood to believe that slaying these targets was the height of piety. Hence, since governors were the most common target in their past lives, these child-like rogues continued to slay the governors of their worlds. In one extreme case, one Callidus assassin was said to have killed every Governor of the Industrial World Gox, for forty years. Every time a replacement inherited

the title, the delusional assassin, believing all governors to be wrong, killed each and every one, each time in a different way and in a different guise. Eventually, the desperate government of the world hired Demiurg mercenaries, to scan for polymorph traces. The trail led to a run down hab district. To be sure of execution, the whole hab complex was burned down. The attacks stopped.

Of course, others seemed to be much more sinisterly organised. Strategic targets were struck. Merchants were killed, or their families intimidated. These scared groups of traders and petty profiteers often ended up allying together for protection, and used their resources to hire forces from various Imperiums to protect them from assassins. This led, in some remote regions, to Imperiums beginning to offer conditional non-aggression pacts with each other. Of course, these were very fragile things, and often fell apart at the slightest provocation. However, it showed that the Assassins, perhaps consciously or intentionally, were trying to knit the Imperium back together. Not that the petty warlords appreciated this, as any captured assassins were tortured, interrogated, and burned alive. Those Callidus, Vindicare, and Coleus assassins caught would only say one word to their captors, before being executed: "*Heracles*."

In contrast, throughout the 51st Millennium, as if the constant brutality, wars and general paranoia did not

make the period miserable enough, several factions of the dreaded Alpha Legion began to spring up once more. Of course, no marines were ever actually seen, only the crude painted Hydra symbols left at the scenes of carnage they left in their wake. Bombs were planted, pro-alliance officials butchered or brutally maimed. In some cases, important defensive secrets of several Imperiums were sold by mysterious Alpha Legion spies, to rival Imperiums or Xenos empires, who promptly used this knowledge to then destroy their foes, out of nothing more than bloody-minded spite.

Everywhere alliances were induced by the Officio Assassinorum, so they were shattered by the even more mysterious Alpha Legion's agents.

No one truly knows how many Alpha Legionnaires died during the first thousand years of the M42, but most agree, very few survived the New Devourer. Thus, the remaining Alpha Legion became far, far more devious. Legion cells were so excellently hidden, they weren't uncovered until the bombs or whatever attack planned, went off. It is suspected many of their servants are not even Astartes, and work amongst the other citizens of the galaxy, sowing discord discreetly.

However, it was clear the two organisations, assassins and Alpha Legion, were at war. Sometimes this was political, sometimes it became direct, with brutally quiet street brawls and backstreet executions being the



main battleground betwixt the two forces. Both sides had little idea of what the purpose of the war was, but in general, the war was kept as a secret, hidden war. The unseen war, fought beneath the feet of humanity. As war raged between vast armies and squalid empires, so too did each set of spies and assassins try to out-smart or outmaneuver the other. Due to the secrecy of the conflict, little is known about either side.

It is known that several robed marines may be connected to the Alpha Legion, one going by the title 'the Voice-Answered', a mysterious fellow, wielding two pistols, but no other weapons. Once, it was said he wielded a sword, but evidently no longer.

Of course, this war of subterfuge and murder, was not as simple as a mere fight between Assassin and Terrorist. Several other factions muddied the waters. A Cabal of mysterious beings was known to be in contact with both sides, and engaged in a strange covert war of their own. The mythical bendies became more prevalent, in particular onboard Adeptus Mechanicus vessels, often murdering suspected Dragon-Cultists and C'tanists in their beds, and dragging them off into the darkness. These strange beings were in constant contact with the Cabal, and the Assassins (it is claimed). Unforgiven, the last few hundred surviving Dark Angels and successors, fought guerrilla wars against any suspected Legion or chaos strongholds across the galaxy, their numbers too small and too scattered now to fight truescale wars. It is known they in particular hated the hooded marines aiding the Legion, and often made special effort in seeking out these marines, and killing them painfully. Telion and his 'grey cloaks' were almost folk heroes amongst Post-Imperial citizens across the south eastern Ultima Segmentum. They came to a world, unseen, and destroyed corrupt rulers or criminally hateful villains, before disappearing into the void once more. Some claimed them to be a myth, to cover the tracks of unruly peasants, but some suspected otherwise. Thus, we can see, the galaxy churned with war, across every world, at every level. No one was safe from the bone-crushing agony of living in the Second Age of Strife.





**SECTION X:
THE NEW DEVOURER**

The great Devourer, the dread star locust, had made massive inroads into the galaxy, even by M41, snatching whole clusters of worlds in its billions of jaws, digesting them, even as their hopeless defenders screamed defiance.

Many were the attempts by a one Inquisitor Kryptmann, to slay the foul swarm, which flooded from beyond the void between galaxies. Viruses, fire storms, plague bombs, exterminatus. All these devious and hateful ploys failed. The beast was too adaptive, too fiercely unstoppable. At last, in the closing decades of the forty first millennium, that he employed his final, lasting gambit.

The Tyranids, that great plague, was turned towards the only race in the galaxy as hopelessly virulent as themselves: the Orks. Genestealers were seeded upon the surfaces of the Octavian Overfiend's many worlds, drawing the Great Devourer, like a moth to a blazing furnace. The war was unsinkable. As the Tyranids flooded the worlds with warriors, the Orks fought all the fiercer, growing stronger in the crucible of war, and drawing more of their number to them, via the unseen psychic force all Orks shared. As the numbers swelled, the Tyranids feasted upon this superior biomass, and they too grew strong from the continuing war. Both sides drove the other to ever greater feats, and ever increasing numbers. The worlds of the Octavius became twisted hells, ork spores and machinery coiling around and competing, with vast spires of bone and chitin, and creeping vines of semi-organic malice. As the death mounted, the bodies coated the worlds, expanding the vast surface of each to unprecedented sizes. Worlds collapsed under the pressure of so many bodies and structures, but even the collapsing boulder fields were knitted together by slimy tendrils, and warring machinery. Roks and hulks warped in from across the galaxy, accompanied by fleets of countless Orks.

For a brief moment, things seemed to be improving in the universe. Ork held worlds across the galaxy suddenly began to depopulate, as almost every orkoid in existence, ploughed into the churning maelstrom of the Octavius Empire. The Imperium and other aliens moved into these vacant worlds, and it seemed as if perhaps the Imperium was not doomed after all.

Their vain hope was misplaced. For, as Tyranid and Ork came together in this war, each of these rival

ecosystems, so virulent and profound in their terraforming abilities, began to subvert one another, at the biological level. Ork spores mutated, to infest Tyranids, Tyranids infested Orks with genestealer eggs and Tyrannic lice. Tyranid spores battled Ork spores, just as Carnifexes and bio-titans battled gargants and stompas, in the epic, never ending war.

Nobody knows for sure when it came about, but the New Devourer was swift to action. It crafted a species, borne of Tyranid and Ork, but truly of neither, which turned upon the Orks and Tyranids, stripping them of their biomass, to create their own hive-waaagh. The creatures created seemed to be muscular, large and covered in foul appendages and weapons. Hive ships, coated in orkoid machinery, fused with orkish biology, and merged with Tyranid hyper evolution and biomorphs, spread from the Octavius system. The Orks were outmatched by this new force. The New Devourer's troops were vast things, taller than almost all Orks, faster than all Orks. The spore reproduction of the Orks was subverted, and these monsters reproduced at a scarily swift rate, with monsters sprouting up from the ground, within hours of being seeded from each New Devourer beast. Each beast could produce a thousand offspring within a day, each battle ready on that same day. The regenerative ability of Tyranids and Orks was also heightened and twisted beyond comprehension, until wounds were healing, even before the blade or weapon causing the wound had even finished wounding the fiends. They could not be killed, they could not be stopped. The inherent Orkoid knowledge of technology allowed them to merge technology with biotechnology, creating semi-mechanical monsters beyond the wildest nightmares of even the most mental of Mekboys.

Similarly, the Tyranids could not defeat the New Devourer. Even when a Hive fleet devoured specimens of the New Devourer, the hive vessel which absorbed the biomass, would become corrupted by the New Devourer, and become part of this burgeoning new terror's psychic web. The hive mind, like a bear pulling its paw from the fire, withdrew its surviving fleets from the milky way. The vast majority of the Tyranid race lay beyond the galaxy. However, on some level, the titanic consciousness of the Hive mind realised it could not eat whatever horrendous thing had been born in our galaxy. Thus, the Tyranids turned from this galaxy, and looked to other galaxies, teeming with life.

The Orks, unable to ever feel fear or dread, merely decided to go down fighting. For, it was the only orky thing left to do. Wazdakka launched a surprise attack, deep into the heart of the New Devourer, charging from his semi-complete warp super highway. He led a glorious charge, leading almost a million trillion Orks in the largest battle in the history of the entire galaxy. They struck right at the rotten heart of the New Devourer's physical and psychic web. A trillion roaring boyz, which shuddered the air, and melted brass, such was the volume and intensity. Gargants and Stompas fired constantly, the air literally coloured orange by constant weapons fire and discharge. Rockets and bombs were dropped in their billions, vaporising everything they struck. Kroozers and hulks rammed New Devourer hive ships, their pilots howling 'WAAAAG-GGHHH!' forever, before charging across their own ships, to fist fight their foes in space itself.

It was not enough. The Orks couldn't kill the New Devourer. Nothing truly could. The New Devourer murdered each and every Ork that attacked it, before it spread out, and picked off every other ork, who nevertheless fought on, laughing with glee as they fought the New Devourer. However, it was known that the orks hated this foe, calling them "Cheetaz!" and "orrid grow-ladz". In contrast, the New Devourer had no language for their foe, beyond the endless, piercing bellow of the Hyper-fiends (the most commonly seen footsoldier beast of the New Devourer). The Orks, howling and defiant, died almost to a Ork.

Only one Waaagghhh seemed to survive the onslaught, led by an Ork with a bolter wound to its head. It claimed it had heard Waaaghraz Gharr, a being the Warboss claimed was 'da dad of Gork and Mork.'. This apparent god, told the Ork leader to kick his way into the puny Aeldari 'Web-place' and wait 'for 'moar intrucshons'. Nobody knows what happened to this Waaagghhh.

Of course, the New Devourer did not stop with the Orks. In the first few centuries of the forty second millennium, this foul plague swept across the entire galaxy, driven by a corrupted kind of Waaagghhh field, and the overall hive imperative of the New Devourer's synapse web. Imperial blockades were useless.

T'au negotiators were slain. Whole naval incursions were swatted aside. Space marine chapters were swallowed whole, by titanic fleets of biomechanical hive ships. At least half of the Aeldari craft worlds were crushed and sucked dry, their fleets, their memories, their hopes, all quashed. Entire alien civilisations were eaten or torn apart, and millions of worlds were utterly, utterly purged. It was estimated that almost half of all life in the galaxy died in those few hundred years.

The only defence against the New Devourer was to flee it, or dodge it. The only thing it did not do better than the tyranids, was the shadow in the warp. It didn't have one. Worlds got plenty of warning, and fleets could indeed mobilise quickly enough. Though it was easy to evade, it was nevertheless unstoppable. Indeed, the history of the second Age of Strife may have ended there, if something beyond our galaxy hadn't distracted the New Devourer. Something was happening, far from the milky way, and the New Devourer's keen psychic sense detected it. Something shifted, deep in the beyond. The New Devourer left the galaxy entirely, within the space of three years, leaving nothing of themselves behind. They went to fight something... greater. Something... different. Again, whatever it was or is, is a complete mystery to the denizens of this galaxy. The only clue came from an astrologer, living within the Ophelian Imperium. She turned her eye lenses towards the distant galaxy, nicknamed Archos Vosh, after her father. She noted how, slowly, even as she watched, the light of that galaxy went dim. As of yet, no scholar, from any race, can explain this. In fact, most do not wish to...

Of course, what they fought is irrelevant to us, because it simply meant that the Galaxy, once more, had just managed to survive total annihilation. It this post-devourer galaxy though, as we can see from previous sections, was a realm gutted, wounded and diseased. The galaxy became a festering wound of civil war, brutality, murder, genocide, ignorance and hatred. It existed only to cause misery, as every race made every other race suffer. Life was horrendously horrific in those times. But, at least, it was indeed life. In a universe as cruel as this one, one must be thankful for small mercies, no matter how bitter...





**SECTION XI:
THE LAST BASTION: TITAN**

When Terra fell, spewing warp stuff and corrupted fleets of pilgrims out from it in all directions, many worlds were unprepared. Luna was suddenly struck by millions upon millions of wild-eyed maniacs, who crashed their very captured transports into the Luna fortress, which was unprepared for an attack from Terra itself.

Many of the other Imperial emplacements, built upon asteroids and various other celestial bodies within the solar system, were overwhelmed by the insane screaming daemons, which invaded the vox traffic of the entire Solar system. These facilities collapsed, as their now-insane human workers and rulers opened airlocks, ruptured plasma drives, and generally fought each other with broken, bloodied nails, and improvised cudgels.

Hevan Forris, the Ramillies class star fort orbiting Sedna, plunged into the icy planetoid, killing everyone on the planet and the fortress.

Desperate fleets of evacuated officials and dignitaries escaped on requisitioned transports and embattled troop transports and grain-ships. The Ecclesiarch, flanked by an entire Lesser Order of Sisters of Battle, captured the Cruiser Lestat, for himself and his nearest clergy, before his new vessel led the retreat out of

Terra, leading over a hundred thousand rag tag ships from the cradle of mankind. A single Imperial Fists Thunderhawk was said to have escaped too, docking with a fleeing bulk freighter. The Astartes aboard had been given a simple order by their Captain, which they were to tell to anyone and all Imperial fists and fists successors then could find. The message was simple: dig in.

While all Solar turned to insanity, the Grey Knights took a different path. They instantly, as soon as Terra fell, shut off all vox transmissions, and refused to respond to any hails, believing that the daemons could infest Titan even through electrical signals. The vast wave of psychic madness, that pulsed from Terra in sickening waves, rebounded from Titan, like water breaking around an ocean bulwark. This precious sanity allowed the vast number of human personnel living upon Titan, to organise defence against the marauding, insane former pilgrims, who threw themselves upon any worlds they could find. Their ships were blasted from the sky systematically, by the vast automatic guns of Titan. Ancient weapons, deep beneath the surface, bubbled upwards from the methane lakes of Titan, shooting down anything that the psychic Grey Knights believed was corrupted.



When the vast ship bearing the Custodes entered Titan's orbit, it too was nearly shot down by Titan's deadly defences, even the ancient Cassini device, the vast spidery construct that it was, powered up its utterly lethal plasma lance, and trained it upon the wayward vessel.

The Grey Knights of course ordered them to all stand down, when the two Grand masters present upon the moon detected the golden, perfect light of the Adeptus Custodes aboard the vessel. Once the Custodes were safely landed upon the freezing planetoid, the chief Custodian marched directly to the central fortress of Titan, and demanded to speak with the Grand Masters in private. The meeting lasted for several days. Nobody knows what was said between the two forces. Secrets were exchanged between the two ancient organisations, secrets accumulated by both institutions over the course of many millennia of service, and plans were drawn up. Eventually, they emerged, and the defence could begin in earnest.

Fortunately for Titan, the Inquisitorial forces around the rest of Saturn and Jupiter's moons, had also managed to somehow avoid annihilation, and they flocked to the most defensible world; Titan itself. The Inquisitors met with the Custodes and Astartes leadership, and they agreed on methods of defence. Vast galleries beneath Titan, were cleared of ancient relics, devotional artefacts and tapestries, and the Inquisitors brought all the fusion powered lamps and artificial lighting they could muster from their own bases, and installed them as quickly as possible. The Ordo Xenos brought with them cultures for rapid plant and microbial growth, and special species of flora, which could survive on heat and light alone, and under the heavy lights, they were implanted into these vast, multiple mile long halls, which soon began to seethe with succulent, life-sustaining material.

The Ordo Hereticus that remained around the Solar system, brought with them all their psychopathic cyborgs, from chrono gladiators to Arco flagellants, from penitent engines, to the colossal excruciating machines, tower-sized machines of gears and chains, which constantly tortured heretical psykers within their workings, sending out waves of warding protection and powerful anti-psyker energies.

Malus brought all the various forbidden tomes it could

salvage from the ruins of the data repositories, along with all the null rods and various anti-daemon weapons and devices they could pull from the besieged ruins. The entire first edition of the Grimoire of true names was brought to Titan, bound in heavy chains, and carried by a veritable army of loyal cultists, such was its vast size. There, it was safely stored within the central bastion, under heavy guard. Every name of every daemon thus far encountered by the Imperium, was stored within that most mighty of tomes.

The devotional and holy relics, cleared from the underground areas, were placed into the upper halls. It was said one could not turn their head, without seeing a beautiful image of the Emperor, or great gilded statues, which glimmered with psychic resonance.

Battlefield engineers, and the scant few Techpriests on Titan, began to plan and devise the extra fortification of Titan. Bunker construction instructions, cultivated from Cadia and other such heavily fortified worlds, were taken out and implemented. Overlapping avenues of fire and perfectly positioned bunkers and trench works, were bored into the surface of Titan, by the countless millions of toiling humans and Astartes upon the world. Several Imperial Fist Deathwatch, under the instructions of the Ordo Xenos Inquisitors, advised and helped with the fortifications, ensuring they were impregnable and immortal.

Soon, these defences were put to the test. A vast greater daemon, Valchocht the Maker, led a vast surge of daemons from the daemon world of Terra. Huge daemon engines and vessels were built from the mutated and semi-sentient ruins of Terra. Ships made from masonry and fallen fragments of Old Terra, were fused together by daemonflesh, which formed unnatural ribs, tentacles and snouts, which pulsed and writhed throughout the daemon structures. These ruin-ships were alive with demonic hatred, and crawled with billions of demonic beasts, which scuttled through the orifice-like passages of the vessels like lice.

The fleet spread across the Solar System, killing all those humans who evaded initial extermination up until then. Eventually, only Titan remained. The aura of psychic defence around Titan was immense, and it shone, as if in imitation of the now-extinct Astronomican itself. Daemon vessels howled as they entered the halo of unseen magical wards and psychic barriers.

Some of the ruin-ships came apart at that moment, as the daemon princes powering their central cores were weakened so much, they were banished from reality almost instantly. Of course, the majority were far too powerful to simply die, and they barreled through regardless. Many more of the weakened daemon ships were destroyed by the ancient Cassini device and the other defence satellites, that blasted heir ruins to ash, under the barrage of lasers and blinding flashes of the deadly plasma lance of the Cassini, which shimmered from the device's vast hyperbolic mirror projector.

Yet still, many of the demonically possessed structures managed to evade destruction, and entered the dense orange atmosphere of Titan. The defence lasers and atomic rail guns of Titan, spewed death into the hateful beasts. Nevertheless, the beasts were not of mortal matter, and the ruined vessels crashed, allowing their demonic cargo to drag themselves from the wreckage, and flood towards the stout defenders. The holy ground of Titan burned the daemons, as they swarmed across the hallowed lands. The human defenders were embattled, and many of them died, torn apart or burned by the abhorrent monstrosities, which howled and screamed in delight and agony. However, ever single defender of Titan wielded blessed weapons, anointed and thrice blessed with holy oils and wards glinting with brilliant holy sheen. Lasguns spat death, the

physical light of the beams merging with the spiritual light, which poured from the defenders themselves. The blazing furnace of insane piety produced by the defenders filled the daemons with agony and vaporising pain. The humans of titan believed they were the last humans in all the universe. They would NOT die, they cursed with their upraised voices, until their lungs were raw and bloody. They did not fear, but instead promised themselves to their own God. They must survive, and they would not be destroyed by this filth.

The Grey Knights, their blades blazing with white angel-light, waded amongst the daemons, hacking down the corrupt horrors with every swing of their blessed glaives. The Golden Custodian joined in battle with their silver counterparts. The custodians fought with the fury of madmen, tears streaming in their eyes, as they screamed in grief-turned-to-hatred. The chief custodian himself, engaged in battle with Valchocht itself. The titanic daemon was as large as a titan, formed from the fused hulks of a hundred dreadnoughts, a thousand tanks, and many thousands of cadavers, all animated by the beast's dreadful will. In place of its face, a terrible blasphemy was perpetrated. The husk of the Emperor, the dried out, dead husk, was fused with the daemon King. Of course, nothing of the Emperor resided within the corpse now, but the heresy was beyond comprehension.



The chief Custodian lost his mind, his righteous hatred overriding his conscious mind. He surged forwards, hacking aside everything in his way, and engaged in epic conflict with the abhorrence that wore the Emperor's face. The Custodian, mounting the countless bodies of the battle, scaled the daemon, battling every tendril, every talon, which it swung at him. He was a blur of golden light, hacking and slashing with furious abandon.

The battle lasted three full days, as more and more Custodes and Grey Knights drew themselves towards the conflict. Silver armoured Grey Knights pumped gallons of blessed promethium onto the horrific colossus, as others charged its giant legs, hacking chunks from the monster with furious, frenzied hacks with their glaives, before pumping bolter rounds into the wounds.

The custodians joined them, stabbing and shooting at everything they could see of the horror. And, from deep beneath Titan's surface, ten dark figures joined the conflict, unseen by their colleagues.

At the height of the battle, the Chief Custodian was devoured whole, the vast jaws of the Greater Daemon opening to engulf him, even as he roared defiance. The battle drew on for another day, as every spare defender turned their weapons upon the abomination. Brother Captain Stern, wielding his force sword in two hands, managed to hack the Emperor's shriveled corpse free of the daemon, and it was borne away by sobbing priests and hissing, angry Inquisitors.

On the seventh day, the daemon shuddered, and then collapsed, dead and banished. The defenders were baffled by this, until, a few hours later, the Chief Custodian cut his way free. Drenched in black daemon blood, and with his armour buckled and broken, he raised his left hand, from which dangled the putrid heart of the daemon King.

The daemons wailed in misery and fury, but still they came, the warp stuff spilling over itself, so eager was it to harm, maim and slaughter their ancient foes. The daemons were just as driven as the defenders. If they could destroy Titan, they need never fear banishment by them ever again.

The war drew on, and many died, as the air was alive

with fire, blood and endless, deafening screams. On one corner of Titan, a group of Terminators began to sing their litanies of hate, their holy battle hymn, which would unleash their faith in one grand torrent. However, the mundane humans, and the Custodes, and even the inquisitors, began to join in, even as the battle dragged on. They did not, however, unleash their furious wrath upon completing the hymn, but instead merely began to chant and repeat it, over and over. Through word of mouth and overhearing, the hymn passed across all of Titan, until it was as if the whole world was chanting the litanies as one. Though the words were gotten wrong by many of the distant humans, the feeling was the same all over: Titan was theirs, and no other's. The whole world seemed incandescent, glowing with brilliant white light, until, after a full day of chanting, the psychic holocaust of Titan was unleashed. It pulsed once, a single wave of psychic magnificence, which rippled across all Titan, and out into the space beyond Titan's orbit. For a brief instance, it was as if Solar had gained a smaller twin of itself, as all Titan flickered once, with this brilliant light, before it eventually faded to nothing once more.

Thus ended the first siege of Titan.

The defenders dug in again, and for another hundred years, they fought off further daemoniac attacks, until they stopped entirely, on the dawn of the forty third millennium. This was because of the great beast, which has arisen on the red planet. The Void Dragon's Necron Fleets, and corrupted Mechanicum Vessels, surged from Mars, securing all of the solar system, bar Terra and, inevitably, Titan.

Over the years, Titan had become almost intolerable to live upon. The nutrient rich gruel, formed from the cultures of mulch supplied by the Ordo Xenos, centuries past, was often stagnant, or otherwise tightly rationed. The human forces upon Titan, though loyal and zealous as they had ever been, began to succumb to their own mortal frailties. Diseases were common, and the only defenders that seemed immune to this rot and degradation were the Custodes and the Grey Knights. They gave the defenders hope. No matter the horrors of existence, humanity would survive, under the benevolent watch of the immortals. The Custodes wasted no time, and bound the Emperor's ruined corpse in scented bandages and silks and other fabrics. Upon his face, a perfect likeness of the Emperor's

original visage, realised in gold, was placed over his rotten mess of a real face, and the remaining fragments of his old armour were placed upon him. A perfect golden throne was built for the corpse, and placed in plain sight, upon the very highest ramparts of the central bastion, as a symbol of humanity's will to survive, and will to remake their god, for as long as they lived, the Emperor could never die.

It was in 666.M43, that the Void Dragon's armies of Necrons and deluded Dragon Cultists assaulted Titan for the first time. The advanced fleets of the Machine God ascendant, battled the extensive orbital defences of Titan for a full three weeks, eventually smashing and destroying each of the starships, orbital gun platforms, and star forts, which orbited the freezing moon. Even the great Cassini, a device said to have been wrought by the first-era humans, long before even the golden age, fell, blown apart by the lethal energies of the Dracolyr-Class tomb ships, the largest kind of tomb ship ever made by the Dragon. The heavily armoured defence guns, however, could not be overcome by mere naval war. They were too well defended, even for the tomb ships.

The corrupted Mechanicus vessels, eager to curry favour with their God, unleashed the most dread weapon the Imperium could ever deploy: exterminatus. Thus, the vast bombs, filled with the black clouds of the life eater virus, fell upon the planetoid. However, the Mechanicus, in their naïve arrogance, forgot who had designed Titan's defences. The Emperor's Inquisitors had been employing exterminatus upon countless worlds for well over ten thousand years. In that time, of course they had devised a means to defeat it, in the event of viral assault upon Inquisitorial worlds. As soon as the billowing clouds of death began to roll across the endless trench systems of Titan, great vents ground open, across the entire surface of Titan. These devices sucked the heinous fog of un-life down massive underground vents, drawing the vile substance, like pus from a gangrenous wound, deep down, dumping the mixture into the blazing core of Titan itself, burning the virus into damnation.

Titan refused to be poisoned, like a petty political rival to a High Lord. This was a warrior world, and it would fight.

The Necrons had to land. Myriad were the technologi-

cal marvels the Dragon unleashed upon Titan, from molten Necrons that could not be harmed by any heat weapons, to the primarch-sized 'Thunder God' Necron constructs, which pulsed with great arcs of lethal electrical power permanently, to vast mechanical swarms of faceless beings, that could drag the souls from the body, and annihilate them utterly. Yet, the Necrons could never teleport within the psychically defended central fortifications, and thus, the Titanians could not be dislodged so easily. The cold steel cage of faith and military determination, managed to prevail, just, against the wonders of the Necron horde.

The Dragon determined that, since he should not have Titan, none would ever leave it. Every ship upon Titan was destroyed, and every spaceport or even runway, was blasted with azure energies, until they were naught but molten slag.

The Dragon prepared to unleash apocalypse upon the trapped Titan. However, fortune came from a strange place. Abaddon, by chance, had plunged into the Solar System, and had encountered the void dragon. Thus, the war which ensued, saved Titan from a cowardly murder by the Dragon. Of course, the wars against the Necrons never stopped, but never again did the Dragon contemplate blowing Titan to pieces. He had greater concerns.

While they had survived, Titan's valiant and unbreakable defenders still suffered. The toxic fumes of war, combined with the increasingly less nourishing floral matter beneath the surface, and the punishing wars against abominations, took their toll upon the human defenders. Almost all of the mundane defenders of Titan were dead within a year, leaving only the Grey Knights and Custodes, alone and lonely, upon their small adamantine sphere of unbreakable strength. They carefully buried each and every mundane human, making their tombs each as grand as possible. The Chaplains of the Grey Knights, canonised every single fallen human, from infant to old woman, from frail ill boy, to vibrant, pious girls, each life miserably short. The Grey Knights memorised every face, every name, carving them into their flesh with the morbid determination they always did everything.

They would avenge every death, one day. They promised that.



**SECTION XII:
WARRIORS OF FORTUNE:
MERCENARIES IN THE SECOND
AGE OF STRIFE**

Chaotic daemons and insane monsters were not the sole benefactors of the anarchy inflicted upon the galaxy, in the wake of the twin traumas of being nearly slaughtered wholesale by the New Devourer, and losing the Emperor's guiding light. Hired guns, and soldiers for sale preyed upon the misery of the galaxy, like vultures picking at the black, distended eyes of a waterlogged corpse. It is an inevitable part of any way or conflict, that these callous, dead eyed pragmatists, would seek to make a swift profit from the anarchy. And, throughout the ten thousand years of Strife, these mercenary groups and factions found themselves with a eager market for their services.

Thus, these forces, loyal to nothing but profit, were a common sight across the entire breadth of the galaxy.

The Serf-soldiery of Krieg

Krieg, a planet of barren toxic deserts and choked, murderous skies, found itself in a terrible predicament during the initial stages of the period. The planet produced no food produce, had very little industry that was not blasted to ruins, or in a permanent state of grim disrepair. With the sudden loss of supplies from the wider Imperium, and a vast population of soldiers, who could not be used for other purposes on their world, it would seem Krieg verged on extinction.

However, the problem of so much soldiery would soon become a peculiar advantage to the beleaguered Krieg. The Planetary Governor of Krieg opened communications with a nearby semi-forge/industrial world, Cocentrine, which happened to be in contact with an agri world, known as Garden Omega-Hex. This triad of worlds, each within a few short warp transits of each other (each transit only taking a few months), hatched a plan to save themselves and their direct neighbours.

Krieg would re-instigate the previously-forbidden false-womb procedure, creating ever more soldiers, ever more quickly. These men and women matured swiftly, and from the age of one, they began to be trained in war, across the vast wastelands of Krieg.

These Krieg Marines were equipped by Cocentrine, which churned out massive numbers of lasguns, flak

jackets, helmets, artillery, and even a special kind of carapace armour of highest quality, not to mention other battlefield equipment (like shovels), and exported these to Krieg, where the soldiers were outfitted for war.

Cocentrine also exported more productive agricultural tools and luxuries, to Omega-Hex, which in turn, exported numerous food stuffs to both the industrial world complex, and to Krieg, in order to feed her populace. Of course, these imports were not sufficient to feed both Krieg's civilian populace, and the massive numbers of soldiers. Thus, the genius of Krieg's governor, Viktor Van Conenburg, came into play.

The massive numbers of highly trained, determined and efficient soldiers of Krieg, were converted to a new purpose. The Death Korps of Krieg became the Serf-Soldiery of Krieg. Krieg soldiers were sold to any petty Imperium or empire (xenos or otherwise), that could afford them. After a one off payment of something valuable, that Cocentrine needed, the buying Empire could purchase varying numbers of Serf-Soldiers, anywhere from a couple of squads, to an entire, fully equipped regiment of Kriegmarines. The Serf-soldiers, indoctrinated at birth to believe that serfdom and servitude to foreign masters was the highest form of piety, did not question their commercialisation. Once sold to the buying empire in question, the triad of Krieg and its neighbours, relinquished any responsibility for their soldiers. The empire that bought them has to feed them and look after their new soldiers, at their own expense. However, they were worth this price, as the Krieg remained, as ever, excellent soldiers.

Thus, by M44, there were examples of Krieg troopers fighting in armies across the entire galaxy, from tyrannical alien warlord's armies of conquest, to the most pious and self-aggrandising of petty Imperiums. Even the Ophelian Imperium, at some point, purchased Krieg-muscle, to aid in their second war against Tallarn.

Krieg, the world of war, soon became a world of commercial conflict, growing wealthy and prosperous on the backs of its own self-imposed slave trade.



Leah Kimmel

The Kroot

The Kroot, a race whose biological imperative is to encounter as many diverse opponents as possible, would inevitably retain its mercenary traditions, regardless of increasing T'au pressure to stop this practice. This became more than just a moral issue to the T'au. The bitter T'au, who had seen the older races ruin and despoil so many worlds, believed that the older races did not deserve the galaxy, and enslavement or coerced servitude was the only solution. The mere suggestion of the Kroot actually helping their foes, was disgusting and abhorrent to them.

However, the Kroot continued this process, sending out war spheres far out into the ever-more anarchic galaxy. Soon, this process had to become much more secretive and undercover, as T'au influence expanded beyond and around Pech. The Kroot could not openly dissent, lest they be brought into conflict with the T'au Imperial war machine.

Thus, Kroot were a common sight across the galaxy throughout the period, lending their services to any race willing to permit them to devour the slain, or take a share of the plunder of a successful raid or invasion.

Yet, the Kroot could not hope to continue this practice indefinitely. Eventually, several Kroot war parties, returning from a successful war against the Nekulli Republic, were intercepted by T'au patrols, and destroyed. This sparked outrage amongst the Kroot, and equal but opposite anger from the T'au high command, who saw this as evidence of Kroot dissent.

In 634.M45, Commander Hawksight, current leader of the westward reaches of the T'au Empire, mobilised an expedition into the Kroot-held worlds. The war lasted almost two decades. Forbidden from exterminating the Kroot from orbit by Ethereal decree, the Commander was forced to engage the Kroot on the ground, on their home worlds of Pech, and the neighbouring terra-formed worlds, abundant in Kroot life. The T'au, by this point, had technology almost seven centuries in advance of the Kroot. Yet, despite this, the Kroot fought a masterful guerrilla war, assaulting the T'au at weak moments, before melting back into the wilderness. The Infuriated T'au forces used ever more devastating tactics, in a vain attempt to engage the Kroot in open war. The war depleted many resources, on both sides, and costed many, many lives. Such was the

apparent slaughter, that many of the Ethereal councils of the inner Sept worlds, began to call for withdrawal from Pech. After all, they argued, were the Kroot not intended to be allies? Even Aun'Va became restless over the war. He did not want his forces bogged down in internal conflicts, not when there was an entire galaxy to conquer.

Eventually, war broke out between the T'au and their allies, and the Thexian trade empire, and their own allies, in the galactic north. Resources were needed for this war, and thus Aun'Va ordered withdrawal from Pech, effective immediately. Thus, the Kroot survived. However, what really, really annoyed Commander Hawksight, was that throughout the entire conflict, the Kroot mercenaries continued to operate, somehow evading T'au patrols. No amount of conflict could prevent the Kroot from spreading themselves throughout the Segmentum, in their quest to bio diversify.



Janisar's Fremen

This brutal band of mercenaries had a humble start, deep within the Hexian Imperium, to the galactic north west. They were initially a shipping group, a private company of merchants, who had maintained a fleet of transports. When the galaxy suddenly shattered into rival groupings, they offered their services to the Hexian Imperium. This was a particularly weak Imperium, which hadn't the military power to requisition the fremen's cargo fleet, and thus the fremen could charge whatever they wanted, and became rather wealthy. However, due to the lack of military protection provided by the Hexians, the fremen, under the sickening mutant CEO of the fleet-based enterprise, Janisar, hired soldiers to protect them from piracy and rival post-Imperial shipping companies.

Eventually, the fremen discovered that they could get far more money from helping to fight in conflicts across the sectors, and perhaps even beyond. Thus, ever more former naval frigates, captured xenos craft, and converted cargo ships, were purchased from diverse entrepreneurs.

Janisar's fremen became infamous across a dozen sectors, as brutal and cold mercenaries, loyal to no one but themselves. They hired professional killers and soldiers from a wide range of backgrounds. Orphaned Imperial Guardsmen and stormtroopers, former Rogue trader staff, now-penniless and desperate for work, soldiers from destroyed Imperiums and fallen empires. Thugs, murderers and dregs from all across the galaxy's underworld. Bizarre xenos breeds from hundreds of different worlds. All were permitted to join, provided they pulled their weight, and made the fremen a tidy profit. Their equipment was of the highest quality, bought from any xenos or human empire they could buy from.

They became one of the most successful of mercenary brigades across the entire galaxy.

Of course, these three are but the tip of the iceberg. Thousands of separate bands and companies sprang up during this period, all hungry to get a share of the undoubtedly lucrative trade of war. For, depressingly, in a universe of such misery and pain, war was the only consistent franchise left.





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**SECTION XIII:
THE WOLF LORDS**

“You think we’re finished. We are the hounds! The very hounds of the Emperor! Of Russ! You think you’ve won? I disagree.”

Reputed vox message from the Wolf Lord Ethelred, from the battle barge ‘Fenritch’, before the boarding of the daemon vessel Horriblix.

The Second Age of Strife effected every chapter of the Angels of Death differently. Some descended into despair-driven barbarity, others broke up into warring factions. Some, like the Imperial Fists, decided to wait out the abomination (as we shall see later on). Some lost themselves in their own madness.

The Wolves were different. During the unfathomable genocide of the New Devourer, the Space Wolves divided up into their respective companies, and were scattered to every corner of the Imperium, for each great company was self-sufficient, and thus could function in this fractured state. Logan Grimnar, the Great Wolf during the early period, gave his wolves a simple message:

“Good hunting! Make our deeds legendary and glorious. Die well, my brothers. Die well!”

Thus, when the Devourer vanished, and the Emperor died, plunging the Imperium into utter chaos, the

Space Wolves made good on their instructions.

Each Wolf Lord of the twelve Great Company’s deeds were legendary. Yet, space is limited, and thus only some of the Wolf Lords’ exploits can be properly detailed here.

Ethelred (known as ‘the Breaker’), feasting upon Fenris upon the death of the Emperor. Thus, he was the Wolf lord tasked with defending the realm against collapse. He sallied forth from Fenris, flanked by his fleet of warships, and travelled to every world within reach of Fenris. Where worlds descended into anarchy, his wolves would quell the rebellion. Where xenos reared their foul faces, Ethelred would smash them. Often, when a world fell, the Wolf Lord would challenge their leaders to an honour duel, marching forwards, alone, wielding only his vast mace. Often, a world would surrender, rather than risk dying at his hand.

This desperate defence of the suddenly powerless Imperium continued on for many centuries. Daemons, monsters and aliens constantly assailed the wolves, from every direction. Supplies often became scarce, and many times, the wolf lord would order a munitions-producing world ransacked for supplies, though, unfortunately, this often ended in butchery, due to the heavy-handedness of the Wolves.



Yet, even though many millions died in the endless wars of this time, the Wolves managed to rally the scant few Imperial troops in the sector directly surrounding the Space Wolf homeworld, urging them on to fight for their honour. For the briefest instant, hope flickered anew.

Of course, then the western Chaos Imperium began to advance eastwards, like a vile plague. Two titanic armies surged from the Chaos Imperium. One was led by Abaddon himself, while a second force, led by the daemon prince Lothar, and the Wolf Brother traitor Tosdak.

With no astropathic communication, Ethelred could not determine which force would attack first, and from where. He dared not split his forces, for even all 150 of his wolves, backed up by their supporting hundred thousand human soldiers, would be horrendously outnumbered, by even one of the titanic armies of chaos.

200.M43, the daemon prince attacked. The beast led his forces across the northern planets of the fragile Fenrisian Imperium, murdering and butchering countless millions, as they ravaged whole systems. When informed of this by his rune priests, Ethelred ordered his forces north, to combat the daemoniac menace. His fleet surged north, and it was on the world of Stinling, that Ethelred engaged the evil chaos monsters. The forces had not expected the wolves to arrive so swiftly, and the wolf Lord made a surprise assault upon the daemon infested capital. Battle was joined, and fierce. Fallen Wolf Brothers, Despoiled Dark Cadians, and black Legionnaires, battled the frenzied wolves, and their allied human warriors. Blood mixed with the grey ash, and grimy muck of the planet, as limbs were hacked, veins were pierced, and man murdered man with reckless abandon. Many were the legends associated with the battle.

On the bridge into the city, a frenzied Khorne Berserker blocked all from crossing the bridge. His twin chain glaives were a whirling maelstrom of saw-toothed death. Eventually, he was slain by a cunning Blood Claw, who clambered underneath the bridge. Scuttling like a beetle, the blood claw managed to plunge his chainsword upwards, hacking through both the Berserker's Achilles tendons. As he dropped, the Wolf Priest Jalmere charged forwards, and dashed the

monster's head from his shoulders in one sweep of his blade.

Eventually, Ethelred engaged Lothar himself. The vile beast was three times the height of a man, and had grown a vast, twisted wolf's face, in mockery of the Space Wolves. Ethelred and his Long Fangs engaged the fiend. As he swept his mace as the beast, the Long Fangs would pump fire from their heavy weapons, preventing the daemon from striking back at the Wolf Lord. Eventually, Ethelred managed to duck beneath the prince's swinging claws, and swung his mace directly into the foul monster's spine, shattering it. The foul thing fought on, wrestling with Ethelred, and nearly savaging his throat with its daemoniac fangs. Ethelred floundered, and the fight seem to go from his eyes.

Tosdak watched, and he watched, as his gene brother struggled with the devil-wolf prince. He looked upon his former comrade in blood, as his armour was rent and his body was being slashed by ethereal talons. He could watch no more.

With a mighty bestial howl, Tosdak charged into the fray, and plunged his ether lance directly through the corrupt daemon prince's black heart. As it roared in agony, Lothar swept a monstrous paw at the Wolf Brother, decapitating the traitorous Astartes. However, Tosdak had slain the daemon prince, and both sides knew this. Ethelred took up his mace, and drew his bolter, and he blasted the foul beast apart, all the while, pulverising its stagnant flesh with his wolf-headed mace.

However, even as it dissolved into warp stuff, Lothar chuckled heinously. He was only the distraction, and Ethelred realised this too late. Fenris was the real target. It had always been the real target.

He made all speed back to Fenris. However, Abaddon was already there. Mighty Bjorn had fallen, slain by the coward Abaddon, who had pulverised him from orbit, along with most of the defence force. Ethelred, howling curses, immediately assaulted the chaos force. Another brutal, bloody battle took place, upon the rubble of Fenris herself. The stricken and depleted Wolves fought like gods of legend, and hacked their way through the great sea of chaotic filth, towards Abaddon. Murder was in the old Wolf's eyes.

An obliterator scorched his armour with fire and melta beam, but he pushed on, hacking it down with his maceband his frost blade. Daemonically corrupted Callidus lunged forth, hurdling poisonous darts into his flesh, and hacking at his limbs with perfectly murderous strikes. Though his blood was boiling with venom, and his limbs were mangled, he still fought through them, hacking them down in turn. Voltan the bull-prince, a vast chaos lord, charged him, and was butchered in the wild fury of the Space Wolf, who tore out his throat with his long fangs.

Eventually, he reached Abaddon himself, and battle was joined. He threw himself onto the Lord of the Chaos Imperium. Bestial frenzy fought daemon-enhanced might, and the two forces paused momentarily, as the battle was joined between the two combatants. However, Abaddon reached out with his Talon, and closed it around the Wolf Lord's throat. Abaddon grinned with evil delight, as he imitated his gene father's murder of his own brother, and the memory filled him with glee. Ethelred sank to his knees, choking and spluttering for air which wouldn't come. In one last, defiant strike, he swung his frost blade at his opponent, striking him in the face. The gnashing fangs of the blade tore through skin and flesh, ripping half of Abaddon's face from his corrupt skull. He howled in agony, hacking off the Wolf Lord's arm with his daemon sword, before plunging it deep into his body. Then, and only then, did Ethelred die, his soul roasted by infernal energies.

Yet, inspired by his example, the Wolves threw themselves upon the chaos forces, reaping a horrendous toll on the Chaos Imperium's forces. Though they died to a man, the Space Wolves of Ethelred's great Company took down over twelve million enemy soldiers. So depleted was the chaos force, that Abaddon had to return to his own lands, to replenish his numbers.

Thus, the sacrifice of the Wolves of Ethelred bought the survival of Fenris, and the last survivor, the cunning Blood Claw who helped slay the berserker, kept the demoralised human population of the Fenrisian Imperium alive, by moving between each world, telling tales of the ancient Space Wolves. Their sacrifice would save the Fenrisian Imperium from collapse.

Grimnar, upon the death of the Emperor, was already leading his Great Company against the New Devourer, and had only just survived the foul horde. Though the

New Devourer was vanquished, the Space Wolves of his company were depleted to only fifty marines. He determined, nevertheless, that he would perform great deeds, worthy of the grandest of songs. Thus, his fleet went off on another great hunt. As their fleet prowled the void, it became apparent they were far from the Imperium. Their navigator was lost, claiming the Emperor's light was gone (Grimnar nearly killing him for even suggesting it), and thus no maps could be made. Every world they encountered, as they short warp jumped between systems, were filled with daemons and monsters, ruled by hideous alien beasts, or were completely barren, picked clean by the New Devourer. Those forces he could combat, he slew with great fury. Those too powerful for his fleet, were left alone, but Grimnar promised he would find them each in turn, another day, and there he would slay them.

However, one world could not be left alone. The Foul Library of Coine. Terrified merchants and cowering human vessels, captured by the Wolves, claimed that foul, forbidden knowledge was being researched upon the world, and that the world was building vast libraries across its entire surface. A silver-tongued man, calling himself Mephet, even told the wolves he knew the way to the planet, and he led them there. Grimnar knew who ruled Coine, even before he entered the system, six months later. The glass spires, the vast libraries. The cold blue and gold sentinels, guarding each temple library. The Thousand Sons yet lived. The Great Wolf could not spare these ancient Traitors.

Thus, the space wolves, following a bombardment of the glass cities of Coine, made planet fall in great fury. When they landed, they realised something terrible. Beneath the shattered glass towers, vast metal ones reared, glimmering with internal verities flame. The very ground of Coine was silver and hard, covered in complex glyphs and symbols.

In orbit, Mephet's mocking laugh echoed across every vox link. For Coine was not the domain of the Thousand Sons, but had an altogether more powerful patron. Coine was a trap, to ensnare the Space Wolves. As the Deceiver destroyed the orbiting Battlebarges and strike cruisers, using his powerful silver vessels, which entered the system instantaneously, the Deceiver offered his terms. He wanted Grimnar and his marines alive. Legend does not tell us what the Star God desired. Some claim he wanted Morkai, the axe, for some



evil ritual. Others said there was something in the blood of the Space Wolves that the golden abomination craved. Some theories, rather more far fetched and outlandish, claim that the Deceiver wished to use the Wolves as bait, to ensnare the sorcerer Ahriman, in order for the C'tan to gain access to the Webway, and hence engage Cegorach directly. Who knows? All we know is that Grimnar, honourable as he was, refused, spitting in defiance, and planting his banner in the metal soil of Coine. He would not yield.

For months, the Necrons assailed the Wolves, and each time they were pushed back, at a dreadful cost. By the fourth month of the war, only twenty marines still lived, led by the bedraggled, and increasingly insane Grimnar. Each death came as a personal blow to the Old Wolf, and each time, he lost a little of his own mind. After every battle, the Deceiver would speak psychically to him, and offer him release, if he would only give into the Deceiver's demands. Every time, bleary-eyed and sorrowful, he would curse the Star god, and refuse.

At the height of the final month, the Wolves, holed up in one of the tall silver tomb towers, desperately fought off waves of immortal death machines. Every time the beasts died, they would rise up and knit back together. Only the plasma weapons remaining permanently took down the silver sentinels, causing them to vanish from sight. It seemed as though the five remaining Space Wolves would be utterly exterminated by the Deceiver's hordes, when help came from a most unwelcome place.

Within the cold dark chamber, a great fiery rent ruptured the air, and from the blazing chaos, stepped three marines. Two were clad in grey, unmarked power armour, with every chapter affiliation carefully filed off. They stood silent, bolters across their chests. The third marine was different, and the hairs on the Space Wolves' necks raised, and they snarled fiercely at the newcomer. For, standing before them, was a marine clad in the colours of the Dark Angels, the ancient rivals of the Wolves of Russ. The marine's twin pistols were sheathed, and his hands were raised in a placating manner. Grimnar snarled, decrying the Dark Angel. He responded calmly, by offering the Wolves passage from the world. All they had to do was go through the portal. After much deliberation, they reluctantly agreed. However, before they could leave, Necrons

began to shimmer into existence from thin air, azure weapons crackling with infernal energies. Heroically, Grimnar ordered his Wolves to go through the portal, while he held the Necrons off. As they fled, Grimnar tossed Morkai to his second in command, Long Fang Brynisson, and the long fang tossed his leader his own frost blade in exchange.

"I'll be wanting that back later," were the last known words of Logan Grimnar, before he charged, alone, into the silver horde, bellowing curses and oaths.

No one knows what happened to him, as he was never seen again. All the Space Wolves know is that he no doubt reaped a great toll amongst his unloving foes. Some claim he fought the Deceiver itself, but no one can ever be certain. Nevertheless, his ballad is sung by the various beleaguered little pockets of Space Wolf resistance across the galaxy to this day.

Of course, these are but a few of the tales of the Great Companies. The exploits of Ragnar the black-maned one, the final charge of Wolf Lord Vostor, the dread 13th Company, and all the other Companies, have their own tales of honour and sacrifice, each force desperately fighting in the last dying hope of an already festering corpse. The Space Wolves, scattered across the entire galaxy, knew they would likely die. However, they would not go quietly into oblivion. They would fight, for they were the hounds of the Emperor! Of Russ! Then the returned great wolf came for the wolf time, Russ surged forward to the head of the Deceiver...





**SECTION XIV:
THE STAR FATHER INCARNATE**

By the dawn of the 50th millennium, almost eight thousand years since the death of the Emperor, the galaxy was like a shattered mosaic. Thousands of Imperiums, of differing creeds, beliefs, and ever technology, were spread across light years, each weak and alone, compared to the glory of the old days long since passed. Aliens and madmen dominated worlds, and countless corpses of worlds devoured or scoured clean by war, lay scattered across every corner of the galactic disk. There was no rule, no law, no mercy.

And, amid all this carnage and mayhem, one thing never changed. The blind, desperate devotion of the masses, as they prayed and begged the dead emperor to save their souls from this galactic anarchy. Blood was sacrificed, people denounced neighbours, friends, children, to the roving witch hunters and lunatics, who eagerly brutalised and slaughtered those sacrifices in wild religious glee. From the most isolated and backwards of villages, huddled around their preacher, as he crushed the skull of an unbeliever with a crude cudgel, to the great, industrial-process of witch burning, which became a near constant feature of the dreadful Ophelian Imperium, the majority of humanity were crying out for order, for protection.

On 000.M50, they received their wishes, their prayers. And they regretted it, with all their putrid hearts. As, on that day, the Star Child, fermenting in the womb of

the immaterial, was born.

To define the origins of this Star Child, we must look to the Horus Heresy, so many millennia ago. In the instant the Emperor struck down his gene-son, all his good will and benevolence was driven from him, into the ether, leaving only a bitter, dying husk of cold oppression. This husk was placed onto the Golden Throne, thus sealing the warp from Terra and keeping him alive. Yet, the Throne's purpose went beyond this. This throne was once fashioned, to help draw in all knowledge of the universe, drawn from the immaterial. And so it continued to do. For thousands upon thousands of years, the misery of the galaxy, the heartache and the desperate pleas for protection and submissive pleas for oppression, filled the Emperor's mind. Every event, every death, resonated within the Emperor's mind. Every senseless murder, every despairing tear of a bereaved mother, screaming out for someone to save them, pulsed through the throne, even as millions of psykers were fed into the Emperor, amplifying and intensifying these thoughts of anguish and misery. It drove Him utterly, irreversibly, insane. Trapped inside his own corpse, he screamed silently, though no one could hear him, and those that could were mad zealots themselves, and could not understand his babbled, confused words.



All the while, in the warp, the Star Child grew and matured, as yet unborn, but waiting for its moment. The Star Child was a being formed from the most seemingly positive of emotions possible: compassion, and the will to protect everyone. Of course, fed and nourished within the warp, these emotions were twisted and stretched, to gargantuan and monstrous proportions. The Star Child became fed upon all forms of protection, and this protection was taken to its extreme. To protect everyone, repression and domination was required, and these emotions fed into one another, until they were as one. Compassion turned to jealous love. In the twisted aspect of the Star Child, love for humanity was love for the Star Child, and no other. It became a dark and dreadful force, lurking in the hidden folds of the warp. Waiting.

It was not until the forty second millennium, that these two forces, one of utter oppression, the other a cold being, fed upon slaughter and murderous sacrifice, would merge once more. When the Emperor, strapped to His chair, looked into the cold eyes of His killer, swathed in a deep hood, He did not resist him, but merely muttered, as the blade was poised over His heart:

“END THIS.”

Terra fell to chaos, but the great spirit of sacrifice surged free, into the warp, and the waiting coils of its counterpart. It took mere instants within the warp, as the two great energies fused and moulded into something far, far worse than the sum of its parts. In the materium, this fusing took thousands of years, the Imperium shattering and the galaxy falling apart in the meantime.

The birth, unlike the birth of Slannesh, was not some great spilling warp storm explosion, but rather a mighty implosion. Centred around Ophelia, the dark heart of the Emperor's bloody worship, space rippled, as Ophelia was swallowed whole by the warp storm, before warp space merely returned to normality, leaving the Ophelian Imperium without a capital world. It survived (barely), but Tallarn took advantage (but that is a separate tale).

Warp storms suddenly flared into life, galaxy wide, as the entire galaxy felt... something. It was as if two ocean behemoths fought beneath the waves of a great



sea, and caused the boats above to toss and turn as a result. The Chaos Gods, that great behemoth, wrestled with this sudden resurgent force for order. No one could possibly describe the conflict, because, in effect, it was not a conflict in any conceptual sense. Realms overlapped, folded inwards, cursed and shifted into different emotional states, and reason and lunacy sifted and pulped emotions of befuddlement and anguish, and despair and murderous lust, as the warp churned as never before. Nurgle seized upon the empathetic despair of the Emperor aspect, but was twisted off course by the hope of dominion and protection, which was surrounded by the hope for more hope, and the urge for change. Daemons, whose concepts and feeding emotions switched sides as much as their patrons, flickered between devil and ordered angel, as the great game played out, confusing and insane as the warp ever was. Yet, the warp was as much a process as a distinct entity, or entities and, like always, the process was the same.

The Star Child rose up, and the chaos gods (nominally) united against it, overthrowing it at some point amongst the non-causal realm of mind-numbing density and dreadful insanity. After the overthrow of the Star Child, Nurgle rose in its place, only for the Star Child to unite, however fractionally, with the other gods, in overthrowing Nurgle. And hence, the great game continued, as it ever had. It became one of five main facets of the Warp.

Of course, in the materium, the Star Child (or 'Star Father' as it became known) made itself felt far more profoundly.

The Star Father's influence was almost as insidious as the chaos gods. Tendrils of essence would infest the minds of the rulers and devout priests of a world. They only wanted to protect their flock, as the Emperor had wished. The cold, commanding voice of the Star Father, seemed to whisper and bellow in their minds at once. To protect, one must enslave. But more than enslave. Dominate entirely. Thus, a web of influence spread across the whole world, unseen but powerful beyond measure. Priests and preachers performed sermons, which opened up people to the possibility of 'the ultimate piety'. Chaos was emotions, the sick twisted emotions at the heart of sentience. To remove thought of chaos, one must remove thought. Unconsciousness and servitude eternal, was the only fully secure protection from chaotic corruption. Thus, they all, slowly, began to come around to this way of thinking. Those that didn't, were sacrificed in the name of submission to Him, to the Star Father, the great patriarch of all existence (in their minds). All the while, they were the ones corrupted, as they sacrificed more souls to the Star Father, until it was powerful enough to break down the barriers of reality, and allow his daemons (which we shall refer to as 'angyls' from now on, just to differentiate these from daemons, or spirits of chaos) to walk upon the surface.



By that time, the world was entranced by these angyls, who set about reshaping the world. Buildings melted down, and reformed, as uniform, silver and gold monuments to the Star Father, while the population was forced to walk across the surface of the world for the rest of their lives, for no particular reason. However, should any of them leave the perfectly straight lines marked out for their walks, they would be instantly destroyed, and their souls dragged into the warp. Men, women and children walked and walked, until they could no longer walk. These people were then either killed, or died of exhaustion. Such was the way of the Star Father. Worlds such as these, sprang up across the galaxy, especially around worlds where devotion to the Emperor had become completely senseless. Unlike daemonworlds, angylworlds becalmed the warp directly around the world, rather than churning it. These were worlds of horrifying, self-defeating order.

The Sensei, the progeny of the Emperor, managed to, for the most part, resist domination (their tragic stories are told elsewhere though, so we will not dwell upon it here).

The Angyls, the dread avatars of His Will, were powerful and as cold as their master. Faceless, the most common form of the Angyls was of winged beings, with androgynous, silver and gold shapes, neither man,

woman, or any other natural form. Dozens of wings arched from them, each devastating and bladed, and the long, blank faces protruded from within these wings. They blazed permanently with intense white light, and left trails of sparks behind them, as they floated ethereally wherever they went. Some say the Angyls are formed from the spirits of all those astro-paths, soul bound to the Emperor while still clothed in flesh. None can prove this, but the theory is prevalent. Of the greater Angyls, only one is known to have a name, and a face. The Malcador, the great Dominion. The great dominion has a harsh, stern, humanoid face, amidst all the folding robes and razor-edged wings. It is the greatest of them all, the first soul bound to the Star Father, so long ago. It is often the voice of its patron during wars, and he only ever offers one option to those enemies of the Star Father:

“OBEY!”

For, in the grim nightmare of the the 51st Millenium, there is no righteous or good path. That was murdered, along with the Emperor, long ago. Tyranny, oppression, or anarchy and doom, are the only options left to the faithful. All is dust, and there is no salvation!

Of course, the above statement isn't quite accurate...







SECTION XV:

THE DYING:

**BIEL-TAN, THE AELDARI, AND THE
LORD OF THE DEAD**

The Aeldari, already a dying race by M41, suffered ever greater misery during the Second Age of Strife. The craftworlds, slow and cumbersome as they were, were difficult to defend against the New Devourer. Many craftworlds, though they fought valiantly for months, eventually fell to the New Devourer. Craftworlds were gutted, their towers cast down, their people slain and devoured. Often, all that remained of a craft world was its titanic wraith bone skeleton, the pulsing infinity circuit, and the innumerable scattered soul gems, which glimmered with the life their murdered bodies had lost.

These ghost Craftworlds drifted, silent and alone, as the Aeldari race was slowly, gradually culled. With a much reduced population, the remaining Aeldari found it hard to defend what little colonial assets they still possessed. Often, the Exodites, confined to their paradise worlds, were left to fend for themselves. Some Exodite colonies were attacked by opportunistic alien empires, such as the Hax Paterinius, a race of utterly alien, multi-limbed creatures, that traveled the void using their Unam, ships made of pure energy. The Hax was thought to have unintentionally destroyed over a dozen Exodite worlds, as the Hax moved onto the world, and Terra-formed it to their preferred environment. Unfortunately, the Hax were native to worlds filled with sulphuric acid vapour, and temperatures hot enough to melt lead, and thus their Terra-forming often killed the native population. The Hax were a peaceful race, and only ever fought in self defence. Nevertheless, they killed millions of Aeldari in those early days.

Some Exodite colonies were far more shrewd. When the Astronomicon spluttered and died, the sudden anarchy that shattered the Imperium, drove the surviving power magnates and opportunistic warlords into a frenzy of land grabbing, and many maiden worlds were seized this way. Some Exodite worlds, such as the one led by Alessair Hurom, dismantled the physical evidence of their culture, including all the buildings and even the crop fields, before they hid themselves. Thus, the post-Imperial forces arrived to find pristine, empty worlds, and eagerly colonised them. However, slowly, the Exodites, under false guises and using trickery, charm and subterfuge, infiltrated all the high offices of these various petty Imperiums, becoming the strange, sinister lords of the realms, who, bizarrely, never seemed to die of old age. Many of the northernmost Imperiums, those small Imperiums bordering Thexian

and East Chaos-Imperial space, are likely to be led, in secret, by Exodites, such as the Hurom Imperium.

With the death of the Emperor, a great wailing cry erupted throughout the warp, as Slannesh groaned. The Star Father, in its first waking moments, struck at Slannesh first, sending the perverse prince reeling, at least initially. This shudder of frustrated lust and pride slammed into each craftworld's Infinity Circuit like a hurricane. Though the barrage was resisted easily by the Craftworlds, the Farseers were suddenly aware of new potential futures suddenly coming into existence. No matter how hard they scanned all possible futures, the predominant one was always the same. A great white fist, pressing the galaxy down. The galaxy would be silent, cold and heartless. At first, the Farseers feared that this future represented the final victory of the Yngir star-hungry. However, this doom came not from the sterile dimensions of the C'tan, but instead from the warp of all places. Flinching back from their visions, like children pulling their hands away from fire, they realised they had to act.

The sudden upsurge in Aeldari deaths, due to the New Devourer, opened a new avenue to the Craftworlders. They all felt it, shifting beneath the surface of every single Craftworld. Its name was death, yet it was hope. Ynnead, the god of the dead. It was growing, and they knew it.

The Aeldari knew, while alive, they could not save the universe from the ancient enemy, and their souls would never be safe, not really. Eventually, craftworlds became less and less frequent. Stories of the Aeldari became myths, then legends, then lies, to the rest of the galaxy, as the craftworlds pulled their forces from active engagement. The Farseers would not explain what they were planning, as all their children returned to the craftworlds. They offered each of their people a stark choice: They could stay with their craftworld, and help save the galaxy and the Aeldari, or they could leave their craftworlds, never to return, and their soul stones would be disconnected from the Infinity Circuit, and they would become of the Path of the Outcast. Only roughly seventy thousand Aeldari took this path. The others were too hopeful, or too naïve. Once the outcasts left, the Farseers, in their mercy, unleashed a nerve toxin throughout their craftworlds, killing billions of Aeldari at that moment, in an act of betrayal few

Aeldari could comprehend, even as they choked their last breaths. The Warlocks and Farseers then collected all the soulstones, and 'emptied' them, directly into the Infinity Circuit, before they each ritually fell upon their blades, and their souls too transmitted into the growing Infinity Circuit.

The great combined spirit rose up, swelled with such a vast sacrifice. It pulsed and swirled and... it did nothing. The vast, unimaginable power of Ynnead was trapped within the Infinity Circuit. For, though many craftworlds followed the route of sacrifice, there was one notable exception. Biel-Tan refused to accept such a morbid view of the situation. When approached by the other Farseers of the other craftworlds, Asitar blade song, the ruling Autarch of the Swordwind, responded:

"Sacrifice? Death? Have you all lost your minds? We are the Asur! The Aeldari! Our empire is overrun by barbarian mon keigh, and pathetic usurpers, and you wish to give them our empire without even resistance? This is our galaxy, not theirs! We are close to victory, do not falter now!"

The delusional leaders of Biel-Tan, could not accept defeat. They considered their craftworld was on the verge of snatching back the galaxy from the filthy Imperium. When the Imperium collapsed, they took this

as a sign, and moved to full mobilisation, leaving their fellow craftworlds to fester, like they wished.

Many of the outcasts from the other craftworlds, appalled at the actions of the Farseers, joined with Biel-Tan, taking new oaths of loyalty. Wild Riders from Saim Hann, spirit seers and the legendary Yriel, from Iyanden, vast numbers of rangers from Alaitoc, and even a few dissidents from the black craft world, were amongst the many Aeldari, loyal to the war effort. Using their perfectly honed combined arms tactics, and utilising their superior FTL system, the Sword Wind's armies were devastatingly effective. From 488.M45, to 333.M46, the Biel-Tan engaged and defeated three Petty Imperiums, the pathetically slow and inexperienced armies of the small clusters of human worlds vastly insufficient in the face of the finely crafted killing machine, that was the Aeldari warhost.

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Ignoring the strong advice of the Harlequins, the Biel-Tan struck at T'au targets, and even engaged in a direct war with the T'au, when they founded a Sept World on the site of a Maiden world. The war lasted several years, with Biel-Tan abandoning the world, after seeding it with a special fungus, which would prevent the T'au from ever growing crops upon the world, essentially making it useless for colonisation.

A large force of Aeldari later struck at Tallarn-occupied space, and decimated several worlds. It was only the unexpected (and short-lived) alliance of Tallarn and Ophelia against the Aeldari, which drove them off.

The Cossedus Imperium, an industrially active power in the galactic centre, was engaged by Biel-Tan's 1st fleet, which stripped that Imperium of its naval power in just seven years, leaving it open to be torn apart by rival Imperiums, ceasing upon the weakness.

Increased Necron activity led to many more engagements with their ancient foes. Initially, they were successful. Of course, once the Ophilim-Kiasoz was unleashed, at the battle of Fornostia, the Biel-Tan could no longer engage the Necrons on their own, for fear of the Deceiver unleashing that terrible device once more. Nevertheless, the Aeldari continued to engage the Necrons discreetly.

In the year 000.M47, a troupe of harlequins came to Biel-Tan, to perform the dance of the fall. However, these supposed Harlequins were, in fact, Dark Aeldari Wyches in disguise, sent on a mission of assassination. When they were brought before the twin thrones of Yriel and Asitar, the Wyches threw off their disguises, and battle was suddenly joined. These Wyches were of the Wych Cult of Strife, led by Lilith Hesperax herself. Startled civilians were slain by the scores suddenly, as the Dire Avengers, the bodyguards to Yriel and Asitar, fought with one another. The battle in the throne room was as if one in legends, with the superhuman Aeldari darting unbelievably fast, faster than the mortal eye

could follow. Asitar, the mistress of Biel-Tan, and master Autarch, fought off scores of the psychotic Aeldari, their blades and whips clashing with fine wraith bone blades, and immortal skill.

Lilith, her near-naked body unblemished by any scars, such was her skill, dueled with Yriel, prince of Iyanden, and husband to Asitar. Their battle ranged from the high-vaulted rafters of the throne room, down to the personal chambers of Yriel himself. The two combatants' blades were near invisible, as they exchanged blows and parries with inhuman skill and speed. Lilith scored small cut after small cut against Yriel, somehow bypassing his personal force field. Bleeding and tired, Yriel at last finished the battle, driving the Spear of Twilight straight through the cursed Archite witch.



Lilith hissed perversely, as Yriel kicked her from his blade. Before her death, it was said she tasted her own blood, for the first time in her life, and she giggled mockingly, before Yriel finished her, with a decapitating blow. The Wyches were defeated.

Asitar, furious, sent the surviving Wyches back to Commoragh, with every orifice sealed shut, and their bodies filled with vile wasp-like Jindi Bugs, which tore them apart from within.

Within a year, the Biel-Tan leaders received another gift: a cask of perfectly blended Commoraghan wine (which was surprisingly, un-poisoned), along with a message, written in blood, but in a supreme hand all the same. It congratulated Biel-Tan on electing such an 'exquisitely brutal' mistress as their leader, and wished her good luck in her war with the Mon Keigh. It was signed by Vect himself.

Though the Biel-Tan had fallen out of favour with the Harlequins, and still enemies of the monstrous Dark Aeldari, they were still a formidable faction throughout the period, right up until M51. They never lost their arrogant sense of self-worth, and still believed that they could reclaim their empire, even as the galaxy tumbled down about their ears.

Such was the way of the last of the few, the remnants of the great Aeldari corpse.







SECTION XVI:

THE BLACKHEART'S REIGN:

THE EASTERN CHAOS IMPERIUM

Though the Eastern Chaos Imperium is referred to as 'eastern', this is only in relation to the Segmentum Solar and Obscurus. Though Huron's own Imperium of Chaos is located within the Ultima Segmentum, it is focused around the Maelstrom, the second greatest warp/real space in the galaxy, located towards the centre of the great galactic spiral. For it was from this realm of madness that the Blackheart, the Tyrant of Badab, renewed his desire to rule an Empire all of his own, as his foes in the Imperium were cast down by the screaming anarchy brought about by the failing of the guiding light of humanity.

As the New Devourer was violently birthed in the churning war in Octavius, Huron Blackheart listened to the whispering warnings of daemons and devils, who told him of this coming menace. As more and more Imperial vessels were drawn off to combat this sudden dread force, he struck, attacking and seizing all the warp capable vessels he could plunder, before fleeing into the Maelstrom once more. There, as the New Devourer slew whole civilisations, he and his minions, drawing together all his resources, consolidated their place within the realm of madness, defeating and enslaving all the rival chaotic war bands within the warp interface, and demanding they join his Red Corsairs, just like all the other chaotic marines within.

The wars within were brutal, bloody, and bitter. Alien monsters, mutants and twisted chaotic daemons fought for all sides during these numerous internal wars. Eventually, with the defeat and destruction of the vast possessed space hulk Mordrecar, Huron was at last master of the Maelstrom. When the New Devourer had left, and the Astronomicon had died, he surged forth from the hellstorm. His fleets found conquering remarkably easy, as the Imperial defence fleets and naval forces remained in terrible disarray following the initial shock of every astropath and warp route being destroyed.

Brutal bands of Red Corsairs, their armour painted crudely with paint mixed with human blood to cover and insult their former chapters' colours, brutalised isolated worlds for light-years around the warp storm. Their tyrannical assaults would begin with the bombing and bombardment of the capitals of each world. If they still refused to give into Corsair demands, the crazed marines would make planetfall, and begin killing at random in the streets, hunting terrified civilians

through the rubble avenues of their former abodes. Ex Space Wolves, Sons of Guilliman, the Brothers of the Hound, the Black Horns, the Beasts of Ravage, and innumerable other marines from innumerable other renegade chapters, all joined in with the slaughter and mayhem, daubed in the crude red paint, a symbol of the nominal allegiance to Huron Blackheart. Governors were taken hostage, or simple broken into gory pieces, just for the sick laughs of the chaos space marine butchers. Eventually, every world they encountered gave them what they wanted: riches and resources. In fact, these raids against the seven hundred or so worlds around the Red Corsairs' domains became almost a sort of tithe. Only, much like an Imperial force, the Red Corsairs protected these worlds from external threats, such as ravenous aliens, or rival Post-Imperial warlords. The people of these planets were the Corsairs', to do with how they wanted.

Massive numbers of grubby, cowardly human filth tended to follow the Corsairs around during their wars and murderous excesses, hoping to catch the eye of their superhuman betters. These human scum ranged from ex-pirates, convict soldiers, released from servitude, and murderers and dissidents, narrowly dodging the gibbet on their own worlds. Often, particularly cunning or brutal human renegades would be granted the equipment of the planet's slaughtered PDF, by their Red Corsair masters. The craven hordes of Huron swelled enormously during the early centuries of the period.

Eventually, after centuries of complete anarchy and chaos, the opponents of Huron finally began to form Petty Imperiums and military forces of their own, and sought to topple Huron, and pick his lands clean, subsuming them into their own ambitiously growing empires.

The first of these usurpers was the Emperor Dotor, and his attendant Imperium, which attacked from the north. A fleet of seven hundred fully armed naval vessels, employed by the wealthy Imperial-impostor Dotor, entered Huron Blackheart's territories brazenly. They had the finest vessels, requisitioned from a naval dock in the Gothic sector, which bordered the Dotorian Imperium, and had elite soldiers, drawn from numerous Guard units taken in by Dotor's minions. This fleet easily entered his borders, and took many of Huron's worlds without so much as a fight. Each world

was brutalised and terrified. They had no PDF, their own forces butchered and confiscated long ago by Huron. In fact, the only symbol of Huron's ownership of the worlds in question were the billions upon billions of stakes, which lined every city on every world, each with a skewered foe rotting upon them. You see, Blackheart was not an Imperialist in the traditional sense. He didn't want colonies, he just wanted spoils, and his various fleets were constantly mobile, moving around his empire constantly, their cruel gaze searching out anyone who challenged their master's will. Thus, Huron's extensive fleets merely watched, and waited, looking for their time to strike Dotor's forces on their own terms.

On the planet of Helis, Huron sprung his trap. He landed a small group of his Corsairs on the planet, taking the planetary capital, before he split his fleet into three, and sent one fleet into the asteroid fields, another around the far side of the system's sun, and his own fleet elements around the dark side of the planet.

When Dotor's fleet arrived, they were instantly T'aunted via vox, by the Corsairs on the planet's surface. The imperial forces unleashed a barrage of orbital devastation upon the world, but this merely killed billions of normal humans, while the Corsairs were securely dug in. Once the bombardment stopped, the mocking transmissions began again, with one of the marines below claiming to be Huron himself (even though he was obviously not).

Then, the smallest fleet element, from the asteroid field, engaged the Imperial Fleet, and were easily driven away, losing two ships. The Dotorians, in their foolish arrogance, thought that was the full extent of Huron's forces. The admiral thought himself secure in orbit, and sent down his soldiers, to cleanse the world of chaos filth. However, the Corsairs made themselves difficult to dislodge. The streets ran red with blood, as brutal street by street fighting erupted. The crimson maniacs launched random assaults from all angles and locations, making the enemy army's job of extermination all the harder. The Dotorians were forced to unleash more and more of their forces onto the ground. After a full two weeks of relentless carnage, the Corsairs on the world were almost all dead. However, all the Dotorian ground force was too. It was then that Huron struck. On the dark side of the world, he unleashed exterminatus on the planet. As dusk fell,

it brought with it a more profound darkness, and the life eater swept across the enemy forces, and the entire world in turn. In one swoop, they were all vanquished.

Then, plunging from hiding behind the radiation of the sun, Huron's second fleet struck, taking the reeling Dotorians by surprise. The vastly larger and more powerful Imperial vessels, were overcome mainly by boarding parties. Particularly effective were the psychotically suicidal mercenary space marines of the Purge. They entered battleships and fought their way deep inside the ships, before unleashing chemical and biological weapons inside. Through the cramped environs, the plagues and viruses spread swiftly, killing everyone onboard, including the purge marines themselves.

The few remaining warships which had repelled boarders, were subsequently vanquished by Huron's final, largest fleet, led by himself, and consisting of all his captured battleships and battle barges.

That day, he had defeated the entire Dotorian expedition, and, what is more, had stolen most of their vessels too.

This pattern played out many more times. Each time an Imperium or enemy fleet invaded, he would defeat them, and capture the surviving fleets, thus making him stronger for the next campaign. Thus, while repelling invaders, he often counter-invaded, stealing resources from his enemies, and making their planets fear the legend of the Blackheart.

At some point, as he consolidated his now rather large, sprawling empire, founded upon fear, a potential ally made himself known to Huron.

In 327.M44, a vessel bearing the dark and sinister runes of chaos, as well as the image of a great aquila, defiled, was intercepted on the western borders of the Eastern Chaos Imperium. This vessel, claiming to bear a message for Huron, was taken directly to Huron's latest base of operations, the fortress of J'baal.

Formerly a Ramillies Class Star Fort, the colossal vessel was twisted and reshaped by chaos. As the emissaries arrived, the fortress was still under construction. Huron, gaining much favour from the entities of the warp, had acquired the services of many daemons and devilish spirits, which worked on converting and



enhancing the ruined old fortress, which had been abandoned long ago. Using Dark Mechanicus, soul forge daemonic entities, and captured slaves which had aided Abaddon in constructing the Planet Killer, Huron was building something dark and powerful within the decrepit heart of the fortress.

The emissaries, seven hulking chaos marines, bearing the grim heraldry of Abaddon's Chaos Imperium, were led by an escort of several dozen Corsairs, the rag tag, brutal garb of the piratical Red Corsairs contrasting sharply with the hellishly burnished and detailed armour of the Black Legionnaires, which writhed with demonic un-life. The corsairs, on the other hand, were rogues and monsters, and cared nothing for their armour, and it showed, with broken sections of armour simply ripped away, and replaced by mail, or crude iron plates.

Eventually, the emissaries for Abaddon were brought before Huron himself. Few beings have ever entered his abode and lived. It is said strange trinkets and artefacts, from across the galaxy, are displayed within, testament to Huron's prolific skill for thievery and twisted obsession for the arcane and the valuable. Jars with malformed monsters, and small cages displaying mewling mutant freaks are said to line the smoky hall, which is filled constantly with smoking incense.

The emissaries came before the Blackheart, and brought him news from the Despoiler. Abaddon offered him the chance to join the Western Imperium, and in the process, crush the few petty Imperiums trapped between the two vast forces of infernal power. Huron did not wish to be subservient to Abaddon, who he considered his lesser. He offered a counter offer: that Abaddon could join his Imperium, as Huron's subservient, and, perhaps, learn how to truly run an Empire of Chaos.

The great horned leader of the emissaries, Lord Vadek Suul, upon hearing such a blatant challenge to Abaddon, cursed Huron for his cowardice and pathetic pride, before charging the Chaos Lord. Huron slew the Chaos Lord in a mere dozen blows, and his minions were seized by the massively-outnumbering Red corsairs, aided by the countless malformed beasts which filled Huron's court.

Ever since that day, annually, Huron has returned the emissaries, piece by piece, to Abaddon, to fully enunciate how much he disrespects his rival.

Though the palatable hate betwixt the two great powers stirred the warp in its intensity, neither side could truly capitalise upon their foe, or invade their rival. A dozen petty Imperium's lay between them, and in the process of sending a war fleet into their foe's territory, the fleet would have to fight the various petty Imperial forces, not to mention countless raiders and pirates, both human and xenos. Thus, the two Chaos Imperium's are the worst of enemies, yet neither side can absorb the other, or destroy their rival either.

Huron soon expanded in multiple directions, until it stretched from Molov in the north, to Badab in the south.

By 999.M44, Huron's Imperium was truly vast, encompassing almost a thousand worlds. His expansion, however, is checked in several places. To the south-west of his Imperium, the powerful Ryza-Catachan alliance has proven very effective. The vast ranks and crushing industry of Ryza, which had militarised the entire subsector directly surrounding it, combined with the unmatched skill and brutal war craft of the Catachans, allowed them to contest (and often secure) worlds from Red Corsair dominance. In the north-east lay the gates of Varl. The blockades around that area remained firm (at least until M51, and those dread days to come...). Even though Huron, if he truly desired, could have defeated the permanent battle fleets around that sector, Huron dared not do so. Not once the golden liar had unleashed the Ophilim-Kiasoz...

Despite these checks on his power, Huron remained a powerful warlord, ruling a (comparatively) massive area of the galaxy. Yet, each world was not directly ruled by him. His policies were callous, lethal, dangerous and brutal, but they were nevertheless oddly freeing, to a population bred upon centuries of Imperial oppression. The unspoken deal between the worlds conquered by him and his forces was thus. His fleets had access to any and all resources they needed, on any world within the Empire, and could come to claim it at any time, meaning the world must be in readiness to receive his ships at any time. In exchange, only the forces of Huron would pillage the worlds, and no other. The worlds would also never be destroyed by Huron, unless he needed to, or really really wanted to. This

unofficial system became known as the 'hierarchy of pillage'. Though a brutal system, it allows unprecedented freedom upon all the worlds within the Imperium, to do whatever they want. Perverse and murderous cults were given pretty much free reign. Some worlds even maintained the religion of the old Imperium.

However, their religion soon became twisted down the generations, and the Emperor became more a figure of hated oppression, and less of a force of protection. For, it was not the Angels of the Emperor which protected them, but instead the murderous devils of Huron's war bands.





**SECTION XVII:
THE WEBWAY WARS:
THE NET BREACHED**

The warp churned as never before, as the Emperor finally expired. His presence rippled through the warp, and the realm of madness fought and twisted in furious eternity. His seal upon the web way ruptured, and daemons spewed from both sides. The Webway flexed and gagged as devils ploughed through the corridors of ethereal speed.

The flickering forms of the harlequins fought like legends, fighting off daemons from every angle of approach. The Webway was their ally in this conflict. As the Masque of Slannesh led the daemon hordes through the complex labyrinth dimension, the very passageways of the Webway distorted and flexed, constantly in flux. Even the daemons of Tzeentch, madness incarnate, couldn't scuttle their way through the complex realm.

Hordes of foes were funnelled into ambushes led by Harlequins, and vast forces of devils, that would have otherwise doomed all the Aeldari, were turned against one another, the inherent hatred within each daemon's nature used against them. The Drukhari, eager to keep their shadowy realms secure, aided the Harlequins wherever they could. The howls of insane hellions and the grunts and bellows of numerous daemons from beyond nightmares echoed throughout space and time, throughout the Webway network. At the central nexus, where time was irrelevant, the Solitaires fought their devilish foes for a billion years, before darting, bladed shapes from Commoragh came to their aid, and together the jesters and murderers pushed the daemons from the Webway. Of course, this act was one of selfish self-interest on the part of the Drukhari.

While the Harlequins were hard-pressed to defeat the daemons, Ahriman took advantage of their overstretched positions, seizing an area within the Webway for himself. His Cabal of sorcerers used foul artefacts to dart through the Webway in a similar method to Warp Spiders, allowing them to travel from world to world, sowing discord and gathering knowledge for their twisted master. For Ahriman determined that he would take the secrets of the Black Library, by any means necessary. Previously, before the Emperor's fall, the guardians were too powerful to overcome. Now, Ahriman had free reign across the whole galaxy, to find and exploit whole planets, just to find artefacts of arcane power, powerful enough to unleash upon the guardians, and breach the defences of the Library, and

hence uncover all the secrets of chaos.

During this period of woe, the Biel-Tan alliance of Craftworld Aeldari made extensive use of the Webway, in order to prosecute their wars of conquest, often disregarding the wishes of the laughing guardians of the realm. In their belligerence, the Biel-Tan considered themselves the unbridled rulers of the Aeldari. Their wars with the Thousand Sons and the Drukhari lasted well into the fiftieth millennium. Vect and Asitar fought a war of feint and slight of movement, their forces prowling for each other amidst the twisting corridors of the interstellar network, while the automata of Ahriman's Thousand Sons blundered around the Webway, causing havoc and mayhem wherever they passed. Warp Spiders and Mandrakes hunted and killed with joy born of ancient rivalries (and, in the Mandrakes' case, literal hunger). On the World of Kastir, a world half-submerged by the warp, where the Webway criss-crossed across insanely, a vast force of Incubi, led by the Dark Father, engaged another force of Striking Scorpions, led by their Phoenix Lord. None can know the outcome for certain, but most believe the conflict remains unresolved. For, as the legends say, the final battle of the Phoenix Lords would see them all dead. This is yet to occur (and may never do so, for the paths of the future are fickle threads of snapping silk. Nothing is certain).

Vect repeatedly sent assassins to murder the Biel-Tan leadership, in various unique ways, but was relatively unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the Drukhari continued on their old ways of pillage, slaughter and slave-taking, regardless of what else transpired in the wider real world. Often, the Kabals would fight each other, both within Commoragh and the wider environs of the Webway. Sometimes, ambitious Archons would storm into the empty ghost Craft Worlds, and there set up bases of their own. War even began to spill into those cold dead realms too, as Biel-Tan forces and Harlequins battled the degenerate children of the Dark City, battling amongst the cold forests of crystal trees, smashing the ancient monuments to the Farseers' folly.

Some of the settlements within the network even sent distress signals to their various allies, with claims of rampaging green beasts, but none save the master of the Webway can verify such insane claims. Even the twisted abominations from the Crone Worlds have

made attempts to enter the Webway once more. How these horrid things survived the fall, none can say. All that is known is that they seek to cast down the Webway, and open it to Slannesh. The lithe and perverse beings, that may once have been Aeldari, cavorted through the arteries and capillaries of the Webway network like lustful daemonettes, murdering and fornicating like base monsters as they went.

Cegorach and his Harlequins watched this carnage from afar, orchestrating the Webway passages in such a way as to direct their various foes against one another in the manner they desired. They could not, however, oust Ahriman, as his Webway city was shielded by daemonic wards and hexes. However, in the materium

proper, his clown-like emissaries manipulated the various petty empires and kingdoms of the galaxy, often tricking them into attacking and destroying planets where Webway gates owned by Ahriman's followers were located, thus attempting to cut him off from support. Of course, Ahriman played his own games, often capturing bellicose or tyrannical xenos species, informing them of the Webway network, and directing them to the nearest gates. Thus, Harlequins often found their gates besieged by xenos and human empires, eager to take advantage of the secret network. Though they couldn't get into the Webway, it nevertheless made leaving the Webway difficult for the Harlequins.



Even more disturbingly (for the Harlequins), by M49 word began to reach them from worlds all across the galaxy, of a charismatic immortal who has been using subterfuge and lies in attempts to trap Ahriman and his followers for some reason. It would seem this stranger (known often as the voice of honesty, or sometimes simply the messenger) wishes to breach the Webway, as the chaos sorcerer did before. Perhaps coincidentally, Necron raiders have been particularly active during the Second Age of Strife, hunting down the former Inquisitors of the old Imperium. Some claim they are searching for one Inquisitor in particular...

The Deceiver, despite his loathing for the immaterial, seems to be trying to enter the Webway somehow,

perhaps to find an advantage against his rival C'tan, or perhaps simply through the desire to slay Cegorach. No one knows, and to second guess such ancient beings is to invite madness. In any case, this was only one of many schemes of the Deceiver's, and paled in comparison to the Ophelim-Kiasoz, and the events within the Gates of Varl. Compared to the horrendous edifice of the Kiasoz, what did breaching the Webway matter?

Thus, the Webway has become dangerous as never before. Breached in some places, and embattled in most other places, the war in the Webway has led to many Aeldari and other races' worlds being cut off from the network, and generally, the Webway is not the safe, secure route it once was.





SECTION XVIII:

THE XENOS RESURGENT:

ALIEN EMPIRES OF THE SECOND

AGE OF STRIFE

Like opportunistic vultures, the myriad alien nations, empires, collectives and confederates, so long suppressed and brutalised during the Age of Imperium, rose up once more, upon the shattering of the Imperium's power and authority. As mentioned previously, all attempts for concentrated military endeavour on the part of humanity wavered and fell after the Emperor's death, and thus the xenos were free to expand and dominate as they chose, with only a divided collection of petty Imperium's and local power magnates to deal with.

Astartes support was sporadic and infrequent, and was often as damaging to the human forces as they were to the aliens themselves.

The T'au, easily the most successful of these Xenos expansionists, have already been touched upon within this tome. However, their realm is but one of countless hundreds of alien communities rising during this dark period, intent upon conquest, slaughter, and in many cases, vengeance.

The following are the most important and/or interesting of these groups.

The Q'orl Swarmhood

On the (completely arbitrary) borders between the Segmentum Pacificus and Obscurus, the Q'orl empire spread out from Loqiit, their sacred home world, into the punishing void. This race of insectoids were vicious and violently expansionist. Expansion and victory; these are the only justifications the insane race require for their Imperialism. A space based race, travelling in vast conglomerations of conjoined micro-craft which link together to form colossal chainships, honeycomb structures of lethal technological power and scale. The entirely male race is short-lived, and those alive have a fetishism for their dead ancestors, building upon their works for generations, while the undying Swarmqueen, the matriarch, sire and leader of all Q'orl, lives on, seemingly forever.

During the 41st millennium, the Q'orl were nothing but a mild annoyance to the old Imperium, due to their lack of warp-capable vessels. Even when the megalomaniacal aliens scavenged and reverse-engineered an Imperial warp drive, they still lacked the essential component. They had no navigators to guide them through the nightmare realm.

However, as the Imperium became ever more stretched and over-worked by the New Devourer, the alien insect species took advantage, stealing human navigators from the undefended warp shipping in the area. The Q'orl laid vile mind-worms into the central cortex of the navigators, drugging and controlling the mutant human strain.

They spread rapidly soon after, pushing their borders out almost a hundred-fold during the first two decades of M42. However, this expansion was sporadic, and not uniform. The Q'orl, fortunately, did not have a system of astropaths to aid communication, and thus they couldn't coordinate as easily as they could travel. However, the Q'orl had an advantage in the warp. The Q'orl themselves were not a naturally emotive race, and their ships were relatively 'quiet' in the frothing madness of the ether. Even their navigators, drugged and transfixed by the Q'orl, could barely remember being human, and near mindlessly navigated the realm of madness, numb to the warp's tendrils.

Thus, even when the Emperor died, throwing the warp into ever greater fits of churning lunacy, the Q'orl were relatively unscathed, and navigated the warp in much the same way. Of course, the distances capable by their vessels were cut short by the sudden loss of the Astronomicon, but their insensible navigators could still fumble their way through the shallows of the warp, and thus they continued on their expansion.

The Q'orl eventually began to meet human worlds, who no longer had defensive aid from their precious Imperium. The jubilant scuttling fiends attacked these worlds eagerly. Like a giant ant nest, the Q'orl swarmed over the worlds. Winged warrior-Q'orl filled the skies and scuttled across the ground, their high tech gas-based weapons, operated by their own biology interfacing with the metal devices directly, poisoning and murdering millions of people, as billions of coldly lethal Q'orl descended upon these worlds. Heavier Q'orl descended in micro-craft, unleashing the heavier weapons. Tanks and armoured emplacements were cracked open with their heavy kinetic cannons, and then the vile poison gas-based warfare of the other Q'orl seeped into them, killing the defenders with ease.

Once broken by the disturbingly organised aliens, the worker-Q'orl were unleashed upon the world. Live-stock, flora, fauna, building materials and precious

ores; all were pillaged by the regimented lines of workers, guided by the pheromonal and hormonal orders from the unseen commander drones. Once the orbiting chainships were restocked, the workers would begin seizing humans. The biologically higher-ranking Q'orl would have thousands of humans brought before them, who they would suck dry of blood with their mosquito-like mouthparts. Then, weeks later, the Q'orl would spray all human population centres with a kind of crimson fog, human blood merged with highly advanced Q'orl pheromones. Soon, the staggering, heart-broken human populace, drenched in gory pheromonal fluid spray, began to howl mindless praises to the Q'orl, or the 'star swarm' as they became known.

Hundreds upon hundreds of human worlds fell and were turned in this way, securing Q'orl borders with fanatical human scent-slaves.

However, several of the petty Imperiums bordering the swarm hood have begun to trade with the vile insectoids. Since the loss of Paternova, and the Navis Nobilitae, the navigators had become a dying breed. Yet, some cunning Imperiums seized as many navigators as they could, and persuaded them to form communes of Navigators within each petty Imperium who considered this idea. These three-eyed mutants would be given any indulgence or pleasure they desired. In exchange, the navigators would breed with one another, to produce navigator offspring, which would then become state-owned property of the petty Imperium, to serve on their vessels at the wish of the petty Imperium's kings and leaders.

The Q'orl, baffled by human biology, failed spectacularly in this regard, often trying to force two same gendered navigators to mate, or trying to find the biggest (and hence, to Q'orl perception, female) navigator, and then planting hormones in these navigators, in the hope it would produce. All these attempts failed. Thus, the Q'orl were reliant on their human neighbours, who granted them a small tithe of inbred navigators in exchange for their safety from Q'orl assault (at least until the petty Imperiums could build up large enough forces to backstab and destroy the vile aliens).

Thus did the Q'orl come to dominate a vast tract of western galactic space.

The Vorlic-Taar Nation-worlds

The Vorlic came perilously close to being devoured by the Tyranids, located as they were in the galactic south. Luckily for them, Kryptmann diverted the Tyranid fleet towards Octavius at that point, unknowingly saving their entire race.

A feline race, they developed slowly on their worlds. No one is sure how, but five different species of Vorlic evolved, seemingly independently, on the five inhabitable worlds within their system. When they sent the first chemical rockets to their fellow system worlds, the culture shock was immense, and the Vorlic races (who had never seen the need to develop ranged weaponry by that point) fought long and bloody campaigns of conquest and war. However, it was upon the fifth world, where their destiny changed. The Vorlic upon this world came across some long-crashed wreckage. The shifting, ethereal runes slithering across every surface made the feline savages realise that this must be a vessel of the gods. In particular, the beautiful images of the the great half-serpent god became a focus of their worship and devotion. The sonic weapons they uncovered from the bodies of the giant primate skeletons aboard, were seen as a gift by this serpent god, to defeat the enemy Vorlic, and take their place amongst the void beyond.



The fifth planet's scientists took apart the sonic weapons and found out how they functioned, soon producing many more of these weapons. These Vorlic-Taar, as they now called themselves, defeated their foes easily. The giant golden towers of their fellow Vorlic were no match for the dread howl-engines and scream-staves of their conquerors, which shattered bastion after bastion.

The Vorlic-Taar were, by M43, united under the fifth planet. The glittering, beautifully carved and sculpted armour of the Vorlic was made in an attempt to emulate their gods' ancient armour. Thus, it was fully sealed, and the brazen suits covered the whole bodies of the feline warriors of Vorlic. Built into the helms of most Vorlic-troopers was a grill, from which the built-in howl engine would pulse lethal blasts of noise at their foes, pulverising bones and organs, as the slender, venomed fighting daggers of the aliens hacked apart the survivors in brutally skillful close combat. The leaders of the Troops of Vorlic-Taar wielded staves which fired invisible, narrow wave length beams of pure sound, which blasted apart even battle tanks.

Ingeniously, the Vorlic used sonic devices to destabilise the structure of the chemical fuel of their rockets, eventually developing a bizarre form of engine which allowed them to travel across the void of space much more quickly.

Thus, the Brazen Cohorts of Vorlic the fifth, spread out from their home system. Progress was painfully slow, due to the lack of any FTL systems. However, a chance encounter with a space hulk changed this. The Witch-princes of the 234th Cohort, upon encountering the space hulk, began to get visions from the ether, from their 'gods' apparently, telling them that the hulks moved across space and time freely, allowing the Vorlic to advance swiftly. Eagerly, the Cohort fleet investigated the hulk. They found docks, big enough to harbour their fleet, and all the twisted monsters on board the ship that could have killed the Vorlic were mysteriously killed before the Vorlic had arrived. Thus, in relative safety, the Vorlic pillaged the hulk of the strange artefacts within, shipping them back to the Vorlic-Taar home worlds.

These technologies allowed the Vorlic to advance beyond their system, conquering some of the weaker civilisations directly near them. The feline monsters conquered worlds, building statues of their god, and of

their greatest heroes, across a dozen worlds defeated by them. The Vorlic were arrogant and vain, in emulation of their master.

Hrud

Across the galaxy, in every dark nook and hidden space, they survived. Their underworld of darkness and cold has hidden, between the layers of other civilisations. They fed upon the detritus of other ascendant races, and cobbled together a civilisation from the cast offs of the decadent races, the arrogant beings who clung to the light. Terrified of the darkness. Yet, in the darkness, they watched. Waiting and planning. A race both cursed and blessed by their father and god. Cursed to skulk in the shadows, to be the shadows. Blessed, to weather any holocaust, any horror the Universe could cast upon them.

They were the Hrud.

The Hrud possess innumerable colonies, infesting countless worlds, both alien and human, as well as lurking amidst ships in millions of vessels across the galaxy. Thus, when the New Devourer slew a third of all life, and the doom of the Emperor claimed trillions more lives, the Hrud, though scattered and most certainly affected by the sudden losses of life, were not as devastated as other races. They continued to spread forth from their pits, their warp plasma weapons and scavenged technologies making them formidable opponents.

Oddly, however, Hrud infestations seem to get less frequent during this period, rather than more. No one can really account for this, but many suspect that the Hrud are abandoning their lesser colonies and outposts, as if drawing together their collective strength. For what purpose is, again, a mystery.

However, strangely, wherever the so-called 'Penumbra' phenomena are located, most witnesses claim that the 'bendies' were somehow helping them. Of course, humanity being ignorant as it is, it is likely that terrified humans merely mistook an Umbra attack for a Hrud one, as both make use of shadows to attack.

Where once whole Imperial crusades and Astartes taskforces were assembled to clear out the largest Hrud infestations, the fractured galaxy of the Second Age of Strife could not hope to do this. The Petty Imperiums

were either too weak or self-interested to aid their beleaguered rivals, and the few remaining interstellar Old-Imperial forces were scant and had greater concerns to worry about.

Thus, the Hrud 'empire' was allowed to fester, and the Hrud were allowed to grow in numbers and power. In some of the most isolated human colonies, the surface dwelling humans merely became a cowed and insensible horde of virtual slaves, as the Hrud took an annual tithe of slaves, snatching them, and dragging them below, to work the mines and factories deep in the darkness.

Few beings ever leave the light-less realms of the Hrud, but those that do are often mad of twisted. They tell of great structures, unseen by human eyes, yet the presence of them seems staggering. Complex canals, dragging detritus and waste through the realm, as the moans of millions of broken slaves murmurs dimly through the cavernous expanses, along with the weary clinking of the chains and shackles, holding all the broken and miserable humans together.

The Hrud themselves are shadows made flesh, a field of un-light flowing around them at all times. Their supple and multi-jointed bodies make them fold like shadows. No nook or crack is beyond their reach, as the Hrud scuttle between the tight, cramped spaces between their vast, black halls. According to the slaves, the Hrud possess titanic libraries, filled with archaic texts and books, made from the only viable parchment material available: human skin. Those humans too tired to continue working are struck down by venomous talons, and sent to the whirring flaying machines, deep below. None of the insane witnesses of these vast Hrud-libraries knew what was written upon the endless texts, though if the stories of the Hrud's perfect genetic memories are true, the libraries of the Hrud could well be the documented history of the entire galaxy, since the creation of the Hrud themselves. The Hrud have been watching for millennia upon millennia. What untold secrets are they privy to?

Some of the most crazy and deluded escaped prisoners claimed they had witnessed the centre of the great Hrud fortresses. The Hrud, surrounding a perfectly spherical black monument, their shadowy forms prostrate before this orb. Others claim the Hrud occasionally came to the surface, at night, dragging selected

slaves with them. There, they would meet vast, angular craft, big as cities, but silent as whispers. The Hrud would then enter the mysterious crafts, before returning some hours later, forcing the human slaves to lug heavy supplies of food and glinting ornaments and artefacts onto the titanic vessels themselves. Evidently, if these deluded lunatics are to be believed, the Hrud are supplying, and aiding, another, as yet unknown race. A race potentially yet to reveal its hand...

Whoever the Hrud worship, and whatever relationship they have to the outside universe, this much is abundantly clear:

The Hrud are ready. The Hrud are waiting...

The Thexian Trade Empire

The Thexian Trade Empire began small, encompassing the Borlac, Niscassar and Loaxtl civilisations in their net of interstellar trade. These civilisations prospered and grew, the security of being part of a greater whole stimulating greater inter-racial exchange and trade. Fear of the human Imperium initially drove them together, then fear of the New Devourer pushed several more races towards alliance, including the water-breathing Actorian, the Nekulli, the Soldiers of the Drong War-Faith, and even the grand Oppressionaia of Ka'Vallimar, a group of almost mindless, serpentine aliens, entirely ruled by a single group of five individuals, who were each oppressed emotionally and conceptually by their fellow leader minds, thus ensuring total, blessed oppression.

Initially, this grouping was due to mutual fear, rather than common cause, and the profits of the Empire sank slightly in the early years, directly post-Imperator-death. Eventually though, through the manipulation and subterfuge of the Thexian elite, the rulers of Thex Prime, and unofficial leaders of the entire Trade Empire.

Before the Thexian Elite arose amongst the Thexians, the race was nothing. They were confined to their blood moons, red and dusty planets with few resources. One day, many centuries before the Second Age of Strife, the Thexian Elites began to appear within Thexian society, working their way into positions of power across the blood moons. They were charming and cunning beyond reason. However, only one of their forms looked like a Thexian at all. Their battle forms

were horrifying to behold, as they twisted into snarling bat-like monsters. Nevertheless, the Thexian Elite ruled Thex Prime near perfectly, and their monstrous side was only unleashed upon the enemy and criminals. As it soon transpired, the Thexian image of these Elites was only a glamour itself, and the bat was the true form. The Thexian Elite infiltrated the command positions of all their trade empire's member nations, taking on the shape of whatever race they sought to lead. Thus, they kept the peace between the nation civilisations.

Under the watchful, sinister gaze of the Elite, the Empire was driven to new heights. More and more races began to join the Thexians. The most notable and eager of these new races were the human-hating Tallerians, who initially began trading with the Actorians, who had developed an artificial gestation technique, allowing the reptilian Tallerians to bolster their dwindling numbers with biologically accelerated 'new Tallerians'.

The troll-like Grongolem smiths were another race to eventually join, commissioned by the Empire to produce ships, factories and commercial/fighting vehicles of the finest quality.

Soon, this Empire of commerce had spread its web across numerous scattered civilisations, both advanced and primitive, across the galactic north east. However, soon the Thexian Elite would come into conflict with a rising force, the T'au Empire. The Niscassar were a client race in the T'au Empire by M41, and by M42-3, they were almost entirely integrated. However, the Thexians also had massive sway amongst the nomadic Niscassar psykers, and soon a dispute arose between the two xenos empires, with Aun'Talië decrying the Thexians as 'selfish abusers of the disadvantaged'. This, of course, was true (as the Thexian Elite adopted a policy of 'survival of the shrewdest'), but this was not the real reason for T'au antagonism. The Thexians offered another route, an option other than the Greater Good. While the petty Imperiums offered nothing but tyranny and genocide of xenos, Thexians offered a viable alternative. The T'au could not accept this. The final straw came in 825.M45, when a Thexian plot to install Thexian elites into T'au society was uncovered. War was declared within the year.

The T'au military machine, by that point, was awe inspiring in its advancement and power, as it had been

allowed to develop in the absence of Imperial control since the fall of the Emperor's realm, and the hideous chaos that engulfed the galaxy. While the T'au had a dedicated army for their empire, the Thexian system, being based around trade and commerce, used its wealth and power to bring in vast forces of mercenaries from across the galaxy.

The Forces employed by the Thexian Elite were diverse and numerous. Ulthian bone-eaters, horrific, non-humanoid beasts, paid in the bones of T'au children. Nestrinian acid Fulgars, strange gaseous creatures, contained inside advanced humanoid fighting suits. Of course, Nekulli war parties, Loaxtl warriors, and whole Churches of Drong War-monks of the war-faith, singing praises to their gods of battle as they killed with their holy shatter cannons, were enticed into the war, for their people were already part of the Trade empire. In addition to these, whole battalions of Serf Soldiers were purchased from far flung Krieg. Backbone to these vast forces of mercenaries, were the Tallerian Soldiers, which had become a vast and professional army, loyal to the Actorians, who were in turn, Loyal to the Thexian Elite. These armies either equipped themselves, or were equipped by the Grongolem, and were eager for slaughter and profit.

Arrayed against them were over seventeen fiftieth sphere expedition fleets of T'au, commanded by Commander Moonblade, an infamous commander, known to be brutal amongst the T'au, offering worlds the choice of death or conversion to the greater good, and giving worlds only a few hours to choose, before bombing and invading soon after. Massive numbers of Vespida stingwings, several Demiurg brotherhoods, Gue'Vesa and Hu'Sta armies of human subjects, and the League of the Avan, strange, translucent aliens with advanced laser technology, formed additional auxiliary wings of this vast force.

Kroot, as ever, hired themselves out to both sides during the conflict, much to the annoyance of the T'au.

The situation in the far galactic east, in the wake of the New Devourer, was particularly bad. Where the eastern fringe was once teeming with life, now four out of every five previously-inhabited worlds were left as barren husks. Often, it was upon these husks, that the brutal and bloody battles between the Thexians and T'au were fought. And they were bloody. No mercy was

offered, and terrible things were done by both sides. Biological warfare, orbital assaults, fire bombings, nuclear weapons, viruses and retro-viruses; all were used at some point, in addition to conventional warfare. Massive alien fleets tussled in the void, as armies of multitudes of aliens battled fiercely across balls of rock. The T'au fought with the bitterness of a child inheriting a ruined legacy, and the Thexian side fought for greed and reckless, murderous pride. Due to the small amount of humans involved directly in the war, the Petty Imperiums barely realise how massive the Thexian-T'au war truly was. It lasted until well into the 46th

millennium, and claimed billions of lives (especially when the noisome Reek joined the war on the Thexian Elite's side), before the Thexian Trade Empire and T'au Empire agreed to a demilitarised area of space between them, which they were forbidden to cross.

This peace, however, was meaningless. In the Second Age of Strife, peace was, at best a miscalculation, and at worst a blatant lie. Unemployed mercenaries continued to murder and pillage post-war. Blood and pain are the only currency that truly mean anything in this period.







**SECTION XIX:
THE FIST CLENCHES:
STRONGHOLDS OF
THE SONS OF DORN**

"Dig in. Do not yield! Never yield! Close the fist!"

- Last words, bellowed by Chapter Master Lastrates, as he battled the daemon tide on Terra.

When the Emperor fell, and the Custodes abandoned Terra for reasons unknown, the garrison of Imperial Fists led the desperate counterattack against the daemons which poured forth from the shattered Golden Throne. Their disciplined gun lines and defensive formations carefully and calmly pumped bolter shell after bolter shell into the onrushing horde, as they led the Arbites and Terran Imperial Guard on a last, doomed charge on the Imperial palace. The vast galleries and corridors within the palace ran fluid with daemon essence, and they were assailed at every turn by gibbering clerks and adepts, driven wild with fright or corruption. These were gunned down all the same as the Imperial Fist contingent pushed onwards.

The throne had connected into the deep warp, and hence, as they neared the throne room, older, fouler daemons spilled into reality. Daemons that had never been manifest before. Tendrils and coiling, maddening shapes forced themselves through the very fabric of the air, tearing marines from their feet to their dooms, or boiling guardsmen where they stood. However, the Astrates never faltered, never floundered, but pushed onwards, swinging his twin thunder hammers with furious abandon.

Their Primarch had built the palace defences, and they made it difficult for the Imperial Fists to enter the palace. Ironically, the Fists had made a fortress so well, even they couldn't get through properly.

This desperate battle, however, was never about victory. The Fists had succeeded in their objective. They had bought the people of Terra a few precious hours, allowing scores of vessels to flee from the doomed home world. Amongst the fleeing humans, a single Imperial Fist Neophyte went as well.

As the Imperial Fists fell to the nightmares pouring straight from hell, the neophyte carried a message from his master, a final order, that would change the history of the Astartes of Dorn for the next ten thousand years.

He told this neophyte to travel across the galaxy, to everywhere a Fist or Iron Lord or other marines of Dorn were fighting, and to tell them to dig in, to fortify. He

did so, and soon his message was taken up by other Imperial Fists, stationed off-world, and to other forces across the galaxy.

Across the Imperium, even as it began to truly shatter, the Imperial Fists and their successors made good on their orders. Fleets diverted themselves to the nearest defensible planets, or stayed put upon planets recently taken back from heretics and rebels. Here, they began to fortify each of these worlds. In some cases, Templar Chapter houses already existed, and the Black Templars stationed there welcomed their founding Chapter brethren with open arms, and together, they built upon these fortresses, and out into the wider world. In other cases, the Imperial Fists had to find the central palace of a world, and demand to fortify it. Dorn's Astartes began to increase orbital defences, and helped worlds found weapon factories and build bunkers, and to toughen the structures of buildings currently standing upon the worlds.

Any Imperial Navy vessels or Fist ships damaged beyond repair were stripped down, and their guns and ammunition stockpiles were cannibalized, and great orbital guns were built into the surface of these growing Imperial Fist Fortress Worlds. The gutted hulks of the vessels were converted into space stations, stocking additional fighter craft and bombers, in the event they would be required.

Supply lines and logistical support were installed, and made incredibly efficient by the allied Fist chapters. Food was secured to feed the populace of these worlds, either from the agricultural areas of worlds, by securing off world agri-facilities, or creating underground artificial eco-systems, deep beneath the layers of armour and steel, which began to cover these worlds. Every building was converted into potential defensive structures, with angled geometry to allow overlapping arcs of fire, and maximum avenues of assault. Killing zones were subtly crafted, disguised as town squares or ditches. Bunkers and trench systems were rapidly installed, and rationing was put into immediate effect.

In most cases, these measures were welcomed by the native populace, who were utterly terrified by the loss of contact with the wider Imperium, and the near-constant xenos and chaotic attacks and raids. With the Imperial Fists there to help defend, they felt their confidence bolster, and aided their superhuman allies

in any way they could. Ranks of the PDF increased by an average of 60% on many of these worlds, with the reserve PDF forces and militias composed of more than half of the entire world population of many of the worlds in question.

The most famous and effective of these Fortress worlds was Nu Marsus. Nu Marsus was an embattled Imperial world, even by early M42, besieged as it was by Heli-caour Ravagers, a bizarre species of metal-fanged xenos monsters. Captain Huun, of the Imperial Fists 4th Company, led a strike force of Imperial Fists against these aliens, and drove them off. As a happy coincidence, a Templars Chapter house was located upon the surface, which had aided in the defeat of the foe. The two forces of marines met up with each other, swapping stories, as they performed the strange, masochistic rituals of the Dorn Successors.

When the astronomicon went out, and warp storms began to buckle and flare across the entire galaxy, killing almost all astropaths, the Space marines found themselves stranded. Unlike other space marine forces, they didn't tear off to assault the nearest foe. The Templars amongst them wished to, but the Imperial Fists persuaded them to stay put for the time being.

Eventually, word came, via sporadic reinforcement from injured or lost Imperial Fist Chapter serfs, that their orders were to dig in anyway, and thus, Huun threw himself whole-heartedly into fortifying the planet. Like the other Fists, as mentioned above, he crafted efficient and effective orbital defences, built up the orbital batteries. He placed his fleet and the systems own defence fleet on constant patrol around the system boundaries, always within vox contact of Nu Marsus. The Governor of Marsus was happy to help the Astartes, and with his government's cooperation, soon every city became a fortress, and the people, eager to help, took up arms and militia roles.

The small strike-force's techmarine set to work, guiding the industrial sector of the planet to increase production of arms, armour and munitions, in addition to their usual output. Also, he instructed several factories how to produce bolter shells (discreetly remembering to not tell them how to produce holy bolters, for they were for the Astartes alone). The PDF of the planet, the Falcina, were built up and extensively drilled by their superhuman allies. They wielded lasguns and carbines,

in addition to their traditional billhook weapons, and with the new training and equipment the Falcina bill men were a force to be reckoned with. The 50 marine Imperial Fist force, in addition, made the decision to split up into smaller units, and each marine took command of several squads of Falcina, or took command of artillery divisions or armour squadrons, and hence disseminated their massive siege experience to the masses. While the Arbiters precinct, Governor's palace, and Templar Chapter Fortress were all void shielded from orbital assault, most of the population centres and cities were not.

Huun, scavenging the generators from several of the most damaged and irreparable ships, converted these star ship shields into city-wide force fields, which were installed on almost every city, much to the gratitude of the human populace. The thirty Black Templars left upon the world remained slightly aloof from the humans, and maintained their squad formations. However, they did submit to Huun's overall leadership, and their thousand-strong force of Chapter Serfs were still highly trained and well equipped to defend their keep.

Thus, Nu Marsus was fortified. And, just like all the other Fist Strongholds, it was to be tested very soon after.

The Petty Imperium of the Aton was ruled by Aton, a vain and foolish man. Unfortunately, his vanity allowed him to become possessed by a daemon of Slannesh. Thus, his entire Imperium was taken over, and the worship of dark gods began in the Atonian Imperium. The daemon-Aton decided that, in order to christen his new empire of sixty worlds, he would baptise it in blood. The blood of Nu Marsus to be precise.

His fleets penetrated the outer system in 222.M43. For weeks, Huun's Imperial Fist fleet harassed and harried the post-Imperial fleet as it travelled towards Nu Marsus, damaging and crippling dozens of Aton's cargo and supply ships, before fleeing back into the outer system.

Aton's main battle fleet consisted of a single battleship, over eight cruisers, and many escorts. By the time he reached Nu Marsus, he had six cruisers, and much fewer escorts, not to mention fewer logistical vessels.

Nevertheless, Aton's dread force was still massive. This sizable fleet smashed into the densely-packed orbital stations and defences erected in orbit. Hollowed out wrecks formed crude carrier vessels, unleashing hundreds upon hundreds of fighters, bombers and thunder hawks at the enemy force, as monitor vessels opened up upon the fleet, as well as the already in place laser orbital, and the long range torpedo silos built into the planet itself. Another cruiser was blasted apart, as well as two more escorts.

Yet, he managed to get his battleship into orbital strike range, and fired. Flames, brimstone, and searing shafts of light rained down upon the entire world, lighting up the sky and angry orange and red, as it churned the clouds, and rumbled off the numerous city force fields across the world. The sound was deafening, but the people of Nu Marsus, inspired by their marine benefactors, showed no fear. It was said that, as the skies filled with fire, Sergeant Blant of Squad six of the strike force, stood in the middle of the capital's town square, and began to laugh loudly, his thunderous voice carrying to all the people of the people of the city, who cowered. He then took up some scraps of metal, and began to beat a tune out upon them, with the pummel of his broadsword, singing a hearty war song as he did so. Eventually, other people began to pile into the streets, and sing along, in defiance.

The bombardments lasted for three days. In that time, only one shield failed. The unfortunate city was blasted into fiery ruins within a few minutes, the lives of over seven million people snuffed out as if nothing. The city of Shogar was no more. Yet, the defence lasers reaped a terrible toll amongst the orbiting fleet.

Yet, the rest of Nu Marsus was unbowed.

Thus, as soon as possible, Aton sent his massive numbers of troop ships to land upon the surface. The enemy landed with almost no losses, as they landed upon the ruins of Shogar, which no longer had any AA batteries to combat them.

Aton's army was vast, numbering almost 60 million troopers, with attendant armour and chimera transports. Great banners were unfurled, bearing the cursed runes of Slannesh, crudely painted over the aquila. Daemonettes groped and cavorted amongst the ranks of Atonian Troopers, as the giant, nude form of Aton

sat upon a giant void-shielded dais, in all his androgynous evil majesty.

The army headed, with all speed, towards the capital, Sherivar. If Aton could break the centre of Imperial Fist power, the planet would be his.

Artillery rained fire and explosives upon the city for two full days, before the army charged the fortress. Lascannons flared and speared across avenues. Bolters fired and auto guns barked, as weapons discharged in criss-crossing, confusing arcs. Tanks rumbled through the streets, only to be blown up by concealed missile teams, who were in turn burnt out by hellhounds, or killed by heavy cannons destroying their buildings. Imperial Fists were present at every gun line, barking orders, which had been drilled into every human on the planet for years, the concentrated and disciplined firepower driving back wave after murderous wave of soldiers. Armour battalions clashed in the narrow avenues and wider parks, exchanging devastating barrages of high explosive ammunition.

The thirty Templars were out in the action, every single one wearing a jump pack. Like angels of doom, they darted from kill zone to kill zone, striking viciously and swiftly, wherever ordered to by Huun. Their fists, hammers, picks, axes and whirring chain blades cut bloody swathes through the twisted ranks of the fallen post-Imperial troopers.

The Trenches throughout the city were bloody killing grounds, where troopers and feral things tussled in the blood and gristle of already dead soldiers. It was work for knives, clubs, and heavy blades, and shotguns, as the foes were joined in epic conflict. Huun travelled in his Land Raider, storming off to every battle he could find across the city, him and his terminators charging from the bowels of his chariot vehicle, and ripping apart foes with his lightning claws, as his terminator assault squad smashed apart their foes with hammers and great tower shields.

The Falcina fought bravely and fiercely, their bill hooks bloody with the terrible toll they reaped amongst their traitorous foes. The barely armed militia fought at their shoulders, aiding the bill men as the enemy sought to surround them. All had curses upon their lips, and faith in their beleaguered hearts.

The Chapter house was a blazing charnel house as the servitor-controlled bi-pod las and auto cannons fired almost constantly, while defiant Black Templar serfs manned the walls and windows of the fortress, pouring bolter and las rounds into the braying, crazed hordes. It was said that, as the gate was battered down, and the enemy threatened to storm the building, the senior Chapter Serf, fearful of failing his superhuman masters, took up one of the marine power swords, and ran to defend the gate. Though the blade was a mere short sword to a marine, he wielded it like some great double-handed barbarian sword, howling Templar oaths as he cut down his foes. Though only a serf, the Senior Serf was modified and strong, trained to the peak level of mortal human strength and speed, and he smote his foes terrible blows; for hours upon hours, he held the gate.

Sergeant Blant walked around the city in a defiant state of good cheer. His insane joy at battle was the stuff of legends. He was said to have been juggling swords and blades as he sang at the top of his lungs, to be heard over the din of battle, as he cackled with laughter, lopping off limbs and heads with dismissive blows of his broadsword. At one point, he was said to have even been playing his uilleann pipes in one hand, while he fired his bolter from the hip in the other hand.

The battle was bloody and brutal, and lasted for a full week. The siege was broken, however, as Huun's fleet returned, and assaulted the Aton-devil's fleet. Caught between the orbital defences and this new fleet, the

Atonian fleet had to flee into the warp, leaving Aton on world. Eventually, his forces were forced from the capital, and hounded, until they reached Shogar from whence they came. For the second time, orbital bombardment fell upon the ruins, and Aton's army was no more.

Huun and his marines remained on the planet for the rest of the period, ever fortifying and reinforcing the defences of the planet, fighting off alien tyrants and devilish monsters, nearly every year. These wars were fierce, murderous and terrible, and soon the good cheer of the defenders became sombre dour determination and grit. The story was similar across all the Imperial Fist strongholds. As they closed their fists, the Imperial Fists hardened their hearts, and sealed themselves from the galaxy, fighting anyone who even entered their systems, until the galaxy abandoned them entirely. The galaxy shattered, and the Age of Strife flared into horrific life.

And all the while, the bitter, hard-nosed Fists of Dorn just dug themselves in, deeper and deeper. Bloodied, battered, muddy, but unbowed; these were the Fists. Unbowed, but blind and futile in their defences, for, as they suspected, they held out for nothing. No help, no relief, would ever come. They would remain, entrenched on their muddy, barbed wire swathed fortress worlds, forever. Even the insane cheerfulness of marines like Blant wouldn't change this simple, depressing fact.







**SECTION XX:
THE HAMMER SHATTERED:
THE IMPERIAL GUARD**

The Imperium fell, and with it fell the Munitorum, the Navy, and countless other galactic organisations. They all tumbled into the void and the horror like everyone else. Administratum clerks continued their mindless tasks, filing reports and signing documents that no one would ever see besides them. As worlds were cut off from one another, communication was also cut, like a blade across a vox wire. Fleet dispositions and ship manifests were lost, misfiled, or sent to other accounting facilities, on other worlds, and lost forever in the sea of souls.

Central authority took a sharp decline, until any hope of contacting superiors became pointless. Vast Crusade fleets of soldiers and vessels gradually lost contact with any other authorities. Without logistical support from forge worlds and agri-planets, crusades ground to a halt, or carried on regardless, their soldiers and troops starving as the grueling crusades wore on. The foes grew more numerous, and the natives of planets more hostile. Some Crusades, like the Nihilus Crusade, utterly collapsed, as the Imperial Guard and much of the naval staff began to mutiny across every ship in the fleet, rioting over food rationing, which had reached sickening levels. The Lord general, Admiral, and even the chief Cardinal, were butchered, and the various ships of the crusade fleet, each taken over by rival factions, fought with each other, in a violent and pointless naval battle, over the planet of Kioto, the wreckage from this colossal battle raining upon the planet with fiery contrails of shattered ships.

Often, crusades would find that the various Imperial worlds they encountered did not recognise their authority, and would attempt to resist the landing and respelling of crusade ships. More often than not these crusade fleets would end up battering the worlds into submission, and taking what they needed, often sending the Imperial Guard forces down to conquer the planets personally. The enemies of the crusade thus became more and more. Not only were heretics and xenos enemies, but also the various petty Imperiums that the crusade fleets inevitably trespassed within, causing yet more wars. Crusades, who had precious few resources to begin with, swiftly ran low, and were often defeated. By M46, most major Imperial Crusades, depleted and battered, were no longer effective, and fell apart.

However, they were the lucky few. The majority of Imperial Crusades and forces were utterly scattered, as

they tried to navigate the tumultuous warp. Sometimes only single vessels emerged from the ether, their crews either mad or utterly broken.

The Countless thousands of Imperial Guard regiments were scattered across the entire Imperium. Often shattered into brigades or single regiments, these few remaining Imperial Guard often numbered in the thousands or even, in some extreme cases, millions. Some were left stranded on previously conquered war zones. These men either tried to found colonies, hired themselves out as mercenaries for local tribal warfare, or were massacred by the human and non-human natives. Other, more fortunate dispossessed Imperial Guard units and squads had access to troopships or had seized a naval vessel by force. In various states of disrepair, these Imperial Guard 'irregulars' and rogues traveled through the galaxy, using short warp jumps to avoid too much danger to their decrepit vessels. Some, like the remnants of the 343rd Terrax Guard, led by Colonel Harsterbeck, managed to find employment by joining one of the Petty Imperiums they came across. In the case of the 343rd, it was the Ophelian Imperium. These Guardsmen and professional soldiers were used as garrison forces for these Post-Imperial settlements, and also were used to train and drill the new armies of the Petty Imperiums, instilling some measure of expertise and experience into these previously merely PDF groups.

Some, like the Harakoni Warhawks and Elysian Drop Troops, refused to compromise their integrity, and remained in their own uniforms and maintained their own traditions. Nevertheless, in a hostile galaxy, even these elites were forced to join other local-level power groups. It is claimed that somewhere within the Segmentum Pacificus a group of soldiers, from various different Imperial Guard regiments, have been gathering around an abandoned and ruined Star Fort, and are organising a resistance. Against who, even they do not know. They raid various Petty Imperiums, in the hope that one day, the 'real' Imperium will come and relieve them. Unfortunately, they have no idea the real Imperium, no longer exists. Thus, they are little more than organised terrorists, waging a war against an imaginary enemy, and slaughtering citizens of countless Petty Imperiums, without realising these very Imperiums are the Imperium.

Around the systems near to Armageddon, the Savlar Chem Dogs, who were fighting on many worlds, managed to not only survive the misery of the loss of the Imperium, but in fact flourished and festered, as lice and other such vermin such as them have a special skill for. They formed an unofficial black market, dealing in vile narcotics and other illicit substances, cooperating with the equally devious and immoral Ratlings. The Savlars had no real interest in defending the worlds of humanity. Instead, as worlds desperately fought off foes and became poverty-stricken and vulnerable, Savlar drug cartels and protection rackets sprang up on underhive streets and slum-zones across hundreds of worlds, muscling in onto other criminal businesses,

using their military training to beat the competition in many cases. They were also notorious gun runners and arms dealers, selling weapons to both sides in wars, profiting from others' misery.

Though Savlar, their home world, was caught up in the terrible effects of the Ophilim Kiasoz, the Savlar Chem Dogs managed to continue on their horrid little lives.

Of the worlds which spawned the various Imperial Guard Regiments, they faced a problem. Many of the best Imperial Guard worlds, like Catachan and Krieg, were focused around providing soldiers for the Imperium. With nowhere to export these soldiers, their populations grew enormously. Their soldiers needed to be utilised, and used to help keep their planets safe.

Each took a different approach to this. The Governor-General of Catachan wisely formed a close alliance with Ryza. In exchange for ships and weapons, Catachan gave Ryza large numbers of quality fighters to supplement its Skitarii, who were few in numbers, comparatively. This alliance allowed them to secure a wide area, and defend it from all comers, even mighty Huron's Chaos Imperium.

Krieg, as mentioned before, turned its soldiers into commodities, and exported them across the galaxy. Some Guard worlds joined Petty Imperiums, and used their unused soldier tithe to boost the defences of these post-Imperial empires.

In some rare cases, Imperial Guard home worlds had mini Empires of their own to begin with, before the Second Age of Strife, such as Tallarn. Tallarn used its wealth and massive armies to expand their lands, and formed a petty Imperium of their own.

Of the Steel Legions... their story links closely with the ballad of Armageddon, and thus shall be explained there, not here...

In the Period of Woe, this Second Age of Strife, where war and domination is currency, the Imperial Guard, the second best fighting force in all the old Imperium, were incredibly valuable. Whoever had the most guns, had the power. Whoever had the power would survive. This was the depressing, torturous creed of the 51st Millennium.







**SECTION XXI:
THE PSYCHIC APOCALYPSE, THE
BLACK SHIPS, AND THE NEX**

The Death of the Emperor was a near-lethal blow to existence itself, more so than any living being could fully comprehend. When the Emperor's heart was pierced by that most foolish of traitors, his soul, scattered and insane, burst apart, flinging itself into the swirling maelstrom. The Warp washed into reality in a tidal flood, killing Terra. Similarly, reality, to a certain extent, washed into the warp. The great edifice, the link to the Webway forged by the Imperator, was smashed from its moorings in reality, and floundered in the madness sea. The living mesh that was the Webway writhed and convulsed, as the strand of reality tumbled through the warp. We shall come to this later...

The deepest depths of the warp were disturbed, and forces beyond reckoning or sanity, strove for the surface of their inverted emotion spherical realm. They burst the surface, turning inwards, and shattering like glass, as they envied and giggled and felt emotions only the most incomprehensible of xenos ever felt. A great blanketing numbness flooding inwards, spilling outwards as it pushed in parallel to the madness. Grim sanity spread like a glass plate, sliding over a churning mad sea. It was shattered in places, or melted, or any number of futile analogies. The Star Father was rousing, and the 'war'/migration/exodus, began in earnest.

It would be utterly impossible to explain what was happening in the warp accurately, thus I must drift into colourful analogy to continue.

Across all the realms of chaos, from the living rot-forests of Nurgle to the churning brass forges of the Lord of Rage, a great silver wall, solid and blank, was grinding, pushing aside the demonic realms like a plough through snow. The crystal maze of Tzeentch was shattered and ground to dust, then reformed, and was shattered anew. The rings of Slaanesh's inferno were breached, as the faceless, blade-winged angyls of the Star Father spread forth, one with the wall, yet apart from it.

At last, Khorne could take no more. A voice that could shatter continents resounded across the entire realm of chaos, plunging mountains into lava lakes, and pulverising daemon trees and devil-spawn. It was a call to war, as he rose from the Skull Throne, black sword of destruction clutched in his vast talons.

A billion billion daemons arose with him, from blood-

thirsters, to blood crushers, and other, indescribable horrors. Legions of daemon princes, armoured with daemon-mail and blades of lethal effect, marched under banners of slaughtered skin and bloodied flesh.

Khorne himself besieged the great silver wall, pounding it with every weapon and devil he could. The wall constantly shattered, yet merely split into innumerable grinding walls, which ensnared the Blood God, who howled in frustration. The mindless Skarbrand dueled the Dominion itself, Malcador-angyl. Infinite energies flowed across the beings, as fire fought light, and bloody blade clashed with burnished nightmare-steel.

The walls continued, smashing aside even the formless waste, spearing through like a thunderbolt. Tzeentch, using every trick and scheme and power, misdirected and deceived the walls, splitting them and dividing them, as he hastily made alliances and dark pacts with his brothers and sisters. Guided by the babbling predictions of the Fateweaver, Tzeentch tricked and tracked the infinite enemy, and guided his enemy-allies against this true threat. The great game took on a new face.

Nurgle, advised by his brother, cast a bile-filled contagion, which tarnished the silver bastions, and allowed plague bearers and capering daemonettes to wriggle within the structure. Innumerable devils and monsters dueled the blank beings which glowed within, formless yet mighty and bleak. Nurgle, empowered by the despair of the losing battle, surged forth, resplendent and powerful. A morass of stinking flesh and foulness formed his bulk, and he sprouted rotten forests of decay in his slug-like wake, as he drew forth his cauldron, to personally pour its contents down the soul father's throat.

He boiled the silver wall aside, as his corruptive influence plunged through, into the Star Realm. Like a billion universes, stars and tranquil evening skies filled the bastion in all directions, and Nurgle himself had to form a bridge of corruption, just to cross the expanse. And there, at the centre of the spiral, stood the Star Father.

A thousand miles tall, the colossus glowed a blinding gold, and where his burning golden stare landed, corruption could not flourish, chaos became set. Trillions of souls stood, utterly frozen under the gaze of

the Star Father, unthinking, unfeeling. One by one, the great being plucked them up, and broke them. He had no face, just a titanic golden crown, which enclosed his head, and blazed with internal fire.

Nurgle, undaunted, ploughed forth, like a living tide of filth. The blades of the Father smashed the daemon thing to the ground, and Nurgle's corrupted blades just held back the merciless force of the Star Father. Then, something even the Grandfather of Disease couldn't predict, occurred. Upon pinions of flayed and stagnant flesh, the angel of despair, Isha herself, appeared. Wriggling free of her chains, the Goddess wailed, howling in agony and misery, flickering tears of despair rattling against the Order God's impregnable armour. Over the eternity of imprisonment, she was quite insane, and such was Nurgle's influence, that she was bound to him eternally, in a marriage of abomination. He, the Star Father, paused, his voice a deep rumble, as glacial ice over rocks:

“OBEY!” he bawled, swatting Isha aside.

However, her intent was never to defeat him. Her freedom had attracted another being that lusted after her essence. Suddenly a dozen singing blades sank into the Armour of the Star Father, as the Prince of Pleasure, She Who Thirsts, slithered upwards to engage the monster. The Father wrestled the heinous goddess-god, venom, fire and blades darting and twisting beneath and above the combat, as god faced god. Nurgle became a vast swamp, ensnaring the titanic legs of the Star Father, with sucking, demonic mud.

Angyls poured from the walls and roofs, at the sight of the Star Father in distress, echoing him utterly, as they plunged into combat. Daemons wriggled from between the toes and talons of the battling chaos gods, intercepting the glowing beings, engaging in epic conflict.

The bastions advanced and retreated, as the other realms plunged over each other like tides on a beach, coming from all angles at once.

The three gods wrestled, but the Star Father was the stronger, and he beat them back, his voice a thunderous gale, as he cursed and bellowed at the hated foes. Whispers and confusing illusions assailed the Star Father, and saved Slaanesh and Nurgle, as Tzeentch



worked his illusions and magics upon the God of Order. However, amazingly, the Star Father and his Angyls fought back all these endless foes. Their gold and silver light was as a torch to hay, as it burnt and scorched the daemons fiercely, flinging them backwards, filling their hearts with the dread of Order.

However, as they faltered, the final god descended. Smashing through the crystal roof of the bastions, Khorne leapt into the Star Realm. His first strike struck the helm of the Star Father, dealing him a deathly blow, and staggering the confused god. The second flurry of blows were parried desperately by the flaming golden blade of the Star Father. The five gods exchanged and traded blows for eternities upon eternities, destroying realms, only to remake them within instants. Daemons and Angyls wailed and bitterly fought, as they were plunged into oblivion again and again.

However, this war was one thing the Star Father could not control; it was chaotic. The chaos unleashed upon everything and everybody within the realm of the warp fought to the Primordial Annihilator's strengths. Chaos drove back order, and the Order God was cast down. Yet, such was his power, he could not be banished as daemons and spirits could be. He became a fixed, dreadful point in the ever-mad seas of souls.

Of course, this account above is merely an analogy, for the churning storm of abomination, which rippled throughout the warp, in all directions and chronologies, defies description and explanation. It snatched away the souls of almost all Astropaths, dragging them into the bodies of Angyls, to fight the incomprehensible war. It made the deep warp an impenetrable bastion of utter lunacy, destroying any vessels travelling through those routes. Only the shallows of the warp were safe now.

Of the Black Ships, many separate tragedies befell them. The Black Ships, vessels dedicated to rounding up psykers and transporting them to Terra, were suddenly made obsolete, as the Astronomicon spluttered, over the course of years, until it was nothing. Then Terra tumbled into hell, and madness took hold of the galaxy.

The Black Ships, crammed with psykers, that were about to enter the warp, suddenly were forced to pull away, their navigators going mad instantly. These ships

became becalmed, trapped in the void, light-years from anywhere. Trapped in reality, psykers, driven insane and empowered by the churning warp, fought at their restraints and cells. The grim dark halls of the psyker ships became battlegrounds, where cold-hearted Storm Troopers and Sororitas engaged the gibbering hordes of psyker horrors. Soon these Black Ships became tombships, as their defenders engaged their failsafe devices, pumping cyanide and neuro-toxins throughout the vessels, mutually destroying both Imperial and monster equally.

They were the lucky ones.

Many of the Black Ships were trapped within the warp, as the guiding light faltered. Some were torn asunder instantly. Others became utterly lost in the warp, their navigators lost or executed. Some, believing they had re-discovered the Astronomicon, headed towards an area of deep warp where a golden light seemed to becalm the warp. These vessels disappeared, frozen forever in mid-action. The infant Star Child had ensnared them forever. Others crashed into driving hulks, fusing at the physical, and even spiritual, level. Their liberated cargo would then flee into the depths of the hulks, or else die, moaning silently, as their bodies fused painfully with the walls.

The most infamous example of a Black Ship through the warp, was that of the Tersis. Its tale is long, and, in some places, incomprehensible. Nevertheless, I shall endeavour to narrate their tale.

The Tersis' Captain, as the Beacon of the Astronomicon vanished, ordered the ship to leave the warp immediately. The Navigator tried his best, wrestling his ship through the unimaginable tides and fluctuations, as things beyond understanding clashed and rolled within the madness. He approached the shallows. To his horror, however, there was no reality beyond, and they plunged back into the madness. They were lost! Lost forever! The Navigator soon began to descend into madness, and was replaced by his assistant. He was killed by his minder, with a bolt to the brain.

Battered by the tides and churning masses of maddening warpstuff, battering the Gellar field, the Tersis dived. Like a black dart they descended, upwards, into the surrounding deep warp. The engines bucked and hissed and crackled. Smoke and murderous vapours

filled the cabins of the ship, incensing and driving the psykers beyond sanity. They launched all their psychic abilities against the cells and restraints, burning out their broken minds. The Sisters on board, led by Sister Superior Medeline, fought like legends, slaughtering and murdering the flaming witches wherever they found them. Stormtroopers barricaded all then on-cell chambers, barring the entrance of the mad warp-terrors. The actual ship's crew managed to be protected from the worst of the horrors. Every human chanted litanies of protection, and prayers to the Emperor.

The ship plummeted, faster and faster, and slower, as they ascended into the deepness of the most dark and unbound warp depths. The walls began to bleed, as gibbering things shoved their way into their reality bubble. Talons and tentacles, everywhere. Hellguns glowed white hot, such was their rate of fire. Bolters barked and roared, blasting chunks of masonry and maggot-ridden flesh-architecture, as power weapons and holy objects smashed apart devil-faced daemons, and scuttled semi-humanoids and psyker monsters, all fire and misery, as they literally flew at their foes, blazing talons drawn.

Yet, they endured, as they plunged into the deep warp even deeper, and ever outwards. Slug-monsters emerged in the engine block, and the Magos aboard fought them with all his cold, logical might. Unfurling dozens of bladed mechanical appendages, the Magos flung himself at the slug-wolf things, cackling binary nonsense as he howled mechanically. He hacked down countless hundreds of the things, but their blood just clung to the walls, and sprouted more devils, which surrounded and befouled him, dragging him down, into their foul embrace.

The Gellar field failed. Like a foul gale, the walls began to shatter and bleed, as they came apart at the instant of failure.

Suddenly, they regained integrity, the ship reforming partially. The daemons eased off, and were forced back, at great cost. Only then did the defenders gaze outside. The fallen edifice. The fragment of reality, tumbling, warded, down into the upper heights of the deep warp. They had crashed inside it.

Unlight flooded the view screens, as they gazed across the strange realm, which loomed under and over them simultaneously. Though it crawled with runes, and was

painful to even look upon, the crew realised it was, in fact, 'real'. Some of the more desperate/insane crew forced open access hatches, and crawled out into this mad wilderness, sobbing with hope and elation. The ground above them formed into multi-coloured horrors, and dragged them off, through the floor, into the warp. Hope was not a safe emotion to exude, evidently. The hatches were sealed soon after this.

And so, riding upon a diseased fragment of reality, the Black Ship plunged. Monsters assailed the defenders at random, plunging into the ship with no effort. Back to back, the Troopers and Sisters fought, battering back the devilish foes. They fired their pistols, until spent. They hacked with blades, until blunt and broken. They battled with fists, until their limbs were broken and useless. Then they fought with their teeth, and their bodies. Desperately, the underlings of the Magos sought to repair the destroyed Gellar field, as daemons lapped mere inches from their workspace, held back only by the wild, savage strength of the desperate Stormtroopers and Sororitas. To the great surprise of several defending Imperials, the surviving psykers, who still lived, fought back against the daemons, driving them back with sorcerous chants, and searing warp blasts. One such patient, the former occupant of cell #1, pulverised daemons and warp creatures, his vast psychic energies driving the monsters insane, and bursting their stolen bodies. It was said the psyker even saved the life of Medeline, boiling the blood of a tusked daemon in mail armour, even as it reared over her prone form.

Aided by their surviving psyker quarry, the defenders forced back the beasts, as the Gellar field shuddered, spluttering, into life once more.

As they tumbled, the various defenders began to age. Some grew older, rapidly. Some stayed the same age, while others began to get more youthful. Others were slowly devoured by the walls, wailing weakly, as the possessed metal sucked them in like quicksand.

They ate mutant and daemon flesh, they drank stagnant blood and thick, sentient fluids. In the immaterial realm, the defenders became something less than human, something more than mortal. The miserable and monstrous occupants of the vessel began to copulate and fornicate, as the years wore on. Their children were hoofed and twisted, bawling bundles of claws and malice. Yet still they tumbled.

None can possibly say how far, and how long, they tumbled, for both measurements are irrelevant in the warp. The ship fell past countless indefinable horrors, and wonders that would make a saint weep. Eventually they entered the final depth, the full doom.

[Record missing: Document descends into bizarre glyphs and runes, bursting into multi-hued flames, before forming a sea of spiders, and scuttling away, across the desk. Servitor guns forced to destroy record. Record resumes...]

-and they screamed “Nex! Notkor Tan!” and there was ice-fire in their hearts.

Yet, the ship, shorn of its reality raft, descended up and across, evading the lingering tendrils of the Nex. What happened in the realm cannot be explained. Nor should it. The Psyker from cell one purged the souls of dozens of his followers, boiling their souls, for fear that any trace of the Nex remained within them.

Yet, it seemed as though sanity began to reassert itself. Gravity began to express itself upon their limbs. Air began to have a taste, not just an emotion, once more. The walls were solid, for the most part. Each defender of the ship now had a single shape, unlike in the final depth.

Eventually, with a burst of mind-shattering horror, the Tersis emerged, heralded by a storm of bile and coloured lights.

They emerged in 999.M42, roughly a hundred years since becoming ensnared in the immaterial. It was a darkly changed vessel now though. Like a semi-living flesh-shark, the possessed vessel drifted, a hellscape made flesh. Arm in arm, the corrupted Medeline and the Wych-Lord of Cell #1, resided over a crew of twisted monsters, who worked the machineries of the vessel as if all was normal, their minds shattered and splintered.

This horrific ordeal was not unique to the Tersis. Vessels lost in the warp would frequently, throughout the Second Age of Strife, emerge from the warp, transformed into colossal warp-possessed beasts, which would then fall upon unsuspecting mortal

worlds, attacking furiously with fangs and warpish flame.

These common occurrences would later be nicknamed ‘hell-subs’, due to the submerged nature of the twisted wrecks.

No matter the horrors the Second Age of Strife would soon bring to the galaxy, it was nothing compared with the numbing abomination of the deep warp. For, as the mariners of ancient legend would warn, there be monsters...





**SECTION XXII:
THE BLOOD AND THE SWORD:
BLOODKNIGHTS OF BAAL
AND THE LEGACY OF
MEPHISTON THE UNDYING**

The cataclysm left no planet, no person, unaffected. From the Eye, all the way to the very furthest fringes of the eastern expanses, the rampage of the New Devourer claimed untold quadrillions of beings, ripping them asunder in orgies of bestial hunger.

As if in mocking irony, the Emperor toppled from his throne, slain or merely dying. It did not matter, for the result was the same besides. The doom of the Emperor affected all who could perceive the great surging changes, resounding across the entirety of existence.

The Children of Baal, the Blood Angels, unlike all other chapters, experienced all three of these outcomes.

During the 41st millennium, it was claimed the Blood Angels were already on the road to division. Dark whispers claimed that Angel fought Angel, through the staggering vaults of their fortress monastery. Successors were drawn to their ancestral homeworld. None can be sure what transpired, but the events bound the children of the blood together tightly. Their conflagration cost the lives of many of the marines and serfs, leaving the founding chapter broken down to an unprecedentedly low number.

However, when the Astronomicon failed, flickering out like a firefly, the Sons of Sanguinius, from several of the chapters, found themselves fortunately close together. Thus, when the Vastinar crystal empire took their moment to strike an apparently weak Imperial sector, Dante and the Blood Angels were ready. Their fleets, hopping from system to system using short warp jumps, managed to engage the fiends, who used their bodies as deadly prisms, amplifying and channeling light into tight beams of death. The combined force of crimson-armoured warriors descended upon the xenos with great wrath and fury, in the system of Kasus.

The crystalline vessels clashed with the Astartes battle barges, arcs of glimmering light and energy passing between them like crimson tapers. Whole ships were plunged into smouldering ruins, and colonies of Vastinar shattered into blazing shards. Kasus I, the hive world the two forces battled over, watched in barely disguised awe as shapes moved in the heavens, rumbling and lighting the skies, like battling gods of war. Awe turned to horror as arcs of energy fell amongst their spires and eco-domes. The streets ran with scorching molten glass and searing plasma storms, as

entire habs slid under the bombardment of hyper-powerful lances and invisible beams of murderous Vastinar light beams, misfires in the naval engagement above.

Dante himself teleported aboard the lead xenos vessel, his golden honour guard flying at his heels, as the legendary warrior charged the barbed prism-fiends, his axe and blazing pistol reaping a heavy toll amongst the evil aliens. Energy beams tore at their armour, and bladed limbs hacked at them furiously, but they could not be beaten by the xenos filth. After losing almost a hundred marines, Dante, with a defiant scream, charged for the centre of the lead vessel. At its centre, a vast machine, part crystal, part something else, sat, linked to all things within the crystal vessel. He battled the fiend for almost three days, fighting through wave after wave of burning energy, which scorched his armour as black as soot, melting his Primarch's death mask painfully onto his face in the process. At last, with a final howl of wrath, he hacked the thing's glacial mind in twain. With that, a mighty roar resounded throughout the vessel, and it did fall from the heavens, shattering and crumbling as it did so. Kasus I, already mortally wounded by the chaotic battle above, was finally slain by the fallen mountains of glass, many kilometres long.

Blast waves, miles wide, fanned out from the deadly impacts, destroying billions of lives in an instant. Yet, disgustingly, the crystal aliens survived. Dante, furious at the monsters, ordered cyclonic barrages and torpedo volleys to pulverise the surface and slay the beasts, regardless of casualties.

The entire civilisation of the Vastinar was snuffed out a year later, after months of bitter and futile hit and run naval engagements across the asteroid fields of the system. Seventy Blood Angel vessels were destroyed, almost a hundred damaged. It was a hateful, miserable campaign, which left the Blood Angels drained, and the humans of the system all but exterminated.

Yet, the Angels could not rest. Over the next hundred years of conflict, the Angels traveled up and down the sector surrounding Baal Secundus, battling xenos threat after xenos threat, putting down swarms of ravaging daemonspawn, destroying psyker covens which had driven worlds insane, as well as heretical armies of deluded men. They fought on, but with every battle the Angels realised they were more and more alone. No

Imperial forces came to aid them, no thanks came from Sector capitals. Nothing. And, with every war and every barely won victory, the death toll amongst their human charges increased and increased. As the years wore on, many more of the Blood Angels found themselves in the Death Company, and those not succumbing to their urges hardened their hearts further and further.

Eventually, seven hundred Astartes returned to Baal Secundus, battered and bloody, dragging almost one hundred frothing mad Death Company with them. When they entered the system, they knew something was very wrong. The orbital defence batteries were blazing with weapons discharge and launching torpedoes. The other planets of the system rumbled with tense conflict. And, most sickening of all, Imperial naval craft were at the forefront. These were no heretics, but their hulls were painted in the triple helix pattern of the Trivit Imperium, one of the many petty realms of post-Imperial mankind. They were invading Baal, warring with the defiant Chapter Serfs, who fought alongside furious tribesmen of the Blood Tribes of

Secundus against the invaders. The traitorous post-Imperials themselves had allies, in the mutant warbands which roamed Baal Secundus like a cancer, and the bitter war had obviously been raging for many years.

Dante, his heart utterly broken, finally succumbed to the rage. The Black Rage. Like righteous daemons, the Blood Angels fell upon their enemy, the Trivit. Bolters barked, chainswords tore. Blood was drunk, and bones were pulverised. And, through all the slaughter and death, Dante, his scorched armour dull and gore-soaked, wept beneath his mask.

“Horus! Horus!” he cried, his mind replaying the events of a long lost past, as he slew all around him with his glowing axe.

The Petty Imperial forces were driven from the system, their numbers greatly culled by the experienced naval commanders of the Blood Angels. Those vessels too slow to flee were boarded and captured. Serfs swarmed the vessels and brought them back to the fortress monastery, to be consecrated as worthy of Astartes use.



Dante was dragged from the field by his retainers on the orders of Mephiston, the highest ranking survivor of the preceding centuries of war. Thus, the master of death became master of the Blood as well.

Mephiston was a strange and sinister being. An aura of utter dread surrounded the Chief Librarian/now Chapter Master. He had lived beyond the Black Rage, his own will quenching the terrible psychic curse within. He had reached into his own mind, and plucked out the defect. No mortal should be able to do so, and yet he did. Some say when he did so, and returned to reality, he was not the same being that had left.

As leader, he looked upon his homeworld with condescending malice. It was primitive, despite all the Blood Angel's purity and culture, they would always come from beasts.

"Let us remake our cattle anew, lest their brutishness taint our perfection," he was quoted as remarking once, in reference to the tribal humans, cowering in the toxic hellscape of Baal Secundus.

Upon the blighted soil, he had great bastions crafted, by the toil of millions. Each bastion was a complete walled city. Marble and grand carvings dominated every archway, every door. These became shelters for the tribesmen against the various horrors of Baal, who eventually, through Mephiston's propaganda and persuasion, became residents of these baroque and magnificent edifices.

At the centre of these great cities, towers rose uneasily. Their chambers were forbidden, and the processes therein were secret. For Mephiston and his sanguinary priests had discovered a means to cure the Black Rage. He had found that, once injected with a viral strain of geneseed, before being completely drained of blood, a human could provide the means to cure the Black Rage. However, this draining of blood became a method to unleash controlled bursts of the Red Thirst. The great and ravening hunger and rage of their long dead gene father allowed them to boil away the psychic backlash of their Primarch. In resisting the Black Rage, they succumbed to the Red Thirst.

Yet, for the unfortunate marines still suffering the empathetic rage of Sanguinius, there was little hope. Mephiston had these monsters cast out, tossing them

out beyond the cities, into the nuclear hell beyond. These deranged Death Company marines and errant flesh tearers, descended further, becoming abominations. Out in the wastes they encountered the original mutant tribes, twisted monstrous beasts, failed Blood Angel clones, and other terrors, and fought and ripped and tore. Their battered armour became tatters around their bulking, rage-fueled limbs. They killed anything and everything, with the truly insane Dante at their head.

Deep within the cities, the Blood Angels implemented their plans. Taking only dissidents and criminals at first, their vampiric rule was relatively benevolent. The townsmen feared the dread, thirsting giants, yet they knew obedience would keep them alive.

Mephiston had chroniclers write of their epic wars, in poetry and song and art. Classical learning and complex theology were openly discussed. By the dull days of Baal, high culture, based upon internal factors, reigned supreme. By night, terror and blood reigned all the more fiercely, as the Blood Angels began to become desperate. Criminals were in short supply, and constant replenishment was required to prevent the Black Rage consuming their bodies. They began to hunt the people, careful to leave enough alive to sustain a population. No one could flee, because the Astartes controlled the space craft, and outside the imposing walls mutants and black-rage filled nightmares stalked the lands.

Gradually, over centuries upon centuries, the Blood Angels changed. Gone were the white knights of purity and legend. Now they were infamous and dreadful. Many of the Astartes loathed this existence, and petitioned for exile into the wider galaxy, to 'find the Imperium' as they put it (which most suspected meant 'find a true cure' for their affliction, in actuality). However, most of the Blood Angels began to revel in the awe and gut-wrenching fear they created in their cattle. Many converted their armour, giving it the fearsome appearance of ancient plate armour of ages past, as if ancient polytheistic gods of pagan primitivity had arisen amongst man, and had come to feast. Many sculpted or adorned their helms with skull imagery, or otherwise created the impression they were agents of bloody death. Some fitted strange vox units to their helms, which made disturbing electronic howls during their hunts, thus amplifying their horror.

They forgot the traditions of their Chapter, becoming obsessed with their own fabricated 'high cultures'. Sanguinius and the Emperor were still praised, yet the now-titled Blood Knights of Baal became almost like saints, on par with their gene fathers. The great heights of their past lay in ruins, forgotten in the red sands of Baal. The legends of their forefathers now only served to justify and excuse the excesses of their rage and thirst.

To maintain strong recruits, children gladiatorial pits were crafted in the townships, and the young of the cities were forced to battle for supremacy. Few made the cut, but occasionally a warrior child with enough naked aggression and skill passed the tests. Of these, few survived the implanting process. Those that did became Blood Knights themselves, and began to learn the 'history' of their realm, and their place within it. It was often said the youngest Knights were the worst. They felt the Red Thirst keenly, and greedily ripped open throats and veins, injecting gene-seed into their prey through complex narthecarium devices, before draining their victims dry, thus staving off the Black Rage for another month or so.

By 342.M43 there had to be a change. Mephiston, the ever-living psychic Lord and Master of Baal, decided it was time for the Knights to truly rise again. They would find new blood, and new foes. They would see what (if anything) survived the combined horrors of both the New Devourer, the doom of the Imperator, and the loss of the guiding light. While before, as the Imperium shattered around them, the Blood Angels fought to maintain their realm. Now, the Blood Knights fought to reclaim, and remake their realm.

For they thirsted, as never before. "New blood and new life!" became the dread war cry of these descended savages, as their captured fleets began to make their first, tentative steps, out into the ruined monstrosity that was the galaxy of the Second Age of Strife period. They desired but one thing: to wash the Petty Imperiums, the heretics, the monsters, the rebels, all away, in a vile tide of blood-soaked carnage. If they were to suffer the Thirst, so would the galaxy suffer.







SECTION XXIII:

THE COGNATE

(200.M43 - 992.M48)

The triumphant death howl of the Emperor upon his destruction was as a grand gale of psychic force. As with the first Age of Strife, psykers sprang up with ever increasing frequency. It was said not a single world in the galaxy didn't have a psyker living upon its surface. Many were cruelly murdered by the ignorant barbarians of their now fully-isolated primal (and, in some extreme case studies, more developed industrial and hive) worlds. Often the reverse was true; psykers rose up to drown their worlds in madness and blood.

The black ships visited worlds less and less frequently, eventually, by M46, ceasing their rounds entirely. Thus, the psyker epidemic was further exacerbated. Daemons and other warp devils took advantage. Hundreds of worlds, both within Petty Imperiums and beyond, were utterly consumed by ravaging warp energies, capering daemons, and all manner of heinous things. Vampyres openly rose up on a dozen planets, draining thousands upon thousands of people dry, their eternal thirst for psychic sustenance unbearable. Mind-walkers and Psychneuein wasps spread from world to world, as croatalids migrated in ever greater numbers.

On one world, the warp was so disturbed, it was claimed that an element of the Nex-

[journal author begins vomiting, babbling in language untranslatable by cogitators. Servitors on stand by. Subject recovers]

- and the entire sector was utterly removed from existence. Luckily, the vile essence of the deep warp did not crop up again, throughout the entire period. We can only pray it never does...

Anyway, even as the petty Imperiums squabbled and made war against one another, and as xenos, rogues and chaotic armies rampaged across the milky way, this subtle increase of psykers caused untold damage, beyond the realisation of these ignorant little empires and power magnates.

Yet, with every rule, there is an exception. Upon the world of San-Vaagar there had always been a tradition of Psychic discipline. When the warp was thrown into turmoil this discipline was kept intact. Though their astropaths and navigators died or went mad, the disciplined psyker-priests of the world did not go berserk, and in fact managed to bring the newly created psykers

under their control, and saved the planet from destruction. This, unfortunately, was not to last. Across the planet, a virulent disease began to spread. Some claimed it was a daemon virus, spread by a travelling troupe of Nurglish cultists, disguised as pleasure girls, who were prevalent across the world, travelling across national and cultural boundaries seemingly at will. Whatever the cause, the virus began to kill everything on the planet, spreading from the crotch outwards, rotting the victims internally as they screamed, aghast at their fates.

Only the psyker monks managed to stave off corruption. Their minds drove away the daemon virus, pulverising the microscopic daemons, which surged invisibly across the entire planet. Some were consumed physically. However, such was their psychic might, that their minds, impossibly, remained, disembodied and screaming silently. However, most managed to seal themselves within their towers, fashioning wards of unimaginable power. The daemon virus, frustrated at being denied, possessed the countless dead of the planet, fashioning itself a host of billions. The army of corpses assailed their magical towers for decades, until the warp energy accumulated by the virus dissipated, and the daemon was banished, leaving a world of corpses.

The priests vowed that this would never happen again. They saw that the plague was a sign: psykers were the future of humanity, and only they were worthy. Across the warp they pooled their powers, and sent out a message, to any witches or psychics in range:

"The Cognate is come! Gather at San-Vaagar. Bring only your mind and your magicks. The future starts now."

Over the next few decades psykers of varying powers and specialities began to arrive. Some had stolen tiny transport craft, using their own powers to guide them through the sea of souls. Others chartered ships who became becalmed or lost in the warp, leaving the psykers to escape in pods. Some had banded together and traded for a vessel, and collectively piloted it to the planet.

Thousands of psykers came. Then came the trials. The first was the planet itself. Swirling with despairing souls, the psykers had to travel through the mountains of rotten dead, to reach the towers. Many went insane.

Many did not. The second was the corruption trial. The priests tested each psyker who came, scrying through their minds with their powerful abilities. Those who were corrupt, were destroyed.

When the trials were complete, the Cognate began to take shape. A series of tiers made up the ranks of the psychic organisation. The first tier were the oldest and/or most powerful members of the Cognate. Those of the original priests, the Alpha Level psykers and above, and some of the most powerful psyker-wraiths. The second tier ranged from the Beta psykers down to the Delta levels. Beneath them were all the rest, the third tier. The first tier decided upon topics of research, and judged the others. The second tier researched the topics, and gathered power and sorcerous magicks. The third tier did the grunt work, serving the upper tiers, maintaining the towers and forming the Sacren, an army of warrior psykers to defend the Cognate, using a combination of captured PDF weapons and their own warp-spawned powers.



The centuries wore on, and the Cognate turned all its sorcery, knowledge and unthinkable power into learn-

ing and developing their understanding of the warp and their powers. Devices were fashioned and artefacts crafted in the deep vaults of the Cognate's towers. As a soul is a firefly, flickering in the warp, the world of the cognate was a vast unreal sun, blazing with soul-fire and leeching ever more energy from the warp. Daemons and Angyls flocked around the world like a warp-spawned miasma. Only the titanic wards crafted by the founders kept the madness at bay, locked behind a colossal conceptual wall of hexes and runes. Words and whispers travelled, across the churning sea of chaos, through the realm of the soul. Rumours became literal beasts which scampered through the madness, bringing their diabolical message to any who had the power to comprehend it.

Languishing in his realm of crystal and glass, the message-beings gathered around the great Red Sorcerer's warp-bound listening horn. Magnus, the vast lord of the Thousand Sons, became aware of this clan of psykers. He looked upon their world through his singular warp sight, and he grew envious. He must possess their knowledge!

In 992.M46, after centuries of fraught travel through the even more insane and hazardous warp, visitors arrived upon San-Vaagar. The Cognate became aware of them when a vessel inscribed with curious, forbidden runes entered orbit above their world. Within that same week, a party of nine landed upon the psyker world. These nine passed across the surface of the world, without being driven insane by the howling wraiths. When they reached the gates of the sixty-six towers of the Cognate, they, unbelievably, bypassed the powerfully warded barriers, their sorcery allowing them to step through a shimmering portal, directly into the central hall of the cognate, to the astonished gasps of the psyker-lords themselves.

Before them stood nine towering giants, bedecked in glimmering gold and blue plate. Eight of the party stood perfectly still, their hollow helms staring impassively, as they held their bolters perfectly still. The ninth was obviously a sorcerer, his armour even more ostentatious than his comrades, his staff held loosely in his heavy gauntlets. This was Lord Severanus, the latest in the line of chief Librarians of Magnus' personal Cabal of heathen warp-channelers and psykers. Arrogantly, he addressed the Cognate's leaders directly, ignoring protocol entirely.

“My dear witch doctors and soothsayers,” he was said to have uttered. “My Lord, Magnus the omniscient, the Red Cyclops of the all-knowledge, has looked upon your great works, and is impressed. Should you wish it, he would gladly allow your highest thinkers into his own great Cabal. All that he asks for in return, is knowledge. Is this not a grand and merciful gift?”

The second tier were outraged, and the psykers had to concentrate in order to repress such murderous thoughts. The grim, hooded figures of the council of Sixty-Six, the greatest of all the Cognate, were quiet. Of course, none of the cognate truly spoke verbally anymore, but even their minds were silent, as they considered the disgusting proposal of Severanus. Eventually they responded, as a single voice, or dread power.

“We recognize your master not. His god is not our god, and his authority does not hold sway here. Be gone, insect!”

At this, it was said Severanus erupted into a fit of hysterical laughter. *“Not his realm? The Lord of all Change has dominion over all things! Think not that even you, walled up in your towers, are unassailable. Reconsider, or you shall surely perish! By the very well of eternity, your Cognate shall fall, without my master!”* the creature proclaimed.

Again, the cognate dismissed him. In a fit of rage, his patience exhausted, Severanus lashed out with his venomous mind, striking at the leader of the cognate himself. Suddenly, the central hall was in uproar and madness, as the Thousand Sons turned their bolters upon the surrounding witches and psykers, who in turn lashed out with their own powers. Severanus was a tornado of power, arcs of blue and pinkish fire erupting from him in devastating arcs, as lightning and blazing darkness poured from his talon-tipped gauntlets. Bodies were blown apart by gunfire, Astartes were blasted to pieces or forcibly banished from the hall, and warp power flowed like oil throughout the room. Yet, while Severanus was as a tornado, the lords of the Cognate were as hurricanes. Mechivoe, a master pyrokiner, speared warp fire across the evil Sorcerer, burning him to his very soul. Lord Severanus hissed in utter agony, only just managing to teleport from the hall and back to his waiting ship in orbit.

Back upon his vessel his own cabal of sorcerers, both human and Thousand Son, began to weave their own

devastating magicks in response. While they prepared, the Astartes Strike Cruiser unleashed a barrage of scorching bombardment shells upon the sixty-six towers of the Cognate. Yet, even as the munitions neared, invisible forces plucked them from reality, or crushed them in mid air, detonating them harmlessly miles above the towers. The powers of the Cognate were mighty indeed.

Then the Thousand Sons unleashed their sorcerous return fire. Like two ships duelling in the void, the two Cabals battled across the psychic plane, unleashing hellish powers and terrible energies upon each other. Mewling spawn monsters were created which battered the towers, only to be destroyed by dozens of vortex portals. Wraiths were weaponries, some were banished. Over six years, the two psychic forces fought each other to near exhaustion. Yet, the Cognate landed the final, decisive blow. A great warp-borne wind swept impossibly across the void, buffeting the entire star ship away from their world, forcing it to enter the warp against its will. Severanus, howling curses, was denied. Little more than a charred skeleton supported by scorched, enchanted power armour, Severanus looked like the face of death, as he fled back to his master in disgrace.

It seemed as if the Cognate had defeated Severanus' prophecy, and had survived. However, the war had taken its toll. The Cognate found that its numbers dwindled over the following two thousand years. Null ships would sneak into their territories, and greedy bounty hunters and mercenaries would steal psyker children from their beds, to be sold into slavery for the many Petty Imperiums, who paid handsomely for Cognate-trained psykers. Daemons constantly assailed them from the abyss, desperate to devour the succulent souls within their hard shell. Likewise, chaos warbands, eager to test their meddle, would constantly send warriors to assail the world, stretching the power of the Sacren wafer thin, as they fought off threat after threat.

As with all empires in the Second Age of Strife, they were gradually eroded, like a tide erodes a beach. No matter their power, they were not all powerful. Desperate for new recruits and new blood, the Cognate sent out ambassadors across the warp, blindly hoping these ambassadors would bring new recruits, or hire themselves out to local Imperiums. However, few ever returned. Most were simply killed in the warp, as with

out the Astronomicon long distance travel was essentially suicide. Those that survived often found they did not wish to make the return journey, and instead offered their services to any who could offer them security, or pay. Often they were simply enslaved or tortured. A scant few were employed by powerful lords of entire petty imperiums, or became captains of great vessels.

Meanwhile, the Cognate became weary and distressed. The second tier became disillusioned with the top tier, and many civil wars erupted intermittently, costing yet more lives they simply couldn't spare. Eventually, in 992.M48, when a group of the league of the Purge entered the system, the psykers (most of whom were now just second tier or lower) were unable to prevent the Purge from callously launching multiple virus bomb assaults upon the world, utterly killing everyone on the world. Such is the price of hope in the Post-Imperial galaxy.







**SECTION XXIV:
LEGENDS OF THE HERMIT**

Men, so it was once said, make their own monsters, as well as their own heroes. Whilst not strictly true in such a time as the Age of Strife, the human urge to mythologise the mysterious and the unbelievable is equally strong in this period. Stories are traded amongst the star farers, or between huddled families, hiding in the dark and cold, or through the countless millions of refugee camps across the galaxy, whispered through dry lips, into the ears of equally miserable or terrified people. Courts surrounding the affluent petty Imperators were no different, uneasy rumours and tales passed as a subtle undertone, throughout courtly proceedings.

One of the most prevalent of these legends and myths, is that of 'The Hermit', or 'the six hermits' or 'The Wandering one', depending upon which sector's stories you choose to listen to. Variations of this rumoured being crop up from the Segmentum Obscurus, all the way to the barter worlds of the far fringe, where human life is a mere commodity of various xenos overlords. Though these tales often differ greatly, the (in)famous hermit character seems to share several similarities. A large cowl or hood, obscuring his features, generally shabby clothes, piercing eyes, and often possessing miraculous, possibly warp-bound powers.

In the Segmentum Solar, the hermit is an almost sort of folk hero. On the planet of Chinaire, the hermit came to the rescue of the Cinairian, when their overlord, a Former Inquisitor calling himself Mauvais, began to terrorise and oppress them terribly. The hermit came, and within a few weeks, it was claimed, the entire planet was in revolt, as his oratory and word skills swayed the people against this false tyrant. The inquisitor sent an entire battalion of soldiers to murder the hermit, in his forest cave which he called home. The hermit, using skill and his insane strength and speed, destroyed the entire army. The survivors fled, screaming 'black beast! Black beast!', haunted by the hermit's form. At the height of the demonstrations, as the people united against Mauvais, and besieged his capital, the desperate Inquisitor unleashed his hardest warriors: a twenty strong band of Marines Malevolent. The callous, evil marines, butchered hundreds in their fury, driving amongst the crowdlike mad zealots.

Then came the hermit. Hidden by the bulging crowd, he had managed to sneak into the capital unnoticed. As the marines prepared their final assault, he lunged

forth, snatching the thunder hammer from the leader of the Astartes, and dashing his head from his shoulders, before laying into the other marines. As the marines were battled back, the crowds grew in courage, and charged the gates as one, smashing them from their hinges, and flooding the capital. Mauvais was defeated, and the people cheered. However, the hermit was gone.

Another world in the Segmentum Solar was attacked by Despoiled regiments from the Western Chaos Imperium, who pulverised their capital, and demanded their surrender. However, a hermit had begun preaching a creed of salvation; of unification. Thus, the people rejected the devilish soldiers, who decided to punish the non-chaos Imperials directly. The bat-winged Apostle Grasis, the Underlord of Sector Champion Kailus of the Chaos Imperium, descended on his dreadful pinions, leading the evil cadians from the very front. However, when confronted, the people of the world were armed with fantastic weapons, fashioned by the hermit himself, and they held back the rampaging hordes. However, they could not vanquish Grasis, who merely laughed, as their flamers and hyper-cannons merely rippled across his demoniacally invincible flesh. He slew thousands personally, his scythe reaping a bloody toll amongst the people. Then, when home seemed to fail, the hermit emerged. The daemon and the hero wrestled, as the hermit battled the bat-like horror from tower to tower. At last, the hermit unleashed a heavy blast from his flamer. Grasis laughed again, as the flames rippled across him harmlessly. However, that was never the intended target. Instead, the hermit melted the adamantine structure above the devil's head. As the beast laughed, the hermit seized him in a hold, and forced the molten super-alloy down the monster's vile gullet. With a howl, the thing was banished, and the Despoiled, leaderless, chose to fight to the death. The hermit didn't disappoint, as he and the defenders overran and slew them all.

And so on, the stories go, across the entire segmentum Solar and Pacificus. We can infer several interesting points about this 'hermit, from these many tales. Overall, he is phenomenally strong, able to wrestle a daemon prince, and even tackle an adult Ambull in one of the legends of Innut. He also is claimed to be a giant, anywhere from ninety foot tall, to roughly seven foot. However, he generally seems to be nearing astartes

height in most of these stories, and thus I feel confident in speculating that he is possibly some form of space marine renegade, whose deeds have been exaggerated, as all heroes are. In particular, this seems to be the modus operandi of the Salamander chapter. Since they shattered into nearly individual units after the Emperor fell, it is likely that perhaps these hermits, are squads of salamanders, claiming to be a single mighty figure. The frequent depictions of the hermit being a 'black beast' would seem to support this.

The mysterious figure of the hermit seems to alter radically in the legends of segmentum obscurus. In these legends, he is a sinister being, who moves unseen through society, murdering and mutilating witches and psykers, seemingly at random. This makes this depiction particularly ambiguous. Sometimes the psykers in question are tyrannical puppet-masters, dominating their mortal minions, and the hermit there is a liberator. Other times, however, he is merely shown to be a bizarre and crazy butcher, randomly murdering other-wise innocent psykers and witches, often dooming the planets in question. This hermit is not depicted as some giant, in fact often being depicted as a frail being by most accounts, but still seems to perform feats beyond a mortal, such as removing all the air in a room to evade Arbites, ripping a reaver titan in half (even



if the reaver in question was damaged, as the story suggests, the power needed to destroy something that large must be phenomenal), or killing with a gesture. I would tend to suggest that perhaps a group of intensely puritanical Inquisitors, aided by significant resources, may be the source of the legend. One being surely couldn't be so powerful.

The Ultima segmentum has numerous hermit myths. In some he is armed, others unarmed. His cowl goes from deep blue or grey, through to bone white, or a deep blackened hue. His height fluctuates as much as his objectives. In the south, near to Grand Sicarium and the Ulfian Pain-Conglomerate, the hermit seems to be a master huntsman, stalking wrong-doers with his hunting bow. These seem to merge eerily well with similar legends of Telion and his hooded company, and well could be a case of stories merging into an amalgam. The hermit being armed is often down to confusion on the part of the observers to events. How can a mortal tell the difference between a Reaper soul, a Watcher in the Dark, Fallen, or cowed warrior zealots? Especially during an intense fire fight? The northern hermit seems completely non-violent, healing the ill and dying, and preaching word of the 'third path', the path of moderation. He/she, has never been associated with any warmongering activities. The north eastern hermit legends tell of a different tale, a lithe woman, cowed in shimmering cowls of black silk, as a widow. She brings death to any who do not pray to the Emperor for his rebirth. Children are frightened by bed time tales of the widow-hermit, the cowed crone of the north.

Thus, we can see that, perhaps, there is no 'one' hermit, but perhaps several stories, overlapping and influencing each other, as the stories are re-told, over and over.

However, one thing upsets this theory. Almost unanimously, the tales have an element of destiny to them. No matter the local, no matter the local dialect or previous myths, each legend mentions 'the world-named-war', and how the hermit is travelling, slowly, towards this mythical place. How so many diverse cultures, many of which could not possibly contact each other, due to warp storms and lack of the astronomicon, came up with, word for word, the exact same phrase, over and over, suggests something disturbing. Especially in light of the events known to have occurred upon the planet of Armageddon...





**SECTION XXV:
OF THE WEBWAY WAAAAGGH**

[distant rumbles are heard far distant from the journal author. Journal author gazes up at ceiling, as flecks of dust dislodge from ceiling. Journal resumes. Exchange of words between author, and hooded figure in doorway. Figure exits.]

Apologies must be given to the tardiness of the latest input. Unforeseen assaults have begun upon the world of my Order. The Mercenaries we hired are dealing with the problem, so-

I digress - the current status of my Order is irrelevant to my rendition of the Second Age of Strife. The Journal shall resume now, covering a topic of much mystique and intrigue.

It has been generally assumed that Wazdakka and his Outriders, at the very start of this period, led all Orks in existence into epic conflict with the invincible forces of the New Devourer, and were utterly annihilated in a war involving trillions upon trillions of Orks, and billions of New Devourer beasts, as Wazdakka's forces lunged from his super highway in a veritable tide.

Of course, it would be a sweeping generalisation to conclude this was universally the case. Though any orks directly fighting the New Devourer, were utterly destroyed, along with their spore-born reproductive systems, some of the more primitive, scattered, and broken ork infected worlds, survived. These were the worlds too far from combat, where only scant traces of orkoid fungus remained. However, Orks are nothing if not tenacious. These light patches of growth eventually bred orks, and other variants of orkoid genus. Thus, scattered, primitive bands of feral orks sprang up, along with the far more common gretchin colonies. These Orks, however, were not the technologically 'advanced' (I just the term loosely. Their technology was as ramshackle as it was genius) versions, which terrorised the 41st millennium. They were mild local threats, often dwelling in deep forests or swamps. They were the semi-mythical menace on the borders of civilisation, and little else. In large numbers, they could perhaps overrun a small Petty Imperium, if they gained the element of surprise, but little else.

Of course, there was also the infamous "bolt boy", a war boss who terrorised the world of Armageddon, using the cunning and knowledge unlocked in his alien mind, via a bolter round to the brain. This war boss,

upon sensing a call from Waaaghraz Gharr, the supposed 'dad of Gork and Mork', led his entire warband away from the Octavian system, and the Armageddon system, and instead assaulted the maiden world of Fourst-K'tikaritix-HeHet Mudastiron (or 'pretty wurld' to the Orks).

The famous Yarrick, Hero of Hades Hive (and later, hated butcher of Betek, but that shall be covered later), and a number of Black Templars, pursued him every step of the way. However, eventually the Orks' superior system of FTL, which didn't rely upon the Astronomicon, outpaced the Imperials, who became scattered by increasingly treacherous warp currents (due to the dying Emperor of this period, as mentioned before). The Imperial Crusade to hunt him was shattered, and the separate elements never reformed again. Some of the least damaged vessels limped back to Armageddon, while others were smashed in the warp, or tossed to distant systems, far away, to be preyed upon (and prey upon) enemy shipping.

Now, back to the Warboss. The few Exodites living upon the pretty Exodite world were slaughtered and eaten after a relatively short campaign. Once conquered, the Warboss, Thraka the head-wound, led his boys against the Webway portals of the world, smashing the seals using brute force, and psychic assaults by his weirdboys.

Soon, his force had breached the Webway, and began to travel inside the strange, almost friction-less realm. Corridors traveled to nowhere, or took you back in time, or turned to insane. Passages were too small for a single Ork to fit in, yet whole gargants tripped over inside them. Buggys lost all grip to the 'ground', and crashed or smashed themselves to bits. Sometimes up wasn't up, but sideways, and time seemed to slow and speed up at random.

After he lost almost half his number, it was said Thraka gave a sensible order to his Orks:

"Ok ladz. Don't tutch nuffin, right?"

With a new found, strange sense of caution, the Orks advanced. Many were the battles and wars they faced, as they hopelessly wandered the Webway, battling Drukhari raids, Biel-Tan strike forces, demons trapped within the warded labyrinth, or Ahriman's

minions, who launched sorcerous blasts at the rag tag bands of Orks. Despite their caution, the labyrinth dimension still disorientated many, who wandered off on their own. Whole warbands and kults of speed, were simply lost in the Webway. Some were killed, some continued to fight, oblivious to where they were. A good few Orks took wrong turns, and stumbled into starship-sized Webway tunnels, only to be splattered by a passing Void Stalker or Aeldari cruiser, as they sped through the tunnels, towards their destiny.

Crystalline spiders became a very common foe, who tested the Orks' combat prowess to the limit. They were regenerative, deadly, and could merge with the walls themselves.

Yet, despite all this anarchy throughout the Labyrinth dimension, those Orks surrounding Thraka headwound, never seemed to get lost, as they battle through the Webway, incorporating wraithbone into their weapons, as their devices broke or were exhausted by constant combat. Something was calling him, across the realm. Dancing, colourful spectres teased and crew the Orks forward, ever elusive to the mindless violence of their quarry.

Waaaghraz Gharr was calling. Waaaghraz Gharr was listening.

No evidence tells us what finally happened, when the Orks met their supposed 'overgod'. However, after that point, the sightings of Orks blundering around the Webway shrank to nearly zero.

It is possible the god's call was a ruse by the Harlequins, who then murdered the Orks.

Yet, this does not even come close to explaining why, on over two thousand separate occasions, strange, bulky shapes have emerged from the Webway, killed entire settlements across the galaxy, seemingly at random, before returning to the Webway. These strange things are said to be eight feet tall, and covered with overlapping, crystalline armour, which glitters like organic flesh, and each being is said to be capable of flight, and could fire devastating blue energy from bulky, sturdy weapons.

Now, of course, these depictions could be of new wraith constructs, or even simple fabrications by civilians with no concept of the strange beings of the universe.



However, it is the fact these broad giants are led by frail, incredibly short beings, similarly attired, which unnerves me, along with the insanely perfect discipline of these warriors.

That and their war cries, which sound suspiciously like another race of war mongers. However, these chants are more disciplined and perfect, and the race's name is different.

Is it possible? Could the green skins really have always been merely the degenerative offspring of these Kr-

[Another rumble rocks entire chamber. Journal is dislodged and topples to floor. Author picks up, dusting off.
Distinct weapon discharges audible.]

Journal shall resume in a few days. We must evacuate to a secure lower level, and let the mercenaries deal with the problem. The foe should leave once our world passes under the glare of the Blue Star.

For now, journal curtailed. Will resume in approximately four (Terran) days.

[Journal is closed by author, as he runs for chamber door.]



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[Vox Transcript Beta-Four-Delta]

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[Conduit: Servitor 1-DX, Servitor 4-DV]

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+++*Transcript begins:*

[Subject 1]- We need assurances Oder! We were promised results. Is the repulsion nearing completion?

[Subject 2]- (large detonation audible. Gunfire sporadic) They're more persistent than before! Had to drag almost half my hosts around to repel them this time. We couldn't have known artillery would become an issue.

[Subject 1]- It doesn't matter. We shall pay double, if you can repulse them as soon as possible. Our vaults are sealed. They can't get in, but my Brethren need reassurances Oder.

[Subject 2]- (garbled)

[Subject 1]- Oder? Oder!

[Subject 2]- (yelling) Understood! Oder out!

(high volume detonations distinguishable)

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**SECTION XXVI:
OF THE C'TAN AND
THE OPHILIM KIASOZ**

Though the most mighty of all the C'tan, the Void Dragon, was roused and trapped within the Solar System, due to Abaddon's devilish guile (as we have already covered), this was far from the curtailment of the threat of the Star Gods, and their Silver fiends.

At the close of the forty first millennium, humanity at large was ignorant of these dread legions. They were mere myths, rumours, legends told by wary adventurers to the gullible or the foolish. Even those of the very highest power, the High Lords, the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the Inquisition, had only the mere inkling that the seemingly random attacks by metallic alien androids, were in fact, parts of a grander and more terrible threat.

As the New Devourer swept across the galaxy like a vile cancerous disease, the Necrons purged their Tomb Worlds of life, cunningly evading the predations of the new threat, which they weathered, as they have always weathered the storm. Then, the Astronomican, over decades, spluttered and blinked out of existence, heralding the doom of the Imperator, and the disintegration of any semblance of unified galactic order, seemingly forever.

Into this universe in turmoil, the Necrons were in a strong position. Their fleets and forces were independent of the warp, and could span the galaxy in mere days. Yet, the scattered Necron worlds, despite their dread might, were near automatons, simply reacting to events as they unfolded, utilizing pre-programmed responses. Some of the more delusional or insane Necron Lords, driven utterly psychotic by the loss of their physical form, crafted grandiose necrodermis bodies for themselves. These Necrons would override the nodal automated defence systems of their Tomb Worlds, and unleash the dreadful mechanical legions against whole sectors, slaughtering billions upon billions of innocents.

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al automated defence systems of their Tomb Worlds, and unleash the dreadful mechanical legions against whole sectors, slaughtering billions upon billions of innocents.

This was an unforeseeable consequences of increased Necron activity. However, the fears of the general populace were misplaced. The Necrons were merely the servants, to the greater, unseen evil, directing the majority of the Necron race. Like a puppet-master plucks the strings of his charges.

The C'tan. The dread Star Gods. Every race had their own legends regarding these fiends, but few believed in them, and thus, when the Necrons began to fully mobilise under their cold, heartless stares, the galaxy at large was largely unprepared for their rampages.

Of the three C'tan abroad, the dark force known as the Reaper, was by far the most overt and blatant of the threats. While its grand rampage came late in the Second Age of Strife, occurring during M47, it was no less devastating for this.

For millennia, the unloving servants of the Reaper had been brazenly gathering and capturing beings of psychic potential, and bringing them to the world of Tovanis, in the Ultima Segmentum. Though the Reaper made no secret of these attacks, there was no force which could prevent it from taking these potentials, as the self-interested and cowardly petty Imperiums sought to protect themselves and fight their rivals, while the majority of the Xenos empires fought amongst themselves likewise, or ignored this growing threat in the east in favour of expanding their colonial assets in the momentous power vacuum created upon the death of the Emperor.

Thus, unimpeded in their baffling work, the Necron Lords gathered these psychics together, herding them to the world in night-shrouded vessels, under constant guard by hundreds of Pariah Cyborgs. Upon this world, hundreds of captured Tech Priests, and Dragon Cultists fooled into believing the Reaper was, in fact, the void Dragon, began work on a vast machine. A unholy meld of psychic technology, and Necrontyr artifice, crafted using C'tan knowledge of the physical, with domesticated psykers' knowledge of warp-craft (and the endless toil of billions upon billions of mind-broken slave workers whipped into work by careless pariah), a great edifice was constructed.

Known as the Dompbir, this device was colossal, easily covering the entire planet's surface, and tapering to a thousand mile high spire, the apex and focus for the grand machine. It is a supreme irony that the largest warp engine ever constructed, was devised by a C'tan, as it loathed the realm it sought to breach.

In M46, the Dompbir was engaged. Like a vast and blinding torch of psychic energy, it punched through the veil of un-reality. The vast beam of conceptual nothingness surged through the sea of souls like a spear, ensnaring something, hidden deep within a warp fold, before dragging the thing out of the warp violently. Emerging slowly from the portal of madness, came the Scythe of Kaelis Ra, the great flagship of the Reaper's fleet. Yet, the entire Necron force was forced to retreat, as the warp spilled outwards like an avalanche of sense and madness. The C'tan knew nothing of how to control the warp, and the reaper fled in hatred and loathing, fearing the dreadful danger it posed to its forces and itself. Tovanis was consumed, as the Necron fleet surrounding the planet vanished in the blink of an eye, dragging their prize with them. Of Tovanis, it was doomed. The Dompbir overloaded, spilling warp-stuff across the world, and pulsing vile ethereal energies into the very core of the planet. The Cowering Tech Priests and slaves were destroyed by daemons formed from madness and woe. The psykers

were possessed and destroyed, paving the path for ever greater daemons and monsters to be born. Within years, the warp consumed the planet, and at last, its core shattered, and it collapsed upon itself. There were no survivors.

Yet, the Reaper had his prize, at last. After a century of purging and restructuring, the C'tan's warship was finally purged of any lingering warp-stuff, and then it was ready.

In 536.M47, the Reaper made its presence felt in grand style. Spreading rapidly from the far north-eastern sectors of the galaxy, the Reaper's war fleet purged systems and destroyed entire populations, while enslaving the rest to be later fed to the monstrous star god. Xenos civilisations would rise up to challenge his fleets, only to be shattered by the devilishly swift and lethal vessels of the Necrons, whose terrible arcs of eldritch lightning destroyed vessels with a mere flicker of their arcane energies. Xenos homeworlds were simultaneously assaulted. As their fleets died in the void, their capitals were suddenly assailed by thousands of towering monoliths. Some of the great floating edifices were said to be as tall as mountains, emitting triumphant, sonorous horns, which blared across entire continents, as they unleashed millions of immortal Necrons from their ethereal portals.



These were not the scant and mysterious Necron raiding forces of the forty first millennium. These were the full warhosts of the Necrons. Multiple-mile long columns of silver death marched wordlessly across the devastated planets, firing their lethal green gauss weapons seemingly in unison at pre-determined targets. In several volleys of combined gauss arcs, whole fortress cities were slagged, whole armies reduced to billowing ash, or smoking skeletons. Wraith swarmed the skies and streets like silver clouds of incorporeal doom. Scarabs, like a moving carpet, destroyed anything which moved or breathed. Smaller Monoliths followed these great phalanxes, their weapons just as devastating, and their payloads equally terrifying. Needless to say, these worlds were rapidly dominated by the Necrons. 80% of all life upon these worlds were massacred in the first few weeks of occupation. The rest were enslaved. As the main host phased off the worlds, to rejoin the main Necron fleet, many remained upon these worlds, forcing the populations to construct towering statues in the name of the Reaper, and massive shimmering machines, reminiscent of the arcane devices upon Phobos, fed humans into them, thus being broken down into energy, and pulsed directly into the Scythe of Kaelis Ra, directly enriching the Reaper with their energies.

It was claimed that within three years, six sectors were cleansed of resistance, and virtually all life exterminated. Within a decade this area of devastation soon bordered upon the Thexian Trade Empire, which pulled thousands of its vessels and millions upon millions of its mercenary troops, slave soldiers, and professional Tallerian armed soldiery, from the T'au front, in an attempt to curb the Reaper's relentless, systematic advance.

The Thexian war machine, hardened by long and bitter border wars, and financed by the double-dealing Thexian Elite, was a formidable force. The Ulthian bone-eaters, employed specialist trans-phasing torpedoes, which used miniture warp teleporters to teleport within enemy vessels, detonating inside. These were effective against even the god-like Cairn Class Necron Vessels, blasting them from within. The Ellicin Colosine, vast grey juggernauts built by the Gorngolem, also held their own against the immortals, using their powerful anti-matter cannons and scavenged dark lance technology to great effect.

Yet, for all their resources and manpower, the Thexian trade Empire could only slow the relentless forces of the Reaper. Whenever there was a prolonged stalemate between navies, the Scythe of Kaelis Ra would arrive to break the stalemate, the vessel was vast and terrible beyond comprehension. On the planets, even the diverse and deadly forces of the Trade Empire couldn't vanquish the legions of Necrons, which swept all before it. On the world of Tatisan, it was said an entire Krieg Serf Battalion marched directly into open combat with the Necron host. Scouring green arcs of malevolent gauss energy played across the battlefield, destroying them within minutes. Yet, never once did the Krieg falter. They marched fearlessly to their dooms, firing their lasguns, as they chanted ancient Krieg war hymns through the dark respirator masks.

Several of the less important colonies were evacuated wholesale. The Thexian Empire needed workers for its monstrous Capital-based society, and it couldn't allow the Necron legions to bleed them dry in this manner. In most cases, the evacuations occurred just before the Necrons arrived. Yet some cases, like that of Horosa, were too slow. As the starport of the single city upon the world became flooded with desperate, fleeing citizens, the dark, crescent shadows of the Necron vessels loomed in the darkening, discoloured skies. A great wail erupted from the predominantly serf-human populace, as they floundered to get upon the last transport, as it idled in the port's docking bay. People bit and tore and found, as they all desperately surged towards their final hope of salvation. With grave regret, the Actonian pilot engaged the thrust systems, and the ships slowly rose from the port, the backwash of its engines boiling away hundreds of civilians, too slow or too weak to fight their way aboard. Yet, on the horizon, stabbing spears of luminescent energy stabbed from the sky, signalling the teleportation of four monoliths onto the surface, mere hundreds of metres from the port. Sure enough, the towering machines hovered into view. Their arcing weaponry was drawn along the mass of planet-bound humans, scything them down like a reaping machine across a Wheatfield. Within moments, the monoliths would be finished with the planet-bound, and would be targeting the single transport, which climbed agonisingly slowly into the sky. Just then, springing from its hiding place amidst the rubble of the ruined city, emerged the bulky form of Vengeance, a Krieg bane blade, representing the last of the military forces upon Horosa. Its cannons blazed,





as the super heavy drove towards the monoliths. In its first salvo, a lucky hit struck a monolith in its crystal nexus, detonating the alien death machine with a throaty roar. Gauss arcs and particle projectors fired upon the tank, blasting off panels, burning the crew, and pulverising its whirring innards. Yet, the machine spirit, outraged at the mere existence of the diabolical Necrons, continued, pushing the vehicle forwards at an ever faster pace. Necrons began to emerge from the closest monolith, as the bane blade closed the gap betwixt them. The skeletal nightmares were ground under track, as the vehicle finally slammed into the machine, simultaneously firing its demolisher cannon, directly into the alien machine. The two vehicles exploded spectacularly. With the tank's sacrifice, the transport escaped, and the world it left behind was utterly slain.

Similarly hopeless situations were repeated, across dozens of worlds, hundreds of battlefields.

The situation became so desperate that the Thexians began to make overtures to nearby empires and conglomerates. Some, such as the Nihilist League, openly murdered their representatives to show how little they cared for the duplicitous Thexians. Amazingly the T'au -the most powerful local faction in the Eastern fringe did agree to send troops and supplies to their old foes. This was in exchange for the Thexians agreeing to join the T'au Empire. Grudgingly, the Thexians accepted (in later years, they broke away from the T'au, and the second Thexian/T'au wars began, but that is beyond the scope of this background section). T'au vessels and materiel flooded across the neutral borders between the two local Empires. Though distrustful, the two forces worked together well, held together by the mercenary professionalism of the Thexian forces, and the technological powerhouse of the T'au empire.

Even more fortunately for the allies, the T'au had discovered a form of advanced D-cannon technology, upon the dead world of Janis, a few hundred years before the invasions of the Reaper. Some said mysterious and colourful aliens had left the weapons there, and this chronicler could well believe this in light of the Harlequin's activities across the galaxy at that time.

Even the relatively intact Iron Lords Chapter of Space Marines, usually so aloof and disdainful of aliens, aided the xenos war effort, by directing the Barghesi, their

main foe, against the Necrons. This was not due to kindness or camaraderie with the Thexians, however. Master Ho'Taa of the Iron Lords, secretly hoped the Barghesi and Necrons would destroy each other. As it turned out, the Barghesi were able to deeply challenge the Necrons on the battlefield, due to their hyper-violent and destructive biologies, yet were unable to overwhelm the immortal forces of the star god.

Using these new allies, weapons, and the sheer manpower of the combined Thexian/T'au empires, the Necrons were halted, and the Reaper forced to consolidate his forces.

The first C'tan incursion was curbed, but at a terrible cost.

Of course, throughout the thousands of years of the Reaper's preparations for epic warfare, the Lying God was abroad and active for far longer, and far more covertly.

Across the galaxy, from M44-M49, nearly seventy petty Imperiums, independent human secession colonies and xenos enclaves, were approached by mysterious emissaries, from the so-called 'Rigny conglomerate' (more vigilant readers can see the obvious implications of the title, I'm sure...). These smiling human orators, in their simple silver garbs, offered advice and/or military and social aid to the governments of these various empires.

However, their advice was venom disguised as sage wisdom. These messengers fed false information to the gullible leaders of these petty empires. Some were guided to attacking Exodite worlds, killing thousands of innocent Aeldari in the process. Some tricked empires into conflict with one another, or turned them against the ancient warrior races. Covertly, the messengers sent disguised Necrons deep within enemy territories, spreading lies, misinformation and rumour, as well as snatching those sentient beings considered worthy of conversion to the next phase of C'tan warrior constructs; the Pariah cyborgs. In some cases, covert Necron cells, would clash with other espionage centred organisations. In darkened streets, Alpha Legionnaires, spies, brigands, assassins, and silver fiends, clashed silently and brutally.

The Lying God set traps and fabrications across the galaxy, seeking to ensnare Ahriman or one of his

Coven, eager to learn the secrets of entering the Webway, and punishing his ancient nemesis. Not only this, but a mysterious man calling himself simply Ralei, went abroad in the galaxy, asking any settlement he came to, where he could find an Inquisitor Czevak.

Yet, the very worst of the Liar's machinations occurred late in the Period. Leading a band of Necrons, through the grim blockage around the Gates of Varl, the Deceiver passed through the incomprehensible portal. None can say for sure what it fashioned in that dark and dreadful region. Perhaps it crafted it, or maybe merely used the power afforded by the inverse sun at the centre of the galaxy to awaken it. Whatever it did, it had awoken and unleashed the Ophilim Kiasoz.

I can name this terror easily, but this is because my order researched the old tales, the legends that were legendary amongst even the Aeldari. Mercenaries and bounty hunters were hired to search the haunted corpse-craft worlds, and find the scriptures, the psychically active manuscripts of the old Aeldari... of the First Ones themselves. It spoke of a war. The Yngir, the great Khaine Bloody-handed, the Asuryan, the ancient gods, the cyclopean hordes. Mirror devils drowning the gardens of paradise in silent death. The puppet-masters, seeping through the cracks in sanity. These legends were self-contradictory and metaphorical in the extreme. They were as abstract as they were dreadful in their implications.

One passage informed us of what spread from the Gates. The great net, cast by the hunter Kurnous. A black net, forged with Vaul's magics, and Khaine's hatred. Subverted, driven into a new form. This black net was known as Kiasoz. Yet, when it was cast upon the Yngir known as Avelor, the breaker, the Yngir star-hungry wriggled free, and cast the net into the wasteland, the realm beyond the realm. The place where the Ophilim, the godless ones, resided. Such was the grim artifice present in the Kiasoz, it ensnared the greatest of the Ophilim, and drove it mad. Even Khaine feared to touch the black net, as the rending horror thrashed like a mad thing. When the war ended, and the other realms finally sealed off the outer realm, the realm not of the ether and not of the other realms, was sealed too. As was the Ophilim Kiasoz.

Until the Second Age of Strife, countless millions of years later.

Reports vary on the appearance of the foul force. All that is known is that, when the Ophilim enters a system, all things die, and the star at its heart withers like a rotten fruit. Ships which escape, claim it cannot be seen, though others say it can be seen only by the stars in the sky it obscures. Is it machine, or is it living? We cannot know. How the Deceiver roused and/or tamed the thing, we also cannot know. All we can know is that it is free, and it is something... wrong.

I have already said too much I fear, for this log was not intended to look to the future of our universe, but to document the horror of these past ten thousand years of hell. I have barely touched upon the great Orb of the Mad One, but I fear if I were to continue, I should drive myself mad. Sufficed to say. As dreadful and hateful as the Second Age of Strife has been for all of us, cowering from the monsters at our door, at least it IS living. No matter how wretched life is, it is still life. Long may our misery continue, but if it means we survive the coming shadow, falling upon our galaxy once more.

[A man enters, carrying a censer. The author waves him out. There is an argument. The censer bearer leaves.

Extract ends]



**SECTION XXVII:
INFAMOUS PERSONS OF THE
SECOND AGE OF STRIFE**

While we talk of the grand dynasties, and marauding nations which ruled and suffered together during the period of anarchy and darkness, we must also remember that history is not just the deeds of the many we need concern ourselves in. Each individual experienced this grand horror in a different manner. Some fled to the the deepest reaches of their worlds. Some wallowed in villainy, using the unrelenting misery of the period to justify any horrendous actions employed by the callous, the cruel and the desperate. Some self-harmed, whipping themselves raw in mute horror. Some found solace in debauchery, some in heroic sacrifice. Some felt some kindling embers of hope, deep in their hardened hearts. For isn't the darkness darkest before the dawn? This next section shall cover five such figures of importance, and chart their place within the bitter tapestry of this age of doom.

Yarrick, Hero of Hades Hive, Butcher of Betek

Commissar Yarrick was once the hero of Armageddon. Beloved by his men, and almost feared by the orks he made his enemy. Yet, he chose to abandon the world, in favour of chasing the great war boss Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka and his fleet, as it fled the Armageddon system in the latter part of M41. He and a sizeable force of Guardsmen, along with regiments of PDF Steel Legion, desperate to join their hero in battle once more, joined the large Black Templar fleet of Helbrecht, as he gave chase to the green fiend.

In the madness and confusion of the period of the New Devourer, worlds were vanquished of life, and chaos became norm. Lost amidst a storm of fleeing pilgrims, xenos and refugee fleets, as well as the stifling shadow in the warp, the fleet lost their quarry. What was worse, after decades of fruitless, violent searching, the warp grew restless as never before. The astronomicon was faltering, and bit by bit, piece by piece and ship by ship, their fleet was separated and lost, scattered across the entire Segmentum Solar and Ultima. Of the Templars, we have already discussed, yet Yarrick's fate was to shape him as a figure of fear and loathing, rather than adoration.

Tossed upon the torrents of madness for three years, eventually Yarrick and his small collection of vessels were vomited back into real space, into the Dalinus system. This happened to be the sub-sector capital of the Mobian sub-sector. The Mobian sub-sector, unlike other tracts of Imperial space cut off from the wider

whole by treacherous warp currents, did not become a petty Imperium in its own right. The sub-Sector Governor, Pilitaes, did not declare himself overlord, or Emperor, or anything as pretentious and vain as the other Petty Emperors. He maintained the title Governor, and instead set up his own council, known as 'the Interrim body'. He and his government considered themselves part of *THE* Imperium, an indivisible structure.

When Yarrick arrived, Pilitaes saw this as validation of his theory, that the Imperium had survived, and if he was patient, relief would come. However, the sight that greeted him was somewhat disappointing. Seven battered, battle-damaged troop ships, and an ancient Grand Cruiser, which listed to one side permanently, its flanks seemingly ravaged by years, nay centuries, of warfare. The naval staff were embittered and tired. Likewise, the Guardsmen who came with Yarrick were similarly weary.

Nevertheless, Pilitaes invited them to set up a sector base within his area of space. Yarrick readily accepted. His Guardsmen and fawning PDF followers set up a large base upon the Governor's capital world, known as Betek. Here, he was resupplied, and his troops drilled and trained, until they had regained some of their former elite lethality. Yet, all was not well upon Betek.

While Pilitaes and his interim body considered everything to be 'business as usual' in the Sector, his people did not. Rumours spread of the collapse of the Imperium, of how Betek had not received communication from the Adeptus Terra in countless centuries, and how supplies from neighbouring sub-sectors had not arrived in system in living memory. Food and patience became scarce. The deluded Governor continued to send his annual Tithes dutifully to Terra. When no word came back, the governor saw nothing wrong, and sent next year's Tithe out just the same, fearing possible retaliation should he not do so. This, combined with the lack of imports, began to take its toll upon the heavily populated worlds of the system. Most notably, Betek.

Upon the planet, mass movements and demonstrations began to spring up, across the entire world. Some were movements in favour of the planet being run by committees of civilians. Most simply demanded representation. In their eyes, the Imperium had fallen, and they

had no obligation to a dead god. The Governor had failed them, and these degenerate 'equality' bands, began preaching of the prospect of representative governance of their planet, in the hope that such a government would redistribute resources, and relieve the growing economic misery Pilitaes was inadvertently inflicting upon his own people. These protests were suppressed violently by the mauls and tear gas of the grim-visaged Adeptus Arbites Precincts across the world cities of Betek. Yet, their actions merely fueled and fanned the outrage and disgust of the protesters.

Pilitaes requested Yarrick's aid in ending the riots and disruptions. He claimed the equality bands were undermining Imperial ideals. Something had to be done. Thus, Yarrick and his soldiers collaborated with the few Arbites forces upon the world, spreading the propaganda message of obedience and submission. Yarrick orated to the crowds. Was he not the hero of Hades Hive? Beloved by all?

However, he was not their hero. Why should they listen to this warmonger, they began to argue, and their protests became more blatant and defiant. Hidden amongst the population, a people's rebellion began to develop. If the Governor could not grant them liberty, then he was not their Governor, in their view. On the fiftieth Candlemas of the 200s of M46, over seven million men, women and children, emerged onto the streets of the main city, within sight of the governor's palace. A more blatant provocation could not be made. As the colourful banners and chants filled the vast courtyards before the palace, a great rumble resounded, drowning out the defiant challenges of the populace. The titanic gates to the palace ground open painfully, and from this grim portal, rolled the monstrous form of the Fortress of Arrogance, flanked by two whole armoured companies. Yarrick, riding atop the tank like some heathen king of old, echoed the blaring roar of the Arbitrators across the city, howling through a loud hailer built into his Baneblade: "Disperse or be destroyed!"

Then something terrible happened. A single rioter, hidden amongst the bustling mobs of civilians, fired upon the force. It was an ineffectual shot, the single las bolt impacting harmlessly into the hull of a Leman Russ.

Yarrick, his patience and nerve stretched thin by multiple antagonistic riots, finally snapped. His tanks

rumbled forth, pouring death into the packed together crowds. Screams and startled yells rose up from the aghast group, the chilling collective scream soon drowned out by the roar of auto cannon fire, and the hiss of las cannon and multi-lasers. The Capital city became filled with confused and terrified crowds of civilians, who fled through the streets, crushing many of themselves amidst the chaos. Thousands more were mown down by the violence volleys of the tanks and accompanying Armoured fist squadrons, who executed countless protesters with a callous efficiency. Just as the armed forces seemed to have relaxed, that was when the rebels chose to strike. Missile launchers and plasma projectors suddenly began to stream from houses, sewer entrances and various other buildings. Tanks were upturned and damaged, soldiers ambushed, even more civilians caught in the vile cross-fire which now developed. The Leman Russ squadrons patrolled the wider avenues, leveling any building which seemed to harbour fugitives. Hellhounds moved through the smaller streets, their flaming main armament spearing fire directly into enemy held buildings, roasting all those within with searing promethium. Windows burst with the over pressure, the anguished cries of those within signalling their demise.

Yarrick was at the forefront of this massacre. This was a war. He knew how to fight wars. As he howled Imperial rhetoric from his lecturn aboard the fortress of Arrogance, the titanic tank ground through the streets. Smaller buildings, and people too old or crippled to evade his vehicle's monstrous tracks, were driven over entirely by the bane blade. Its heavy bolters, las-cannons and demolisher cannon, pulverised anything within range. Men, women, insurgent rebels, buildings, children: all were treated with the same heartless distaste. It was claimed that Yarrick himself took his storm bolter to many of the fleeing 'combatants', screaming hateful litanies as they were burst asunder by his butcher's tool.

Within six hours, three million civilians and rebels, and six thousand soldiers, were dead, with over four million more unarmed citizens fleeing the city in disarray. Even as the men cheered their 'victory', Yarrick was perturbed. He knew that it was far from over.

Even as Yarrick and his fellow Commissars held mock trials for the captured rebels before executing them,

word was spreading to every other city across the planet. Native media spread the word. Revolution. The Butcher of Betek must be punished.

Within scant months, every city across the world was revolting. Though there was no single leadership of the disparate and disorganised revolutionaries, they were united in one thing: utter contempt for the butcher Yarrick, and the Pilitaes, who they considered to be a puppet of Yarrick (even though this was not strictly true). Arbites precincts were besieged by millions upon millions of vengeful rioters, and the less numerous, but far more deadly, equality bands, who had developed into a semi-professional para-military force.

Yarrick's Guardsmen, and delusional former-Armageddon PDF, moved from site to site, battling and destroying whichever foe rose up to engage them. While the Imperial forces were near-invincible in open battle with the rag-tag para-military armies, they could not handle the guerrilla campaign, which was underway across seven continents, and in conjunction with constant pitched battles and uprisings. Over that decade, Yarrick and his men fought near constantly. The rebels, armed with improvised explosives, captured armour and armaments, and fanatical devotion to their cause, took a heavy toll on their oppressors. In some cases, the Betekian PDF battalions found they could no longer murder their own people, and the record of desertion was unbelievably high.

Soon, the situation was untenable. Pilitaes and his 'Interim Body' decided to flee the capital world, and found their capital on another of the worlds within the Sub-Sector. Yarrick cursed them, decrying them as cowards and pacifists. Nevertheless, in 264.M46, the transport bearing the rulers of the Mobian sub sector, began to rise from the star port. Disgusted and betrayed, the ancient Commissar ordered his Fortress of Arrogance to fire upon the transport. Though the treacherous barrage severely damaged the transport, it managed to escape the world.

Yarrick, who was by now so very old, even his bionics weren't keeping him flushed with vigour, began to truly

go insane. His forces destroyed the star port of Betek, in order to prevent any further 'cowardly retreat' as he said.

265.M46. The capital was once more besieged by dissidents. However, this time they were well-trained, well armed, and hungry for vengeance. All but three of Yarrick's battalions were destroyed over that year. The Arbites were all dead or in hiding. Most of the native PDF were part of the massive revolt now. Only the palace, besieged on all sides, remained in Yarrick's hands.

Surrounded by foes, even his fellow allies began to realise Yarrick was a failure. Yarrick, never known for despair, called for a final, glorious charge. Most of his men refused, but he still managed to persuade his bane blade crew to join him in this final act.

As dusk fell on Yarrick's final days, a great roar arose from behind the great gates of the palace. Out surged the Fortress of Arrogance. Its weapons were spent, its fuel low. Nevertheless, it charged, its loud hailers blaring the 'Emperor's Glory' a well-known Imperial battle-hymn of the 41st millennium. It ploughed through the masses of enemy soldiers, as an evil amount of ordinance and weapons fire impacted the dying leviathan. Engines ruptured, sponsors toppled off in flames, and the crew died, one by one. Yet still the vehicle ploughed forwards, scattering the enemy before it.

No one knows who killed Yarrick, such was the confusion. All the same, a single las bolt struck Yarrick in the throat, blasting his head from his shoulders, causing his stiff corpse to pitch itself from the chassis of his battle tank, to be torn apart by the baying hordes of enemies (so romantic revolutionary writers, writing about the glorious revolution after the event, claim the las bolt came from the same anonymous shooter in the summer of 250.M46, making up for missing the butcher originally. However, there is no evidence to support this).

Thus, in infamy and dishonour, Yarrick, hero of Armageddon, and Butcher of Betek, met his end.

Honorin Sung, Grand Master of the Order of the Tempestrian League

The Segmentum Tempestus was divided into many different Theocracies between 209-999 of M49 and well into M50. The Ophelian Imperium continued to bitterly oppose the Tallarn Imperium, even after the destruction of Ophelia in M50. As well as this conflict, these two large Theocracies fought multiple individual wars with numerous other, far smaller Imperiums. Many were merely one of two separatist planets banding together. Yet, several, such as the Balcull Imperium and the Matriarchy of Meledore, were powerful and influential petty Imperiums in their own right, and engaged in wars with each other, on and off, throughout the period. Yet, these Imperiums also had to face countless Heretical cult uprisings, piracy and repeated xenos surges at the same time. So concerned with theological and territorial dominance, these Imperiums often found themselves ill at ease to cope.

Luckily for them, by chance, a new force was in the process of being created.

Honorin Sung was a Cleric from Damasr, a world on the embattled border between Tallarn and Ophelian interests. His Monastic order, the Divine Sculptrists, were on generally good terms with the two Imperiums, and thus were largely left alone. Of course, the rest of the world was Tallarn dominated, with a large Ophelian population. War was commonplace on the world.

While on a justice pilgrimage, It was said a man, armoured in perfect grey armour, studded with scripture, appeared before him, guiding him to a data-vault, deep within the eastern hemisphere of his world. There, he discovered a vault, filled with information and documentation, written in ancient, pre-second strife era Gothic. As a learned scholar, he soon translated all the documents, and deciphered the meanings of many of the artefacts. He learned of this ancient Order of Warriors. Soldiers of the faith and champions of the rule of the Eccliesiarch. They were known as the Frateris Templar. He returned to his order, and brought them into knowledge of his discovery. He formed a following. Sung's new movement converted almost all his fellow clerics, and within the year, his beliefs became widespread and popular, across the entire world. Patronage by local power magnates and religious backing by both Ophelian and Tallarn canons (each eager to use the movement's popularity to gain them oral high ground

over their theological foes), allowed the order to rapidly expand and develop. Honorin, though he himself was a skilled warrior and orator (due to his role of battle-missionary of his order), he knew most of his brothers and sisters of the faith weren't so skilled. Luckily, several prominent Sororitas patronised his order, and their battle orders soon began to aid in the training and recruitment of his developing force. He eventually allowed the various suits of Frateris Templar armour to be examined by serf-Tech Adepts and other mechanics of the Imperial cults of machine, allowing more suits to be built. It took many years, and much blood and money, but eventually, the 'Reborn Fraternity' was forged. Ships gifted or built for the Order, spread throughout the sub-sector, then sector, then segmentum.

Using a revolutionary tactic of way station and 'leap-frogging' warp transit (which this chronicler maintains was a tactic stolen from early T'au fleet tactics, despite the venomous retorts of the many major League Masters I have encountered), the order managed, over a decade, to establish order houses across the Segmentum, with Grand Master Honorin Sung loosely in charge of all of them, from his Monastery upon Damasr. His Order was tasked by him to defend any Emperor-worshipping faction's vessels, as they travelled through the void, defending them from marauding xenos and any pirates that chose to attack. Similarly, Honorin, who often sallied forth from his keep upon Damasr, called for his brothers and sisters to:

"Cast aside the chains of segregation and division. Division is weakness, a heresy the Emperor ascendant would never permit. We are children of the master of man one and all. Let our tremendous wrath and hatred turn upon those that truly deserve our murderous wrath. Let the ad humanist taint be expunged from our collective realms. Let the heretic and the unclean beast-man and children of mutant filth be our foes. Let the anti-human, the cursed xenos, be our foe. Let hate be directed outwards. Let the outer-dwellers fear us, the children of Emperor! Ave Emperor!"

This 'Tempestrian League' as it was now called, was readily joined by elder Battle Sisters and deranged zealots, who dimly recalled the ancient days, where the Sororitas performed similar roles. Not only this, former mercenaries and converted pirates, eagerly joined these

Honorin's order refused to fight in inter-Imperial conflicts, and instead committed itself with butchering worlds of heretics and exterminating xenos infestations. The Velten beings, pale and frail witch-aliens living on the borders of the Segmentum, were utterly killed by the hate-filled League's crusading elements, all in one week.

With every passing year, and every victory, the Tempestrian League's reputation between the warring theocratic Imperiums of Tempestus grew massively. While Inter-Imperial war could not be stopped, even by the league, the orders were essential. In fact, when Ophelia was utterly destroyed, and its Imperium looked as if it would be torn apart by war between the two rival Ecclesiarchs elected in the aftermath, and the expansionist Tallarns, it was the League (and the powerful oratory of the now-ancient Sung) who held together the broken realm, and served as neutral arbitrator in the many conclaves and councils that conveyed to decide upon the true ecclesiarch (which was eventually decided to be Ecclesiarch Gregorin III, of Teteheim, elected in 005.M50), and prevented the Tallarns from utterly shattering their ancient foe.

Three days after this election, Honorin Sung himself died of an infected battle-wound. His place was taken by Grand Mistress Ducarf, who began a long line of Grand Masters and Mistresses in the league.

In the fiftieth millennium, the order was nearly destroyed, by a combination of greedy local petty Imperiums seizing their assets, and the growing menace of the Star Father's Angylic hosts, who becalmed massive areas of the warp. Yet, amazingly, they survive until this day, though they are much weakened. Many heroic and influential Masters of the Order have existed since Honorin's passing, many of whom deserve their own legends. However, none were as influential or as well loved as their founder, Honorin Sung the pious, the man who created the first of the Trans-post-Imperial organisations, Leagues not bound within the social and/or geographical framework of a single restrictive petty Imperium.



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[Opening Pict feed: Upper Hallway 35B]

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[Visual: Five heavily armed men (elements of Ober Vik's Combat group). Running towards pict-imager. Weapons discharges into darkened far corridor. Blue flashes of luminescence return fire. Three fall, splattering bio matter across hall. Strobing autogun fire.]

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[Audio: "Get the warp in-boys, lads! Gush 'em!"]

(heavy drone of heavy stubber discharge)

"Frag them! Frag them!"

"Imperator, eva Tetrinas!"

(rushing sound. Query: Flamer?)

(Unidentified language. Non-human?)

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[Visual: Flashing weapons fire. Lumen globes damaged. Switching to dark-sight...]

[Visual: Humanoid figures. Engaging mercenaries. Single intruder cut down by autogun exchange. Remaining figures engage. Mercenaries extinguished.]

[Audio: (unidentifiable screams)]

[Visual: Humanoids turn device towards pict feed.]

(Query: Weapon analo-

[.....]

[.....]

[echoing detonation. Muffled by roof]

Belius, the Barter King

Belius, colloquially known as 'the Barter King', is an enigmatic figure, famous across much of the Ultima Segmentum, throughout the centuries of the forty ninth millennium. His world is located on the border between not only the twin juggernauts of the Thexian Trade Empire and the T'au Empire, but also five overlapping Petty Imperial borders, not to mention the World-Weave of the Reek. Yet, rather than a subjugated realm, his world (known as 'free geld' by most scholars of the age) was a haven of trade and enterprise, a sort of 'neutral ground' where Empires of differing xenos, and innumerable free, independent traders, could trade technologies, secrets, knowledge and produce, such as the vibrant slave trade functioning throughout the Age of Strife, or the corrosive trade in the Narcotic 'Psyconot', which was gradually, somehow migrating from the Savlar realms, many lightyears from free geld.

How he survived (and indeed, thrived) in such a time of misery and monstrosity, is testament to his ruthless intelligence and shrewd cunning.

No one knows the origins of Belius. The vast being's visage is hidden behind many veils, and only his closest guardians have seen his true appearance. Some claim he is a rogue Thexian, or possibly an outcast and decadent Aeldari (a mythic race by this point). Others claim darker origins. Records from M42 suggest there was a gene stealer infestation upon the world, due for purging. Since records beyond M42 for the Imperium are simply non-existent, we cannot be sure the infestation was destroyed. It is possible that the departing of the Tyranid hordes soon after this point could have killed off the infestation, we cannot know.

Whatever it was, Belius built up an effective system of catering for the struggling Traders and merchants, which plied their trade across Governor(?) Belius' world. Warp travel could only be undertaken via multiple short warp jumps, which made journeys across even sector-sized areas decades-long affairs. Belius provided rest, refuge and re-fuelling for these weary travellers, in exchange for minimal fees, and the chance to cut into these various trades. Uniquely, Belius allowed not only humans of various political affiliations access to his world, but also all many of xenos and bizarre creatures, defying exact descriptions. All paid the fees, all shared in the trades. Eventually, Belius' world began to be well known as a trading post,

and merchants flocked to the world, rather than using it as a stopping off point. Traders, couriers, envoys, usurers and ambassadors began to fill the system near-constantly, and Belius became very, very wealthy. Numerous banks and semi-corrupt casinos (many of whom were secretly owned by Belius and his ruling family, who gained even more profit) sprang up to deal with monetry and physical capital. Inevitably, across the crowded and bustling cities across free geld, criminals and brigands were drawn to these rich targets, like lice to a canine.

Fences, pick pockets, thieves, con-men, nuttilian soul-snatchers and bounty hunters of various genders, creeds and races, flocked to the world to take advantage. Pirates and crime syndicates sought shelter from authorities in the free-trading mire of free geld, seeking to avoid prosecution or execution, or simply coming to the world to purchase weaponry and supplies, in order to continue their destructive and despicable actions. Prostitutes, actors walked in the darkest alleys, actors and their play companies performed in the streets, or in dedicated playing houses. Assassins left discreet advertisements in ale-dens and public conveniences, their adverts making only one stipulation: 'no hits upon the Barter King'. Gladiatorial pits sprang up, sating the hateful bloodlust which all the cowering masses of the galaxy felt during the Age of pitiless misery. The bloody combat of these chrono-constructs gave release to the futile, pent up rage of the masses, who bayed constantly for blood.

Though numerous private paramilitary, security groups and bodyguards flogged their services to clients wishing to avoid being disembowled by vagabonds across the world, Belius had two main groups of 'state' owned forces under his direct control. The first were the Suftem, a group of warrior abhumans, who had a strange desire to perfect their martial abilities using cybernetics and mechanical engineering upon their bodies. Their goat-like physical bodies were enhanced with claws, built in weapons and digital lasers, and their flesh interwoven with various metal plates, tri-weave flak fibres, and minute force fields. These beast-men had been shunned by most societies, due to their violence and their strong lusts (for both violence, and intercourse, incidentally...). On free geld, they found plenty of both. They guarded the main holdings of the barter King, who paid them in slaves and ale, all of which were very abundant in the cities. The other

security force was far more secretive. The hooded brotherhood of Han, were speculated to be made from the deformed relatives of Belius, who formed a secret police force. They would discreetly remove any troublesome guests, without incriminating Belius in the slightest.

Free Geld was barbaric, murderous and chaotic in the extreme. Yet, somehow, it worked.

Of course, as the many, many divergent empires of the galaxy expanded their ragged borders, there was bound to be trouble. One would have expected the brutish empires to tear free geld to pieces, each side fighting over who owned the planet, or destroying any resistance on the planet. However, the Barter King avoided this, in a very simple manner. He joined them all. The T'au entered his system, and demanded he join them. He joined them. The Thexians sent emissaries to his realm, suggesting an alliance. He accepted (and thus removed the need for the Thexians to impose their own ruler upon the system) and joined the trade Empire. The Pan-Haritic Imperium entered the system, their dread vessels swarming with stolen Necron arc-weaponry. They threatened invasion. Belius sent envoys, saying the King surrendered. The Imperium accepted, and didn't interfere with the world (as it provided a lot of income revenue to them). Each time a force came, he became a subject to this force. Handily, while it made him technically subordinate to these empires, it also meant that many of these empires granted him treaties, 'research' grants, and various other funding. He then used these grants and loans, to pay his tithes to his other Imperial overlords. He played each realm off one another, without them ever realising.

Though it seemed like free geld was invincible, it was evidently not the system which held it together, but the influence of the Barter King himself. When he died in his sleep, in 800.M49, his realm collapsed within seven decades. His tithes became delayed and mismanaged, by blundering underlings, and this angered the empires that ruled the realm. Civil wars between rival successors to the throne of 'Barter King' led to his private forces becoming rather more violent and public. In one incident, a merchant was killed in the crossfire, and his White Scars hired goons turned their gleaming bolters and scimitars upon the native forces, causing anarchy and confusion, as thousands

of different mercenary groups, bodyguard units, and criminal gangs, turned their guns upon their rivals and their apparent foes, each believing their clients and brethren were under threat from a hostile force. 'The War with no enemies' was a baffling and senseless engagement, which cost over seven million lives in the two years it lasted. Afterwards, merchants came less and less frequently to the world. Profits dropped, and tithes were not paid.

The seventeen empires which apparently ruled the system, came to collect. Free gold was destroyed over a period of two centuries, as fleet after fleet of militaries came, bombarded, and looted the decaying world. Eventually, with no ruling government, and no laws in particular, the now increasingly barren and sickly world was abandoned by its ruling empires, and it fell into disarray. By M50, it was still a realm of meetings and trading. However, it is almost exclusively criminal in nature, with grimy thugs and robbers roaming the streets murdering and stealing, while large bands of pirates and reavers met to trade stolen goods, and plan further atrocities in other sectors, or simply to get drunk and violent.

In 103.M50, by Ethereal decree, the 400th phase Expansion fleet of Commander Blueheart, cracked the planet by directing seven hundred asteroids into the planet, until it broke up, killing any rogues and crooks stupid enough to still be on the planet when they did so. This was to 'deter' piratical assemblies, and hence keep T'au shipping safe from reavers.

So endeth the realm of the Barter King. Yet, while he lived, it was possibly the closest to a functioning society capable during such a turbulent period of genocide, extortion and the death of a God.

Festielle, the Broken

After so much devastation and death across so many millennia, our universe is a realm made hollow and heartless by necessity and misery. Great tracts of space, thousands of lightyears across, lay barren and destroyed. Wilderness space makes up the vast majority of the realms of the galaxy, the few areas of lucrative or habitable territory fought over, like scraps of fresh meat clinging to the bones of a corpse, being pecked at by ravenous vultures. Petty Imperiums, alien empires and monolithic societies of abominations, all cluster around these decadent and murderous regions of ironically named 'paradise space'. For there is

nothing but wilderness beyond it and between it.

Yet, even the wilderness space is inhabited, by countless pirates, mercenaries and obscene monsters. The same cannot be said of ghost space. In some place, where the warp was weak, and the death toll from invasions, the new devourer and the death of stars was 100%, the destroyed and murdered souls are said to cling to existence.

Such a being is Festielle. Knowledge of the Festielle, the broken one, is scant at best. Some call him legend, others myth. Yet, the stories are too many and too similar to discount entirely. On an orphan world, drifting in the deep dark, where no light falls, resides the Festielle.

Amidst a world of corpses, where the entire world was dead and rotten to ash, the Festielle roams. Some say he is a corrupted Night Lord, driven into insanity and bitterness by despairing lunacy. Others claim the fiend is a fury, tossed from the realm of the warp during the conflagration with the Star Father, to be trapped within the material realm, taking the body of a fallen man, filling him with bitterness and rendering the man incorporeal. The stories are countless, and futile. He simply is.

It is said the realm is utterly silent. Unnaturally so, as if the planet is cursed with silence. Creeping things, with their orifices sewn shut, and their flesh wasted and thinned until their dry bones can be seen, crawl and scrape silently. Furies flutter from crumbling towers, snarling soundlessly in futile dislocation.

The rogue planet appears in the void, when vessels are forced to drop out of the warp, short of their destinations. As they ready themselves for another jump, the dark planetoid appears, a black shape against a black void. The vessels inexplicably break down, their engines bafflingly non-functional, despite the best efforts of captured tech priests or serf-Demiurg engineers aboard. They simply stop. Then the silence comes. The whole vessel becomes silent. Panic ensues, as men desperately scream to be heard, clawing at their heads and ears furiously. Before long, the beleaguered crews either enter the orbit of the void world, or are ensnared (the accounts differ). Desperate for a solution, they send shuttles to the surface. No one returns. Soon, the vessels begin to orbit closer and closer.

In most accounts, the planet crashes, yet somehow they survive. They are dragged before the silent one. His mouth like a rotting cavern, Festielle screams in their faces, no noise erupting from his lips. He rips apart most of the men with his claws, in frustration. The survivors (those to relate the tales) claim they were spared for a purpose. Festielle wants to be heard, wants to be known.

Though undoubtedly horrific to hear, these stories are nothing compared to simple existence in this accursed universe, and so-

...

No-

[author tears auto-quill link from forehead. Begins scribbling across data-slate, for direct log interface. Interfacing...]

As I write this, I am disgusted. I cannot be dispassionate any longer! I sit in the darkness of these Vaults, cowering from the Reavers above, who even now slaughter our defenders to a man above us, and I talk about legends and ghost stories, as if they matter!

I contemplated destroying this log, just to stop them from corrupting it or defiling it. Then I realised. This log is more important than this whole facility. This log is evidence. It is proof. Throughout the millennia of my existence, not once have I found another history of this Age. Nothing so complete.

[Pict display shakes, as detonations from above become audible above a rumble. Voices beyond room begin to scream. Gunfire beyond chamber door.]

I would not be so arrogant as to say this history is anywhere near a complete log of this period of abomination. I cannot depict everything, for I am only human...

[bitter laugh]

But I am the only one left. The only one who has a ... continuity of vision. I was there before, during and after. The human race needs to know what it once was... and what it can be again.

This Order, the Order of the Recollectors, brought me here to collate a summary of the universe from the billions of source-materiel they have hoarded in these vaults over the millennia of degeneration, to store here as a permanent record of all the gods to see. I have done as you asked, but I must break our contract.

[Metallic bangs begin to resound behind the author. Massive battering ram/humanoid foes attempting to breach the vaults? Author ignores.]

I built a device. This world was naturally linked to the web. Perhaps this is how the Recollectors first got here? It doesn't matter. There was a Gate. I studied it. I took it apart, and rebuilt it. It took me centuries, but I did it. Originally, I tailored the Gate as a getaway system for myself, but I know now that it is this log, this record, which needs to survive this. I can't let my legacy be destroyed. I have already lived too long. Done too much evil.

[sounds of gunfire]

I suppose then this should be my last declaration... First, to organise.

+++++

[User #17382: Request= File data summary.]

[Process?]

Yes.

[Files located: 1003 Sections. Begin packaging sequence?]

No.

[Please state desired functions.]

Use the initial twenty-seven as the hash index for the package salt. Use the rest for interspersed obfuscation code using quantum-algorithm delta5. Collate, then package.

[Collation complete. Awaiting instruction beta/six.]

I am an evil man. Perhaps never intended. No, never intended. This changes nothing though. My actions may very well have doomed us all.

Armageddon, the planet of battles. I know what happened there, and I know who leads the Imperium growing there. If you are indeed reading this 'hermit', I know your name, and I have one thing to say to you:

Save us. Please save us Primarch. Save us Vulkan.

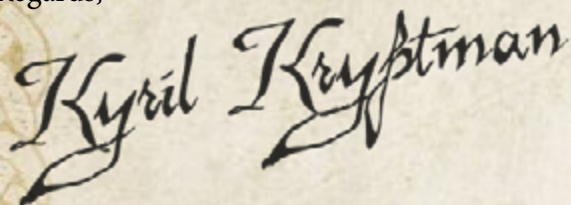
/Encrypted Section/

So, I commend my soul to... (laughs softly) I almost said God-Emperor then! He's not worship of that title. Not now.

I commend my soul to the Imperium. May it rise again.

Forgive me.

Regards,



---Lord Inquisitor Kryptmann

[Author concludes log.]

[Log locked and secured. Stasis field engaging in 10 sec]

[10 sec]

[Humanoid figure bursts into room. Author turns to them, obscures image of figure]

[9 sec]

Author: Too late. Your realm will fall!

[8 sec]

Humanoid: The Templates. Where are they?

[7 sec]

[6 sec]

[Author spits at silhouetted figure. Gunshots. Viscera obscures pict lens]

[5 sec]

[4 sec]

[Figure advances. Author falls. Figure strikes dataslates from desk. Spectromatching initiated via proximity trigger.]

[3 sec]

[2 sec]

[Figure focuses upon log device, lunges for log device. Spectromatch found. Figure identified as Subject #2352. Codename designation: Bile.]

[1 sec]

[Stasis engaged.]

Colours, swirling and blistering and monstrous. The cogitator brain cannot identify the realm it slides, like a bullet through the concept of envy. Oily shapes, milky white eyes in the side of twisting, snarling figures. Vague structure, shifting along smooth walls.

More colours splash into view. Waves at a beach.

Cross-referencing fails, as the images before the cogitator unit shift constantly. The temperature fluctuated and flexed, forming ribbons around the capsule, as it flew through the frictionless realm. Hot, cold, hot, all formed spider-like structures on its flank, before they dissolved in logic.

Eventually, perhaps before it set off, the capsule finally stopped, with a hiss and a gargle.

###

[Opening pict feed]

[Two figures, located in room. Room analogous to bunker system.]

[Figure 1 taps controls at side of log device. Figure 2 remains motionless, transfixed by device. Spectro-matching indicates: humans.]

[Human 1 continues adjustments.]

Human 2: Are you supposed to do that? It's techno-magic. We should burn it.

Human 1: No! He said we weren't to burn techno-horrors anymore. We bring it to him when we find them. He'll know what to do.

[Further adjustments. Stasis field deactivated. Human 2 recoils from deactivation sequence.]

Human 2: Devil!

Human 1: Nah, nothing heathen 'bout it. Go! Go get the Hermit! Go, go tell him, or one of the Angel-fire warriors. Go!

[Human 2 departs. Human 1 smiles at device.]

[log Ends]

