

THE GALAXY OF THE 41ST MILLENNIUM



For ten thousand years the Imperium of Man has endured, under the rule and guidance of the Immortal Emperor of Terra. Humanity populates over a million worlds stretched across the entire galaxy, fighting for survival against hideous nether-entities, hostile aliens and rebellion from within. To live in the Age of the Imperium is to live in troubled times; wars are commonplace and millions die each day, as the Emperor's faithful servants lay down their lives for the future of Humanity.

The Imperium is so vast as to be beyond mortal comprehension. It is spread over tens of thousands of light years, its armies alone numbering many billions of soldiers. The mighty bureaucracy of the Adeptus Terra, known by many as the Priesthood, attempts to make sense of a seething mass of information from this gargantuan empire – reports of wars and battles, tithes from distant star systems, men and materials being shipped to far flung stars – but to try to truly understand such a massive realm is to invite insanity.

WARP SPACE

The human colonisation of the galaxy owes its accomplishment to one thing – the nightmarish alternate realm of warp space. Warp space lies alongside and around the material universe, a dimension comprised solely of shifting energies and formless consciousness. In warp space there is no time, no distances, only a constantly flowing stream of immaterium. A starship equipped with warp engines can break through the barrier that separates the real universe from the warp, thus removing itself from the normal flow of time. Only by travelling in the warp can the immense distances between stars be covered within a single lifetime, though even warp travel is not instantaneous. On board a ship in the warp a single month of perceived time may pass, yet in the material realm anything from six months to several years may have elapsed. This can mean that fleets and armies responding to calls for aid

may turn up weeks, months or even years too late to help and this further adds to the anarchy and confusion of conducting hundreds of wars across the whole galaxy.

NAVIGATING IN THE WARP

It is possible for a ship to make short warp jumps of about four to five light years with a certain degree of accuracy. However, over longer distances it is necessary to steer through warp space itself. The warp is like an ocean, with currents, storms and tides that must be used or avoided. For the Imperium, only the mutated Navigators are able to see the shifting eddies of the warp and direct a ship between them, thus steering the ship towards its ultimate destination.

Even the Navigators need a point of reference, and this is provided by the immensely powerful

psychic beacon known as the Astronomican. Guided by the minds of ten thousand specially-trained human psykers on Terra, the Astronomican pulses outwards 70,000 light years to the furthest reaches of the galaxy. A Navigator can sense the beam of the Astronomican and use it to plot his course. Weaker, shorter-ranged astropathic ducts and beacons are also used to mark out shipping lanes and to aid navigation through treacherous areas of the warp.

"It is forbidden to speak of what I see in the Great Beyond. I could hint at impossible, half-seen castles in the distance, of rivers of pure vibrance flowing to where they fall upon themselves forever, of mothers' love and children's hate given form. But nothing could give you the vaguest notion of what it is truly like"

Varentias Jugold of the Navis Nobilitate.

THE IMPERIAL NAVY

Almost every ship in the Imperium is part of the Imperial fleet controlled by the Priesthood: the relative handful of vessels that are not belong to a few special organisations such as the Adeptus Mechanicus, Space Marine Chapters and the Inquisition, or a small number of honoured and ancient merchant families. Even Imperial Guard regiments must rely upon the Imperial fleet to transport them to distant warzones. This fleet is divided into the civilian vessels of the Merchant fleet and the warships of the Imperial Navy.

To aid organisation, the Imperium is split into five Segmentae Majoris, each of which has its own merchant and naval fleet. The fleet stations for these vessels are on the Segmentum Fortress in each Segmentum – Mars for the Segmentum Solar, Kar Duniash in the Ultima Segmentum, Bakka in the Segmentum Tempestus, Hydraphur in the Segmentum Pacificus and Cypra Mundi in the Segmentum Obscuras. The Segmentum fleet commanders, the Lord High Admirals, are powerful individuals and sometimes may even be one of the fabled High Lords of Terra.

All human-inhabited space is further broken down into sectors, which are most usually cubes of space roughly 200 light years to a side. Each sector is comprised of a number of sub-sectors ranging from ten to twenty light years in diameter, centred on densely populated star clusters, important worlds, or meeting points of various trade routes through the warp. The areas between sub-sectors and sectors – unexplored or uninhabited regions, alien empires, areas inaccessible by the warp etc, – are known as wilderness space or wilderness zones and make up a far greater proportion of the galaxy than that controlled by Humanity.

For all practical purposes, a sector's battlefleet is the largest operational naval organisation, under the command of a Lord Admiral. Each battlefleet is then divided into a number of battlegroups. Battlegroups are not permanent organisations, but are instead task forces, convoy escorts, patrol flotillas and other fleets that have been assembled to perform particular functions. A few battlegroups are almost permanent institutions, such as the famous 1st Terran Battlecruiser Armada, but most are gathered and then dispersed as necessity dictates. Depending on its size and role, a battlegroup may be commanded by an experienced ship's captain or commodore, a fleet admiral or admiral, or sometimes even the Lord Admiral himself.

WARSHIPS OF THE IMPERIUM

Each battlefleet normally consists of between 50 and 75 warships of varying size, although in some sectors this will be more or less, according to the importance of the sector and the number of enemies it must contend with. As well as these destroyers, frigates, cruisers and battleships, a battlefleet also has access to countless smaller vessels such as transports, shuttles, messenger craft and long-range patrol craft. In addition to interstellar vessels, a sector will also be protected by numerous ships incapable of warp travel, such as system patrol ships and defence monitors. These are backed up by stationary defences – space stations, orbital defence platforms, ground-based defence lasers and missile silos and orbital mines.

This may seem like a formidable armada, but the area they cover is huge and the navy must be ready to perform many varied and difficult tasks. An average sector, perhaps in one of the western spiral arms where humanity is most dense, can contain tens of thousands of stars and covers an area of 8,000,000 cubic light years. Within this vast wilderness, only a small fraction of systems will have planets and a small proportion of these will be inhabited, or indeed inhabitable. However, the ships of a battlefleet must constantly scour this area for enemies: protecting merchant shipping from pirates and alien attacks, transporting and escorting Imperial Guard armies, giving orbital support for planetary armies, not to mention providing exploration fleets and routine patrols.

The Eye of Terror

Although the warp is a distinct dimension, generally separated from the material realm, there are a few areas in the galaxy where the boundaries of the warp and realspace are broken and the two intermingle with each other. These regions are roiling tempests of destructive energy, where the laws of physics are broken and the raw energy of the warp spills forth into our realm. The Eye of Terror is the largest of these, a tempestuous area where nature and nightmare are found side by side – worlds with seas of blood and skies of fire; moons that scream into the ether; stars that roam across the heavens, clashing together in gigantic supernovae. The Eye of Terror is the strongest fastness of the followers of Chaos, renegades who have turned from the Emperor and bargained their souls with ancient and evil gods in return for power and immortality. From the Eye of Terror these twisted traitors make forays and attacks, ever questing to bring about the downfall of the Imperium, to sweep away law and order and replace them with disorder and anarchy.

"This is the place." The Chaos Sorcerer's voice was little more than a harsh whisper.

The small force of Chaos Marines stood in a withered glade, the grass at their feet was dark and burnt, the trees hung limply as if drained of life. In the middle of the clearing was a rocky hill, a small cave opening in front of them. Tendrils of dank smog drifted lazily through the air from the hole, its rancid odour easily picked up by the enhanced senses of the renegades.

Abaddon stepped forward and stared at the cave entrance, as if daring some hideous beast to rush forth and challenge him.

"I will go alone. Stay here and keep a watchful eye." The Warmaster commanded.

As Abaddon stepped inside, he was plunged into near-darkness, the dismal light of the world's ancient sun barely penetrating more than a few feet into the cavern. His superior eyes quickly adjusted to the gloomy interior and within a moment he was able to see clearly. The cave was hung with grisly decorations – animal and human skulls, entrails on hooks and chains hung with pungent smelling plants. Wind chimes made from hollowed bones hung low from the ceiling, some of them drilled out so that the faint wind caused them to produce a murmuring of groans and shrieks amidst the desultory clattering of bone on bone. The Warmaster was unimpressed. Such baubles might seem frightening to mere mortals, but he had waged war for ten thousand years, strode across hundreds of battlefields laying waste to his enemies. Whole planetary populations had been enslaved or put to death in his name. He had little to fear from this place.

The smoke was billowing intermittently from a small fire in the centre of the cave, burning some noxious fuel that gave off dark purple flames which seemed to exaggerate the shadows rather than provide any real light. In the darkness, Abaddon could make out a hunched figure by the fireside. It was swathed in rags, which once must have been a deep green but were now faded to dull grey and grimed with dust, mud and bloodstains.

Greetings, magnificent Abaddon, thrice-cursed,

destroyer of worlds." The wheezing voice was quavering and the speaker degenerated into racking coughs for a moment. Abaddon strode into the central chamber and stood behind the crouching figure.

"You know why I am here, hag. Tell me what I need to know!" He demanded, his voice a menacing growl.

The figure turned its head and let its frayed hood fall back. The woman's face was haggard and lined, her scalp bald except for a few wispy strands of pure white hair. It was then that Abaddon noticed that her eye sockets were empty – shrivelled holes that still wept a slight trickle of blood.

"The mighty Abaddon, come here to consult with old Moriana. What price will you pay?" The withered woman asked.

Abaddon leant forward and grasped the seer's neck in the Talon of Horus, squeezing ever so slightly.

"If you do not tell me my destiny, it is you who will pay with your life!"

The hag cackled then, a screeching laugh that set the Warmaster's teeth on edge.

"Kill me and you will never know!" She retorted, her cracked, blistered lips twisted into a sneer. "You will not live to see the end of the year, killed by a traitor in your own ranks. Stop this foolishness. I have consorted with creatures far more horrific than you and I do not fear death at your hand."

With a growl, Abaddon released his grip and stepped back. The haggard old woman stood up with the cracking of arthritic joints and gasps for breath. She hobbled over to a pile of ill-made pottery jugs and took a handful of foul-smelling leaves from one. Casting them on to the fire, she seemed to gaze into the flames, though she had no eyes.

"Your future is twisted and turning. You will either achieve your goals or your masters will strike you down for your disloyalty. The Dark Gods tolerate no-one who betrays them, and to think that you can rival them..." The hag laughed again. "I see fortresses in the stars, a circle of six, but they sleep yet and must be awakened by you. Seek the Hand of Darkness in the place between salvation and damnation, for with it you shall guide the doom of suns. Take the Eye of Night

from the stunted men and see the path laid out for you. With these, the citadels of the ether will be yours to command, their powers yours to unleash. Ride upon the storms of Chaos that will come soon. Gather your rivals about you. Send discord and terror through a thousand worlds. But be swift, for destiny does not wait for those who are cautious. That is the way to control your destiny, to set yourself up as a living god to rival the so called Emperor of Mankind. A chorus of a billion throats will cry your name in fear and hatred, the stars themselves will run with blood. If you have the stomach for it, Warmaster..." The prophetess nodded to herself as she finished, dousing the flames with a splash of water from a cracked gourd beside her.

"You speak in meaningless riddles. Where is this place between salvation and damnation? What is the fortress of the stars? Tell me these things or die now!" Abaddon demanded, ripping the Daemon sword Drach'nyen from its scabbard, its unearthly blade bathing the inside of the cave in a baleful blue glow.

"If you would set yourself up as a god, you must use your head, as well as your fists, ignorant fool!" The hag spat back, her voice suddenly strong and full of contempt.

"I will remember your insolence, crone." Abaddon threatened, pointing the baneful sword at the old woman. The seer did not reply, but merely turned away from the Warmaster to show that the consultation had ended. Abaddon snarled to himself and then turned and strode out, his bulky Terminator armour smashing through the grisly wind chimes and causing a cacophony of rattling and wails.

The Sorcerer was waiting outside with Abaddon's bodyguard, his eyes full of questions.

"What did she say, master? Did she mention me?" he asked, stepping next to Abaddon, who ignored the follower of Tzeentch for a moment, lost in thought. With a grunt he turned suddenly to face Zaraphiston, causing the Sorcerer to flinch as Abaddon's Daemon sword flashed past his face.

"Signal my fleet to prepare for battle," Abaddon ordered. "We seek our destinies in the stars!"

139-142.M41 – OMENS OF DARKNESS

Many Imperial scholars believe the Gothic War to have started several years before the first invasion fleets actually entered the Gothic Sector. With hindsight, a number of seemingly unconnected events can be linked together, warning of the darkness and bloodshed that was to come.

THE ARX RAID

Although the bulk of the Imperium's defences around the Eye of Terror are based in the area known as the Cadian Gate, there are many monitoring stations throughout the Segmentum Obscurus. These outposts are constantly raided and attacked by the Emperor's foes, but during the mid-second century of the 41st millennium, the number of these attacks dramatically increased. Most important of all, in the eyes of scholars, is the attack on the watch station at Arx. Due to its low priority and importance, Arx was inhabited by only a skeleton garrison of Imperial Guard, whose duty it was to protect the few Tech-adepts required to maintain the station's observation equipment.

Early in 139.M41, the scout frigate *Ascendance* received a garbled plea for help from Arx station's ageing Astropath. The attackers were unknown and when reinforcements arrived four months later, there was no sign of those responsible. The Imperial Guardsmen stationed on the planet had been wiped out. As Captain Thetis of the 122nd Borlian Imperial Guard wrote in his journal.

"They had been horribly butchered, their mutilated bodies left to the ever present scavenging wild dogs that are Arx's only natural predators."

The Inquisition sent one of their agents, the experienced Inquisitor Horst, but there was little evidence for him to uncover.

If Arx had been the only outpost attacked in this way, the raid would have become just another

intriguing riddle in a galaxy full of mysteries, soon to be forgotten. However, over the next three years a number of similar attacks were reported throughout the neighbouring systems and spreading into the adjacent sectors, and Inquisitor Horst began to suspect that some larger scheme was in motion. However, with no proof to support his instincts or identify the attackers, he decided to watch and wait for his enigmatic enemy to make another move.

A PLAGUE OF DAMNATION

Just over a year after the Arx raid, several patrol vessels made grisly discoveries in the Athena Sector. A number of Imperial merchant vessels and warships, one of them an Emperor class battleship, were found drifting uncontrolled through wilderness space. Upon being boarded, it was found that the crews of the ships were all dead, their disease ridden corpses strewn along corridors and gantries, some found still at their workstations. Xebal Astolax, Magos Biologis of the Adeptus Mechanicus, listed the various symptoms he encountered on his examination of corpses from the merchant vessel *Shanxi*.

"The skin was blistered with many weeping sores, the blood thin and watery. Fungal growths were found within the brain cavity, which must have caused extreme pain and delirium when the victims were still alive."

Each ship also bore the scars of a brief space battle and signs of being boarded, though no enemy dead could be found.

As Inquisitor Horst puzzled over these new developments, his many agents and spies brought more news. A rumour was spreading amongst the captains of the Imperial Navy concerning an ancient, despised Chaos ship known as the *Plagueclaw*. Crewed by pestilential followers of the God of Decay, this ship had been the scourge of the Imperial Navy for four millennia. The infection of the ships' crews and the reappearance of the *Plagueclaw* must have been more than coincidence and when a force of Chaos Marines from the Death Guard Traitor Legion sacked the hive world of Morganghast, Horst was convinced that the forces of Chaos were planning another major incursion. The watchposts around the Cadian Gate were put on close alert and Navy ships from all over the Segmentum Obscurus were detailed on increased patrols around Cadia.

ANARCHY SPREADS

While Inquisitor Horst investigated the Chaos activity around Arx and its neighbouring systems, events began to take an even more sinister turn in the Gothic Sector, 2,500 light years away. The Navigators of the Navis Nobilite reported greater disturbance within the warp around the region, the incidence of warp storms gradually increasing as the year went on. On many worlds, this news was received with panic, a situation which was made more precarious by several religious fanatics declaring that the Emperor was displeased and was sending warp storms to purge the unholy.

This led to a number of sects forming, members stricken with feelings of impending doom. They were desperate for the Emperor's forgiveness and as the shocked preacher of Flexeberg noted:

"They spend their whole time flagellating themselves to purify their souls, decrying the excesses of their fellow men and driving their neighbours to cast out the sinful and purge their own blasphemies. Though very laudable behaviour in itself, they have forgotten their sacred duties to the Emperor – while they wail and gnash their teeth, the coffers rattle empty!"

On many planets, the cults became very powerful, swelled by popular support to such a degree that the Ecclesiarchy (and sometimes even the planetary government), could do nothing to stop the rampaging hordes. As the hysteria spread, lynch mobs roamed hive cities and mining colonies seeking the impure. Impromptu burnings and hangings became commonplace as the desperate citizens threw themselves into a fervour of apocalyptic faith, scouring their friends and loved ones to atone for real or imagined sins against the Emperor. Yet it was to no avail. Fleet-Admiral Bratha, when sending a message to the naval base at Port Maw, lamented,

"And still the warp swirls and rages and the situation becomes ever more desperate."

Under cover of widespread paranoia, secret cults and covens insinuated themselves into positions of power, subverting ever more people to their twisted causes. Misguided followers of the Dark Gods openly proclaimed that Chaos would save humanity when the Emperor had turned from them. Thousands, even millions, of Imperial citizens were deluded by false promises, flocking to these calls, and the Inquisition was hard pressed to root out every cult member, deviant and heretic. To make the situation worse, several naval vessels were destroyed in dock, by reactor overloads and magazine explosions. Though official reports declared the incidents the result of poor maintenance, faulty ammunition or other ordinary

causes, many readily believed the tales of sabotage and rebellion within the Navy's own ranks.

THE HAND OF DARKNESS

While the Gothic Sector was being engulfed in anarchy and confusion, Horst was searching for more clues to the plans of the heretics. When he heard of a Chaos attack on the Imperial world of Purgatory, he demanded to accompany the investigating fleet. There was one thing which made Purgatory different from the dozens of other raids – the device known only as the Hand of Darkness. Its existence known only to a few of the most trusted members of the Inquisition, the Hand of Darkness was an incredibly ancient alien artefact located deep beneath the surface of Purgatory. All attempts to divine its purpose had proved fruitless, yet distant legends, from older races such as the Eldar, spoke of the Hand of Darkness with horror and revulsion. It was widely believed to be a weapon of immeasurable power, although its exact functioning was a mystery. When Horst arrived at Purgatory, the Inquisitor's deepest fears had come true – the Hand of Darkness was gone. If the followers of Chaos learned how to activate this unimaginably potent weapon, who could tell what destructive power they could unleash on the forces of the Imperium?

THE INVASION OF ORNSWORLD

Horst knew of another artefact connected to the Hand of Darkness in the old myths. Called the Eye of Night, it was located on the Ratling planet of Ornsworld. As Horst sped towards it on the fastest ship he could commandeer, a report came in of an attack on the Ratlings. A small force of renegades had landed close to where the Eye was embedded in an ancient statue, worshipped as a god by the Ratlings in pre-Imperial times. After a brief skirmish, an Imperial Guard recruiting force stationed near to the Chaos force's landing site

OMENS OF DARKNESS

drove off this initial foray. However, a month later Chaos ships blockaded Ornsworld and a full scale invasion began. The defenceless Ratlings stood no chance against the depraved Chaos Marines and the death toll reached millions as the hills and mountains were scoured with fire and shells by the followers of the Dark Gods. Lieutenant Compton-Hawkins, attached to the recruitment team, recorded the scenes that followed the attack:

"Piles of Ratling skulls towered over the plains, funeral pyres blackened the skies as the Traitors systematically wiped out everything in their path. The small settlement of Esmerelda's Dale is now but a smoking crater, the bones of its 4,000 inhabitants crushed to powder and scattered over the surrounding area. A powerful seismic detonator brought down the [mountainside of the] Great Belly, sweeping away seven towns and 82,000 Ratlings, in a tide of crushing boulders and boiling mud slides."

Amongst the carnage, the Eye of Night was torn from its mounting and the thief slipped away into the stars. The forces of Chaos now had both the Hand of Darkness and the Eye of Night and with them perhaps the power to overthrow the Imperium in its entirety. Inquisitor Horst was tormented by a single question: where would they strike first? The answer was to come all too soon.

THE STORM BREAKS

The old Inquisitor began compiling scattered reports of unusual activity in an ever widening area, and learned of the disruption engulfing the Gothic Sector. As he headed for the region, more reports of sightings of Chaos vessels came to Horst's attention, reinforcing his belief that the Gothic Sector was to be the arena of this latest incursion. A month after Horst arrived in the sector, three years after he had begun investigating the Arx raid, a cataclysmic shockwave passed through the warp. The massive storm engulfed the Gothic Sector in swirling tempests, cutting the area off from the rest of the Imperium. Whatever happened next, the ships and warriors of the Gothic Sector would face it alone.

SURPRISE ATTACK

143.M41 – SURPRISE ATTACK

The first outright battles of the Gothic War were fought as the year 143.M41 came to a close. During the first few months of conflict, Chaos fleets launched a number of wide ranging all out attacks against Imperial Navy bases within the sector.

THE FIRST STRIKE

Reports of attacking Chaos fleets flooded in from all across the Gothic Sector. Much planning must have gone in to the all-important first strike, as the Chaos fleets targeted a dozen major Imperial bases in the Gothic Sector. With no warning, the renegades struck hard and fast, ambushing Imperial warships as they were in dock or orbiting around their stations. Caught unawares and already overstretched by the increasing tension within the sector, the Imperial Navy was poorly prepared to respond to this sudden offensive. At Bladen, the *Rhadamanthine* had her starboard flight decks blown clean off by torpedoes, while at Cherys, Doomfire bombers from the *Heartless Destroyer* damaged the warp engines of the *Lord Sylvanus* so severely that it took nearly two years of constant repairs for the ship to be able to make warp jumps greater than five light years.

Orbiting stations also fell to the Chaos invaders, destroyed or captured by the swiftness of the attack. The loss of many of these orbital shipyards, such as Tripol Docks, Port Imperial and Gathara Station, was doubly felt – not only were Imperial ships badly in need of refitting, but the means to do so were being put to use by the enemy. Captain Grove of the *Admiral Drake*, an old Relentless class cruiser used as a training vessel, was one of the few survivors of the attack at Halemnet Base in the Cyclops Cluster, which typified the style of attack used by the Chaos vessels. Grove and his crew were lucky to escape, as this log entry shows:

4th Watch, 3rd day of Euphistles. Under attack from renegade vessels. They approached from starward, blinding our surveyors. Long range torpedo strikes have destroyed the Vanguard [a Dauntless class light cruiser] and crippled Indomitus Imperious [a Lunar class cruiser]. Broke from dock with the reactors still at 75% of operational capacity. Engaged in short ranged exchange with squadron of renegade escorts, disabling our starboard batteries and destroying the torpedo tubes.

Fires broke out in the port quarter galleries; the emergency bulkheads had to be lowered. Casualties estimated at 5,000 or more, many of them gun crews on the starboard decks. We are attempting to disengage, trying to avoid a Slaughter class coming in around Halemnet's gravity well. Ordering all available power to the engines to outrun him. Time to visit the chapel and pray for the Emperor's protection.

Fortunately for the crew of the *Admiral Drake* and many others, the Chaos fleets were not normally disposed towards lengthy battles, preferring instead to hit hard and then retreat, leaving the Imperial Navy suffering heavy losses, with many capital ships destroyed or needing months of repairs and refitting.

THE DEFENCE OF ORAR

However, the Chaos fleets did not achieve total success. In a few battles the traitors suffered serious reversals, most notably during the defence of the hive world Orar. When one of the many Chaos warfleets, led by the Chaos Warmaster Malefica Arkham, ambushed the Imperial

battlegroup which was stationed at Orar, they did not, on this occasion, find their enemy taken unawares and helpless.

Having just received orders to help put down a rebellion in a neighbouring system, the Imperial battlegroup, led by Captain Compel Bast on the battlecruiser *Imperious*, was just preparing to break orbit. Already at full alert status, the Imperial ships easily evaded the raiders' initial torpedo salvo and counter attacked. What happened next is best summed up by Bast himself:

"Unable to abort their attack, the Chaos ships swept onwards into a hail of torpedoes, gun deck fire and lance shots from Orar's orbital defences. Our nova cannon struck the reviled renegade Soulless full on, crippling the vessel in a huge blast of gas and debris. Extra beverage rations to the gun crews that night.

"As we closed in for the kill, the other Chaos ships abandoned their fellow vessel to its fate and attempted to escape. With a torrent of fire pouring into its breached hull, the Soulless finally destroyed itself as its warp drives imploded under our continuous bombardment. Arkham's ship, the Deathbane, had its bridge smashed to pieces by a volley of fire from the Iron Duke, and rumours say that Arkham was the only man on the bridge to crawl from the wreckage, somehow protected by his Dark Masters.

"I cited our attack craft crews for their admirable performance of their duty. Several of our bomber wings were instrumental in reducing the Deathskull to a hulk. Unfortunately, we were unable to claim our prize as the hulk was gripped by Orar's pull and broken asunder in the upper atmosphere."

Only a handful of Chaos escorts escaped without damage and the *Deathbane* and its fleet was pursued out of the system by the vengeful Imperial commanders.

UNLIKELY ALLIES

Orar was not the only major set-back inflicted upon the forces of Darkness during the opening stages of the war. In one incident, a small Chaos fleet consisting of several Iconoclast and Infidel class escorts, bound for a raid on Denerair in the Cyclops Cluster, fell foul of the numerous bands of Ork pirates in the region. The garbled transmissions of the Chaos ships were intercepted, giving some idea of what happened.

Using their traditional tactic of lurking in an asteroid field for an unwary victim, the Orks leapt from hiding and plunged into the heart of the Chaos fleet. Unable to use their greater manoeuvrability in the swirl of asteroids, gas and dust clouds, the Chaos ships were mercilessly hammered by the Orks and not one Chaos vessel survived the battle.

Upon hearing this news, Lord Admiral Ravensburg was quoted as saying, "If he wasn't damned green-skinned scum, I'd make their commander my Flag-Captain!" although he later denied this statement. Such occurrences were however rare and the greenskins were as happy to continue attacking Imperial shipping as they were to fight against the invading warfleets.

THE BATTLE OF BLACKSTONE IV

The initial Chaos attacks struck at important installations such as Adeptus Mechanicus forge worlds and naval bases. Of the seventeen bases in the Gothic Sector, six of them were founded upon the Blackstone Fortresses. As the Liber Monumenta tells us:

"The architects of the edifices known as the Blackstone Fortresses remain unknown. All analysis of their materials and construction methods has proved inconclusive. Attempts to date them vary massively between seventeen thousand years old and three hundred thousand years. They have remained dormant since their discovery early in the second millennium of the Emperor's divine rule. Even with most of its systems inoperative, a Blackstone Fortress made an incomparable foundation for a naval base."

After extensive refitting by the Adeptus Mechanicus, with Imperium constructed defence turrets and primary weapons systems added, the Blackstone Fortresses' defensive capabilities rivalled those of the Naval Command stations at Port Maw itself. It was the pride of Battlefleet Gothic that no Blackstone Fortress had ever been taken in battle.

This was to change at Rebo system, where the naval base Blackstone IV orbited the system's fifth world. A Chaos fleet, probably led by Abaddon himself, struck at Rebo V. The Imperial ships on station put up a ferocious defence, but were overwhelmed by the size of the fleet facing them. Twenty capital ships, including two Despoiler class battleships and a score of escorting vessels, swept through Rebo's outer defences and attacked Blackstone IV itself.

The battle was short and bloody – just as the Chaos fleet approached within range, the Blackstone Fortress' power systems shut down completely. With the energy grid dead, the guns were unable to fire, the armoured gates to the attack craft bays couldn't be opened and the personnel on board were defenceless. Soon after this information was projected by the station's Chief Astropath, Blackstone IV fell to invaders. There was no more news from Rebo and it was assumed there were no survivors. This was to be the first of a number of critical blows that shook the Imperial forces right from the outset of the war.

SURPRISE ATTACK

THE DEATH OF SAVAVEN

Even as Abaddon pushed home his attack at Rebo, more disaster was to befall the loyal defenders of Gothic Sector. At Savaven, a Cardinal world of the Ecclesiarchy, the few system defence ships could do little to protect their planet against a new and awesomely powerful vessel. Simply dubbed the *Planet Killer*, this monolithic ship bristled with gun decks, lance batteries and torpedo launch systems. As the defence monitors withdrew from its implacable advance, the *Planet Killer* achieved orbit over Savaven. Jeremiah Soldagen, commander of the orbital defence forces, was later to record the dreadful events to follow:

"Within [the Planet Killer's] central cavity, we could detect a massive power surge. Energy crackled from a number of ports on the hull. Then, with a blast that blotted the sun from our scanners, it opened fire. The energy beam lasted for about a half hour. Emperor knows how they could generate that much energy. We linked in to the planetary surveyors to see what was happening on the surface. That bolt bored its way through miles of the planet's crust and seared through the mantle beneath. As the attack finished, the magma surged forth through this continent-sized wound, breaking apart Savaven from within. The seas boiled into the skies, the ice caps melted and whole continents sunk beneath the tidal wave. With such an unimaginable release of energy Savaven was blown out of her natural orbit and flipped over on her axis. I guess nobody was alive by then, but if they were they didn't last long. Like a rations pack crushed in your fist, Savaven just crumpled in on herself, then broke up into thousands of fragments. There's just an asteroid field there now, really dense, impossible to navigate. There were fourteen billion people living on Savaven. Fourteen billion dead in an hour."

Soldagen and the other survivors were to suffer traumatic mental breakdowns from what they witnessed and three months later they all took their own lives in a mass suicide. The effect on Imperial morale was devastating. All had heard of

THE BLACKSTONE FORTRESS

Exterminatus with fusion torpedoes, virus bombs and mass drivers, but to know the enemy had the ability to destroy an entire planet, not just all life on it, must have been the most chilling thought that any naval crewman had ever faced. As the Imperial Navy reeled at this news, Inquisitor Horst was left wondering if this was the power gained from possession of the Hand of Darkness and the Eye of Night. If it was something else, then perhaps even worse news was to come.

TROUBLE WITH THE ELДАР

A constant problem for Lord Admiral Ravensburg, commander of the entire Battlefleet Gothic, was the presence of a large number of Eldar in the sector, making swift forays from their hiding places within the Graildark nebula. It is even widely believed that an Eldar Craftworld was in the Gothic Sector during the war, though there were no confirmed sightings and its location was never determined.

Of the pirate forces plaguing the Imperium, the force called the Executioners became highly active as the Gothic War progressed, until the number of their raids and attacks had increased from three in 143.M41 to eight in 147.M41. Unable to track the sophisticated Eldar ships back to their base and strongly suspecting that they were connected in some way to the elusive Craftworld, Ravensburg could do little to defend against the aliens and it was up to individual battlegroup commanders how best to act against their slippery foes.

The Wolf Packs Gather

Not only the Eldar preyed upon the transports and merchantmen of the Imperium. Bands of human pirates, renegades from the Eye of Terror and even the vessels of other alien races all increased their activity. Called Wolf Packs by the Naval officers who chased them, these roving bands of small vessels hunted the ships and convoys of anybody and everybody. Admiral Koburn, of the Second Battlecruiser Fleet, noted bitterly:

"If it came to a straight fight, they would be no match for our guns. But [the raiders] are canny, and never risk open battle if they can avoid it. The packs nibble at the heels of our convoys, capturing a single transport here, a merchant vessel there. Their favourite tactic is to lurk in asteroid fields or to operate from deserted moons, where they are almost impossible to detect and even harder to root out. I even heard of one band that docked in a station in the upper atmosphere of a gas giant in the Fullarn system. Every month brings more reports of their attacks, but we cannot spare more ships from the battle lines to escort the convoys."

The Imperial fleet was fighting two enemies at once: the Chaos battlefleets and the Ork, Human and Eldar pirates that had been a constant threat to Imperial shipping even before the Gothic War began. Everywhere the Imperial forces were on the defensive, driven from world upon world, system upon system. Losses were high and the shipyards and orbital stations fought an ever increasing battle for supplies and manpower. Darkness had descended upon the Gothic Sector and it looked as if the light would never return.

144.M41 – THE BLACKSTONE FORTRESSES

The Imperium was beset by many Chaos fleets led by individual Warmasters (estimates vary from eight enemy fleets to twenty or more). Each was a rival to any battlegroup Lord Admiral Ravensburg could muster at the time. One in particular, led by the hateful Abaddon himself, was to pose the most serious threat of all.

LUKITAR STATION

With the threat of Abaddon's planet killer looming over them, many Imperial worlds surrendered without a fight. Sub-sector after sub-sector fell out of Imperial control and with them a number of shipyards and orbital docks. As the Imperium faced increasing difficulties in repairing its vessels, building new ones became ever more unlikely. With its critical early strikes, Chaos may well have won the war before it had even started.

There was some hope for the Imperial Navy. On a desolate moon orbiting a gas giant in the Lukitar system was an Adeptus Mechanicus facility. The Tech-Priests were already researching the wisdom of their predecessors to uncover knowledge of more powerful weapon systems, more efficient drives and better shield generators. A few Imperial ships were fitted out with these improved systems, but the results were never entirely satisfactory. A ship could only provide so much power and if

gunnery was improved, communications would suffer; if the engine power was increased, the shield generators could not be sustained. The search continued, with each new development slightly more successful than the last.

Then the ships of Abaddon arrived. Commodore Vandez commanding 202 Red squadron, consisting of four Sword class frigates, was among the first Imperial vessels to sight Abaddon since his attack on Blackstone IV.

2nd Dog Watch, 19th day of Aphrodae, Lukitar system. *The reports from the guardian stations were correct. Our assayers have picked up an energy pulse of unimaginable magnitude. The crew are whispering fearfully of the Planet Killer, but that was last sighted in Saviour, 65 light years away. We are proceeding at full power to investigate.*

9th Watch, 19th day of Aphrodae, Lukitar system. *Even seeing it with my own eyes, I do not believe it! Several renegade capital ships are heading in-system, with a dozen escorts. With them is a Blackstone Fortress! Damn my eyes, but it's true! It looks different, more organic; somehow alive, if that were possible. Our surveyors have picked up several weapon systems which are not Imperial in construction. How have they managed to wake the beast? Emperor's blood, they're building up energy to fire, even at this range.*

3rd Watch, 1st day of Sanacleus, Immaterium. *We have left behind what remains of Lukitar station. The captured Blackstone Fortress proved almost impregnable to our weapons, those few of us who could fight through to attack it. It has weapons the like of which I have never seen, even when fighting Eldar pirates, or chasing down Fra'al raiders in Bhein Morr. The Fortress has pummelled Lukitar station to rubble, taking only a few minutes with all its armaments brought to bear. It is only a seven light years jump from here to Brinaga where Blackstone VI is stationed. We are proceeding with all speed to Brinaga to warn them of the attack, for I believe the renegades will attempt to capture another of the Blackstones. I pray to the Emperor we can stop them.*

Even with Vandez's warning, there were few available ships left to defend Blackstone VI. As with the capture of the first Fortress, the Chaos followers had some means of controlling the Blackstone Fortresses from afar, able to shut down its power systems and turn it into a death trap for the tens of thousands of personnel aboard. Brinaga system fell to Abaddon four months after the attack on Lukitar.

IMMEASURABLE POWER

While Lord Admiral Ravensburg pondered the many military and logistical problems facing his isolated sector, he was visited by Inquisitor Horst. What passed between them was never recorded, though it is widely believed that the revered Inquisitor told Ravensburg of the Hand of Darkness and the Eye of Night. A plan was formulated to try to recapture the Blackstone Fortresses by covert means rather than open attack.

However, before this plan achieved any visible results, news came through of another assault by Abaddon's fleet, this time at Blackstone I in the Fularis system. The personal log of First Lieutenant Elijah Borgia of the *Vindictive* was recovered from the hulk of the ship, found floating towards the Fularis star:

THE BLACKSTONE FORTRESS

"We are in luck today. [Abaddon's fleet] has attacked from the other side of Fularis II, which means they'll have to dare the orbital and planetary defence systems to get to Blackstone I. We have only just upgraded our weapons on Fularis II for just such an occurrence and I doubt that even with his two Fortresses, our enemy will survive."

Borgia's early optimism was to be cruelly shattered:

"The two Blackstones have taken up station five thousand leagues from each other, some seventy five thousand leagues from Fularis II and just out of range of the weapons platforms, except for the torpedo launchers. We are picking up an energy surge in the two Fortresses: they're powering up for something. Tech-Priest Flavix says there's some kind of energy exchange between them. Emperor's teeth, I can see it myself now, a column of shifting energy linking the two fortresses together. The surge is still rising, the power beam becoming more visible. The damned Astropath is screaming now, yelling something about a breach into warp space. What hell-spawned trick are they up to? Oh my..."

Other recovered evidence points towards an energy beam being unleashed towards Fularis II. The *Vindictive* was caught full on, her shields overloaded instantly and outer hull vaporised as the energy wave passed over the ship. Fularis II was later found with its atmosphere stripped off and the surface scoured to a rocky plain. Of Blackstone I, there was no sign.

An explosion further along the gun-deck rocked the Fortitude and then a shock wave swept along the confines of the corridor, hurling Tech-Priest Muarex into a bulkhead. As he recovered his senses, Muarex saw an ominous orange glow from around the corner up ahead. Locating the nearest fire alert system, he slammed his fist down on the big red rune and the corridor was filled with the piercing shriek of the fire sirens. Smoke was beginning to build up in the corridor now and he could hear the crackle of flames getting closer. The thud of boots reverberated along the mesh decking as fifty engineers jogged into view, dragging three fire pumps with them. They unwound the fire pumps' hoses and headed towards the fire, where they stood for a few seconds, looking bemused, their bulky protective suits protecting them from the heat.

Muarex ran over to them, realising they had no Tech-Priest with them to awaken the fire pumps' spirits. Lifting the Ikon Machina from around his neck, Muarex began the incantation.

"Oh great Machine God, we beseech thee to deliver us from danger. Oh great Machine God, we beseech thee to invest this metal carcass with your spirit. Oh great Machine God, we beseech thee to bring life to the inanimate. Oh great Machine God, we beseech thee to summon forth the holy en-Djinn."

As he spoke, with the sparks of the fire flickering around him, Muarex swung the Ikon Machina over the engines of the fire pumps, sprinkling tiny droplets of holy oil from its many perforations. Satisfied that all was prepared, he stabbed his finger onto the activation rune of the first fire pump and it roared into life, spewing foam from the many hoses held by the engineers, dousing the raging inferno with its protective effervescence.

THE WAR CONTINUES

144-149.M41 - THE WAR CONTINUES

Across the entire Gothic Sector the Chaos and Imperial fleets clashed. For five years the battles continued, with the death toll on both sides running into millions. Planets were invaded and recaptured, fleets ambushed, bases attacked and all the while the sector was isolated from any outside help.

SLAUGHTER AMONG THE STARS

From the Hammerhead Deeps to the Cyclops Cluster, Imperial ships fought desperately to hold back the Chaos ships that spilled into the Gothic Sector. In some areas, the Emperor's forces were hurled back by the ferocity of their foes, while other regions, protected by more skilled or experienced battlegroup commanders, held against the initial impetus of the Chaos attack. It is impossible to chart exactly the ebb and flow of battle and many worlds changed hands four, five or even six times during the period of fiercest fighting. By 147.M41, the Lysades sub-sector was almost entirely overrun and Chaos ships held sway in over a dozen systems surrounding Port Maw. However, in the Cyclops Cluster the Orks gave the Chaos vessels stiff resistance and from staging points in the Quinrox Sound, the Imperial fleet launched many counter-attacks, pushing back the spread of Chaos for months before being forced to turn their attention to incursions elsewhere.

While the Imperial Navy and the renegades duelled across the stars, the attacks from Orks, Eldar and Human pirates increased. With the watchful eye of the Imperial Navy elsewhere, these bandits had an almost free rein. Convoys were captured, raiding parties sacked cities and on dozens of worlds, millions died from disease and starvation. Those convoys that did get through safely often found enemy warships prowling through their destination system, blockading all

craft entering and establishing a stranglehold on the worlds they besieged. On the hive world of Stranivar three hive cities, with inhabitants running into a hundred billion souls, were overcome with rioting due to the shortages of drinkable water. With no incoming supplies, the world's own recycling centres were unable to cope and four fifths of the population died from dehydration before the next convoy managed to break through the Chaos blockade. The docks and shipyards were frequently starved of supplies and ships which put in for repairs and re-arming were often sent into battle with only makeshift refits and half-empty magazines.

THE PIRATES' HAVEN

While Lord Ravensburg's forces struggled with the ships of the Chaos Warmasters, the Imperial fleet made significant progress against another deadly foe. A rough confederacy of nearly two dozen pirate bands had gathered in the Quinrox Sound. With over 50 escort-sized vessels, a captured Gothic class cruiser and two salvaged Lunar class cruisers, the marauders had become a serious threat to the security of shipping in the sub-sector. Lord Admiral Ravensburg, unable to turn his attention from stemming the Chaos incursion, ordered Fleet-Admiral Mourndark to deal with the pirates in any way he saw fit.

Mourndark drew ships from battlegroups across the sector, including the *Sword of Orion*, *Havock*, *Uziel*, *Fortitude* and the fearsome *Cypra Probatii*.

Along with these capital ships, Mourndark also took command of the 24th Destroyer Squadron [Widowmakers], the 1st Frigate Echelon [Eagle Claws] and the Sword class frigates of the Anvil 206 Patrol Flotilla. With a large convoy of empty transports, Mourndark lured the pirates into attacking. When the Imperial ships counter-attacked, Mourndark ordered that at least one of the renegades be allowed to escape. With the aid of the Master Navigator Absalom Draal, Mourndark and his fleet were able to follow the surviving pirates back to their lair in the Barbarus Costa system. Confident in the knowledge that they were safe in their den, the pirates had given little thought to defences. The Imperial attack came as a total surprise, as Mourndark concluded in a report to Lord Ravensburg after the battle:

"We fell upon them like hounds at the chase. They tried to scurry and bolt for their holes, but my escorts were ready for them. The Cypra Probatii herself claimed fifteen kills that day and their losses must have been in excess of thirty ships in total. Many fled to the surface of Barbarus III, thinking themselves safe from our guns. How wrong they were. Using plasma torpedoes modified by Magos Urilun of the Adeptus Mechanicus, we set fire to the atmosphere of the near-deserted world, burning them out. Only three vessels emerged from the conflagration, asking for clemency. Our guns showed them the mercy of the Emperor!"

With a large proportion of the pirates dealt with in one blow, Ravensburg was able to concentrate his forces onto fighting back against the Chaos fleets once again.

150-151.M41 – THE IMPERIUM RESURGENT

For the first seven years of the Gothic War, the Imperium had been fighting defensively across an extended battlefield. As 150.M41 passed into the year 151.M41, Lord Admiral Ravensburg decided to take the fight to the enemy and claw back what had been taken.

THE BATTLE OF GETHSEMANE

Knowing that although the Chaos ships were more numerous overall, they were divided into many smaller fleets, it was Lord Ravensburg's hope that he could destroy his attackers if he could bring the weight of Battlefleet Gothic to bear against each of the Chaos fleets individually. This was a very risky ploy, because to amass the battlefleet in any strength meant weakening convoy escorts, system patrols and squadrons on anti-pirate duties. Ravensburg stated his reasons in a missive to Inquisitor Horst, saying:

"These are troubled times that require resolute action. If we do not act boldly and with the confidence of the Emperor we will be bled dry within ten years and we will have lost the whole sector to our enemies. Not only will a decisive blow eliminate enemy vessels, it will send a message to the Chaos fleets and the Imperial forces alike – the Imperium is not going to give up without a fight."

After numerous aborted attacks and false starts, Ravensburg saw his first real chance in mid 151.M41, when scout vessels reported a Chaos fleet moving en masse towards the Gethsemane system. Ordering his task force to get underway with all possible speed, Ravensburg took personal command aboard the *Divine Right*. With seventeen capital ships (including two battleships and two battlecruisers) and twenty escorts under his command, Ravensburg pursued the enemy fleet into the Gethsemane region. Suddenly becoming aware of their plight, the Chaos forces headed out-

system again to try to get far enough from Gethsemane's star to make a warp jump. Ravensburg detached the fastest vessels in his fleet to pursue and a week-long sternchase ensued. What happened next was recorded in the memoirs of Captain Blythe of the *Guardian*:

"As we followed the fleeing foe, signals came in warning of another enemy fleet on a closing course. We had been lured into a trap! Bolstered by a further twelve ships, the Chaos fleet turned on us and it was all we could do to evade the bulk of the enemy. Even in doing so, we lost three destroyers and four frigates in a series of small skirmishes. The enemy losses totalled at least five escorts and maybe as many as ten or more. With all of our big guns in Lord Ravensburg's command, there was little to do but run. The hunters had become the hunted!"

Blythe and his battlegroup headed back towards the vicinity of Ravensburg's main fleet, but even with Ravensburg's capital ships, the Imperial forces were still outgunned to a serious degree. For three days the two fleets circled and dodged each other through the system, neither fleet commander prepared to commit the bulk of his ships against an enemy whose exact position was unknown. Three weeks after arriving in the

system, Ravensburg's fleet and the Chaos ships clashed. Six Firestorm class frigates located the Chaos fleet near to Gethsemane II, using the cover of several dust clouds to avoid being detected themselves. Seizing the opportunity, the Lord Admiral moved his whole fleet in on the attack. Ravensburg's Cobra destroyers launched several torpedo salvos at extreme range – although they had little hope of inflicting damage, the torpedo attacks forced the Chaos ships to alter their heading so that they were moving towards the Imperium's capital ships. Flag-Lieutenant Martyn, aboard the *Divine Right*, related the battle's events:

"Forced into a head-on clash with our fleet, the Chaos vessels came off poorly in the initial exchange of fire. Salvos of our torpedoes screamed into their fleet, some evaded, others hitting home with blossoms of explosions. With our forward shields and armoured prows, their return fire did little damage. Our escorts carefully kept the enemy herded in a compact mass as we passed through their lines. The ship shook as we fired both broadsides simultaneously. Then Lord Ravensburg gave the order and we poured a continuous fusillade into their ships. The stars were thick with the enemy, we could hardly miss at that range."

"Thank the Emperor, I have done my duty."

Lord Admiral Ravensburg at the Battle of Gethsemane.

THE IMPERIUM RESURGENT

The Imperial fleet tore through their adversaries, crippling four capital ships and destroying eleven escorts in the initial pass. Rather than turning to fight, which with hindsight would have given him the greater chance of victory, the Chaos Warmaster ordered his fleet to continue on their course in a bid to escape.

THE EXECUTIONERS' BLOW

It looked as if the Chaos fleet would escape justice again, as the faster renegade vessels accelerated away from Ravensburg's pursuit. Even as the enemy drew away, more drama was to occur, as this account by Captain Drew of the *Fortitude* shows:

"They attacked without warning – one minute the screen was clear, the next a veritable armada of Eldar ships had appeared in front of the Chaos fleet. Recognising the colours of the Executioners amongst their vessels, we feared for our lives. Even as we attempted to haul onto a new heading, our dread became ecstatic happiness. The Eldar attacked the enemy, not us! I remember hearing cries of joy across the bridge as a pulse of lance shots burnt through the hull of one of their battleships, sending debris tumbling and flames crawling along its upper gun decks."

Caught between the attacking Eldar and Ravensburg's fleet, the Chaos ships were annihilated, although a dozen more of the Emperor's vessels were crippled or destroyed before victory was finally attained. Why the Eldar decided to lend their weight to the Imperial cause was never discovered, though it is a common belief that they had finally heard of Abaddon's capture of the Blackstone Fortresses and had seen an alliance as their only chance of survival.

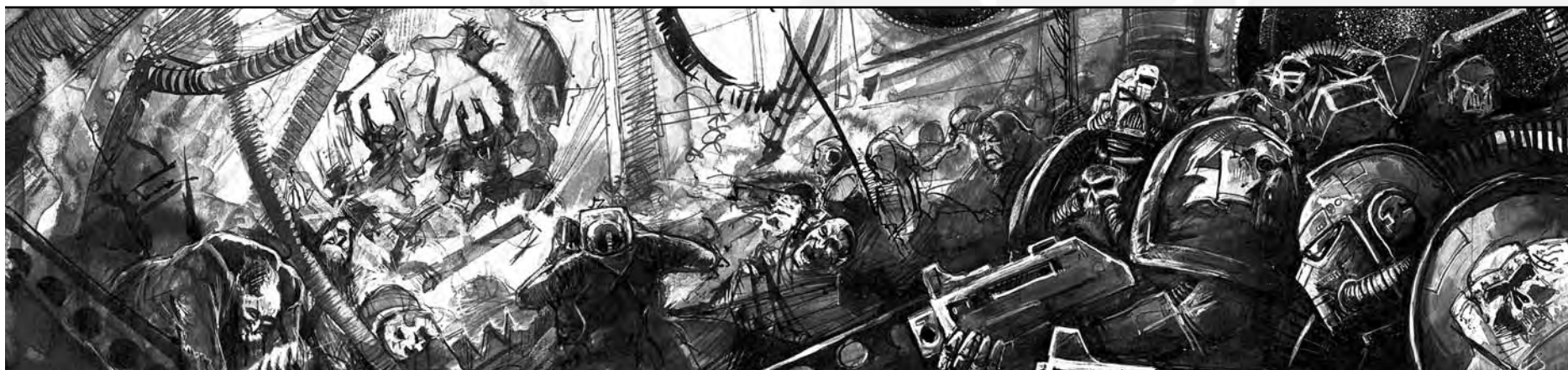
THE TIDE TURNS

As the news of Ravensburg's great victory in the Battle of Gethsemane was spread throughout the fleet, even more promising tidings were to come. In the late months of 151.M41, the warp storms that had isolated the Gothic Sector began to abate and several ships from neighbouring battlefleets arrived to reinforce the Lord Admiral's bloodied fleets. The battle barges and strike cruisers of several Space Marine Chapters also arrived, bringing fresh, elite troops to the fighting. The Imperium's solid defence, though broken in places, had prevented the Chaos fleets from achieving swift victory, and with the help of the Eldar and ships from nearby sectors, the Emperor's servants could go on the offensive.

THE DESTRUCTION OF TARANTIS

Just as Ravensburg had never contemplated defeat, it seems that Abaddon was equally loth to give up what he had won. With two, possibly even three, Blackstone Fortresses under his command, it was Abaddon who was the greatest threat to Imperial worlds in the Gothic Sector. Just how much of a threat was not realised until the attack on the Tarantis system. On the edges of Gothic Sector, Tarantis was a common gathering ground for ships entering or leaving the region from Tamahl Sector and so it was here that Abaddon tried to stem the flow of reinforcements coming in.

His main fleet, accompanied by all three of the missing Blackstone Fortresses, swept aside the few Imperial ships close to where it broke from the warp. Closing rapidly into the system, the cruisers and battleships of the Chaos armada punched a hole through the defenders to allow the Blackstone Fortresses to break through. Countless millions of navy personnel and Imperial Guard died, planets were destroyed and an uncountable number of innocents perished as the two mighty fleets clashed, but what happened next was to totally eclipse all the horrific events of the war so far.



Combining their power together in the same fashion as at Fularis, the Blackstones unleashed a massive energy wave into the Tarantis star. With their objective complete, the Chaos ships conducted a fighting withdrawal and then jumped into warp space once more.

For a whole month, the Tarantis star raged and boiled. Tortured storms moved across its surface, its corona expanding to engulf the two nearest worlds. Any that could leave fled the system, but to evacuate the populations of three worlds was an impossible task. Four weeks after Abaddon's attack, Tarantis' star went nova, wiping out everything for many thousands of billions of miles in every direction in a storm of gas and plasma. Tarantis, a whole star system, was no more and Abaddon had the power to unleash this destruction wherever he wished.

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

Lord Ravensburg firmly believed that Abaddon would try to capture the other three Blackstone Fortresses, but he had no idea against which of the three the Chaos Warmaster would strike next. The hunt continued for six months, with Imperial and Eldar ships patrolling through long forgotten systems in a desperate bid to find Abaddon and his horrific weapons. Then the forces opposing Chaos achieved a breakthrough – the Eldar had located Abaddon's fleet in the Lower Lysades and were able to use their sophisticated ships to trail him through the warp.

From his course it was clear that the Warmaster was preparing to launch an attack on Schindlegeist, where Blackstone V floated in the depths of space. Leaving only a few vessels to deal with the other Chaos fleets, Ravensburg and the Eldar raced to reach Schindlegeist before Abaddon. Using ancient warp gates shown to them by the Eldar, the Imperial Admirals sped across the sector and arrived five days before

Abaddon was due to reach the area. With a constant stream of information concerning Abaddon's actions, the Imperial ships and Eldar lay in wait.

Outnumbered and caught by surprise, there was little the traitorous ship captains could do except die fighting. For three days the two mighty fleets battled, inflicting horrendous casualties on both sides. But for all their ferocity, the Chaos ships simply could not match the forces arranged against them. As the third day of fighting drew to its bloody conclusion, Abaddon once more broke the Blackstone Fortresses through the Imperial defence and headed towards the star. Ravensburg ordered all available ships to intercept them, though he knew there was little he could do to stop the behemoths. Only the *Flame of Purity* was close enough to attack, but the battlecruiser's weapons had little effect against the huge stations.

As the Fortresses built up power for their cataclysmic attack, they were again linked by powerful energy beams. Seeing only one chance, Captain Abridal ordered all power to the shields and drove the *Flame of Purity* into the middle of the converging energy waves. The ship was destroyed almost instantly, scattered into its constituent atoms. However, the detonation had expended the Fortresses' power and, as Abridal had hoped, the Blackstone Fortresses would take some time to accumulate the energy required for another attack. Luckily, time was something that Abaddon had run out of.

ABADDON'S DEFEAT

Their power systems drained, the Blackstone Fortresses could do little. Abaddon managed to escape into the warp with two of them, after a lengthy chase to the edges of the Schindlegeist system and a jump into warp space dangerously near to the gravity well. The Imperial fleet closed in on the third, unleashing all of their weapons,

THE IMPERIUM RESURGENT

although still to little effect. Finally, two strike cruisers from the Angels of Redemption Space Marine Chapter, combined with assault boats from the *Divine Right*, boarded the isolated Blackstone in an attempt to recapture it. Ensign Goldwyn was part of the Navy's boarding party and he later reported to his superiors:

"We were astounded to find no crew aboard the Blackstone Fortress. There was no opposition at all to our boarding and on entering I found it entirely unrecognisable from the base where I had been trained. The walls themselves pulsed with energy, the surface of which had become a deep-veined black – totally unlike the harsh white-painted corridors and rooms I had called home for six years. There was no sign at all of the modifications made by the Tech-Priests, as if our intrusion had been totally expunged. We had been aboard for perhaps an hour when suddenly a high pitched whine filled the air and the walls became ruddy in colour. A sense of panic filled our hearts and we hurried back to the Sharks [assault boats]. We were just in time, as no sooner had we left than the Fortress began to break up, slowly shattering into thousands of fragments. It should have been a happy moment to see our enemy destroyed but, although I cannot say why, my heart was filled with sorrow and I could not get over the feeling that something magnificent had died."

At about the same time that the recaptured Blackstone destroyed itself, the other Fortresses across the Gothic Sector also self-destructed. Nobody knows if the Fortresses under Abaddon's control destroyed themselves in a similar fashion: rumours have the Chaos Warmaster sighted both with and without the ancient engines of destruction. How or why the Blackstone Fortresses were obliterated remains a mystery, but Inquisitor Horst reportedly said to Lord Ravensburg:

"Who can tell what Abaddon could have done with all six? Some things are too dangerous to be allowed to exist and someone or something decided that the Blackstone Fortresses are amongst those things..."

THE CLOSING YEARS

152-160.M41 - THE CLOSING YEARS

With Abaddon's fleet gone, the attention of the Imperial Navy was turned on the other Chaos fleets. The warp storms had decreased to almost their normal level and scores of ships poured into the Gothic Sector.

OVERWHELMING FORCES

Many of the Chaos Warmasters followed Abaddon and fled back to the Eye of Terror, to nurse their hatred and bitterness until another opportunity to attack came. Four battlegroups, each consisting of several dozen capital ships and escorts, systematically engaged and destroyed many of those who remained, eradicating them each in turn. In the Port Maw sub-sector, titanic running battles between Admiral Storn's second cruiser battlegroup and the warfleet of Heinrich Bale lasted for two years, as the Chaos ships slipped from system to system, turning to fight when the odds were in their favour, fleeing before the Emperor's wrath at other times. The battle for Quinrox Sound claimed yet more lives as solitary Chaos vessels sped through the tangled debris, picking off the occasional Imperial escort or cruiser sent to hunt them down.

THE STAIN IS CLEANSED

Although the battles across the stars were drawing to a close, it took a further eight years to retake the worlds that had been captured by the forces of Chaos. Many of them were utterly devastated, their populations enslaved or sacrificed to the Dark Gods, the lands ravaged by war. Slowly but surely, the Imperial Guard scoured these planets of the taint of Chaos. The Missionaries and Confessors of the Ecclesiarchy set about restoring

faith in the Emperor and the Inquisition hunted down those who had collaborated with the followers of the Dark Gods. However, the fight is never truly finished. There are worlds within the Graildark Nebula that still await the Emperor's fleets to free them; there are scattered Chaos ships, and even two or three fleets, that still roam the darkness between the stars of the Hammerhead Deeps and the Cyclops Cluster, waiting for their chance to strike again.

THE WOLVES SCATTER

As more warships of the followers of Chaos departed or were destroyed, Ravensburg ordered two of the large battlegroups to concentrate on the pirates who had grown powerful during the carnage. Like the Chaos fleets, they were each hunted down in turn, many of the bands breaking up and seeking sanctuary in forgotten star systems and in uncharted asteroid fields. The Orks of the Cyclops Cluster became the target of extensive pogroms, forced from worlds where they had enslaved millions, smashed from star systems where their crude ships had preyed upon Imperial shipping.

Twenty years of war had left deep scars and it will still take centuries of blood, sweat and toil to repair the harm, both physical and spiritual, that has been wreaked by Abaddon and his minions.

THE REWARDS OF VICTORY

For the Imperial Navy, and Battlefleet Gothic in particular, the cost had been high, both in human life and in numbers of ships. Great sacrifices had been made and great heroes had met the challenge. Through the determination, courage and loyalty of every man in the Navy, the war had been won.

The High Lords of Terra recognised the efforts of the entire sector fleet and the name of each crewman who served in the war, from Lord Admiral Ravensburg to the lowliest rating on the smallest merchant ship, was engraved upon a specially constructed monolith, which stands ten times the height of a man in the Chambers of Heroes in the Imperial Palace itself. Inquisitor Horst slipped away to pursue his duties elsewhere and it is rumoured that he spent the rest of his life hunting Abaddon, questing to find out what had become of the Blackstone Fortresses Abaddon may have escaped with. Of the success of his self-imposed mission, no report has ever been made and he has not been seen since the end of the Gothic War.

Through those dark times, the Gothic Sector had survived and life would eventually return to normal for the brave men of the Imperial Navy – the running battles with Eldar pirates, the constant search for traitorous smugglers, the crushing of heretics and rebels and the thousand other jobs for which Humanity owes the Imperial Navy its eternal thanks.

"Extreme remedies are most appropriate for extreme diseases."

Inquisitor Horst on the Exterminatus of Lowengulf