



WARHAMMER 40,000

CAMPAIGN SUPPLEMENT



WARHAMMER



LEVIATHAN



The Warhammer Vault exists to preserve the rich lore and background of Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer Age of Sigmar. As such, outdated game scenarios and unit rules have been removed from this publication.

LEVIATHAN



THE OPENING OF THE SHIELD OF BAAL SERIES

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THE VITRIA STRIKE

In late 996.M41, before the Cryptus System had even heard of the Tyranid menace, the Ordo Tempestus' attention was caught by a weak teleprayer from Vitria.

Vitria was a world at the heart of the Red Scar region. Though the men and women of the Vitria System were no strangers to strife, a new enemy had recently shown itself – the teleprayer signal bore news of many-armed killers and shadow-dwelling xenos abroad in the planet's capital city. It was only a matter of hours before the lords of the ever-vigilant Ordo Tempestus dispatched its agents to the Vitria System on a mission of eradication.

The task had found its way to the merciless Tempestor Prime Uther Abraxes of the 11th Kappic Eagles, a man for whom the concept of wasted time was blasphemy. Within moments the officer had summoned his men to battle readiness and ordered his pilot to assign the voidship *Punitive Measures* a new heading.

Abraxes strode impatiently down the *Punitive's* steel-clad corridors as his servo-skull – formed from the remains of his predecessor, who he had personally executed for unseemly hesitation – chattered out the Ordo Tempestus' databrief. The skull's robotic tones told of a wave of civil unrest that had destabilised the Vitrian authorities, and a strange static that confounded all attempts to reach the planet by psychic communion.

Despite the nearest hive fleet tendrils being in the Octarian sector, everything Abraxes had heard about the Vitrian anomaly corresponded with the intelligence he had gathered regarding early-stage Tyranid invasions. En route to the drop-

ship's launch hangars, Uther Abraxes barged into the Sanctum Navigatoria in the belly of the ship. He slammed his laspistol onto the curved mahogany desk belonging to the sanctum's sole Navigator, demanding an explanation for why the psychic interference around Vitria was slowing their progress.

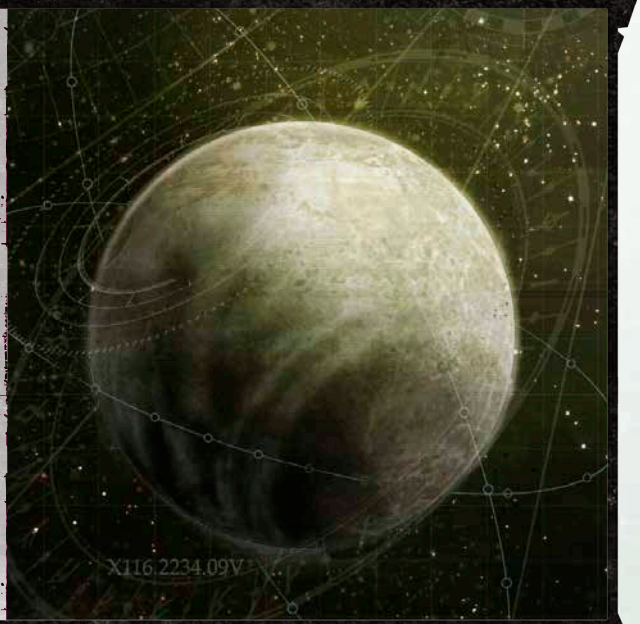
The Navigator was a gangling scarecrow of a man called Audacious Ghonst. Ghonst complained bitterly of the stab of pain that lanced his third eye whenever he turned his warp-gaze towards the Vitria System. To progress any faster towards it was out of the question, he protested, for they risked harming his Emperor-given othersight. Such an order would only antagonise the great and powerful House Ghonst, and no doubt provoke a swift and humiliating demotion for Abraxes. The Tempestor Prime launched himself across the Navigator's desk and grabbed Ghonst's head with both hands, pounding it sideways against the hardwood frame until the mystic's ear was little more than bloody mush. The Navigator would steer the *Punitive* into the heart of the anomaly, Abraxes explained through gritted teeth, or meet a swift and humiliating death at this very moment.

Before the hour was out the *Punitive* was speeding through the Warp towards their quarry, making translation back into realspace just outside the Vitria System. The ship's headlong charge had caused Ghonst to suffer a crippling aneurysm, but Abraxes only grunted in irritation, telling the Navigator's aides to take it up with the Officio Prefectus if they so wished.

VITRIA

The planet of Vitria was once known as Silica VII, a death world of howling sandstorms and desolate oases. The indigenous tusk-felids that roamed the dunes were so lethal the Adeptus Terra declared the planet unfit for habitation. However, in the latter years of 165. M40, a solar flare reached out from Vitria's sun and turned the planet's sandy wilderness into hard black glass. So dramatic was the transformation that the world was not only renamed, but also reclassified as habitable. Before the planet had even fully cooled, the Imperium had deleted Silica VII from its records and replaced it with Vitria, a civilised world of igneous rock and glasscrete.

Though at first glance Vitria's buildings look no different from those clustered throughout the rest of the Imperium, they conceal a lethal secret. The ruins, tumbled statues and splintered buildings that stud its cityscapes all have jagged edges as sharp as shattered glass. Because of this, Vitrian citizens are easily distinguished by their networks of scar tissue. Those few who make it to old age say that haste is the quickest way to suicide, and that the clumsy man soon loses his head.







As the *Punitive* entered Vitria's orbit, Abraxes muted out the bridge's protestations and ordered his Kappic Eagles to assemble for pre-strike edification. After delivering a typically terse briefing in the Valkyrie bays, Abraxes strapped himself into the command chair of his assault craft, *Winged Persecution*. His voxmaster and auspicator, Scion Teratus, sifted through the scattered mayday reports of Vitria's capital. Sure enough, there were several garbled accounts of xenos sightings in Viopolis.

The *Persecution* led the rest of its squadron down through the wet grey thunderheads above the slumbering city, each Valkyrie's Tempestus idents ensuring their descent went unchallenged. Teratus used the *Persecution's* modified auspexes to scan the abandoned buildings in the derelict Marivit Docks.

The auspicator's hunter's instinct was once again proved correct. There were dozens of heatghosts within the moon-silvered dockyards, and each pale green blip was moving with inhuman speed. They were fainter than the readouts of hot-blooded human citizens, and their loose outlines suggested far too many limbs. Abraxes' top lip curled in disgust as the Valkyries swept over the docks and out over the ocean of glass around Viopolis. The Commissariat's suspicions had been correct.

The Tempestor Prime barked out an intercept course for each of the Valkyries in his squadron, and the aircraft banked sharply, peeling off as they roared back over the moonlit seascape toward Viopolis' docks. The Tempestor Prime was a great believer in the power of the surprise attack, and timing was critical. Turning back in his command chair, he made a quick visual inspection of his men. He nodded curtly in approval as he found them primed and ready as ever, not a single finger or bootlace out of place.

The Valkyrie assault carriers zoomed high above the shardspires and battlements of the docks. They did not slow as their side doors clanged open and Tempestus Scions bailed out two by two, Abraxes to the fore. The Storm Troopers spun head over heels through the air for a moment before punching their grav-chutes and adopting vertical strike posture, each descending with legs braced and supercharged lasguns pointed downwards. Such was the precision of their dispersal that they formed a perfect geometric grid in the skies, and many a Viopolitan citizen looked up in wonder at the sight.

The blistering salvo of fire that erupted from the descending Scion squads started well before the first set of boots had touched the ground. Pinpoint volleys blasted into the dark buildings of the docks, smashing roofs into jagged triangular wedges of glasscrete. Xenos figures were

revealed under each broken dome, the creatures scattering quick as insects under the *Persecution's* searchlights. Yet the Tyranids were still too slow to escape the sudden fury of the Tempestus Scions' attack. Several were impaled or crushed by the falling debris that had been the dockyard roofs. Many more were pierced through by the stabbing lasers of the descending Scions.

By the time Abraxes and his squad crunched down onto the scattered gravel, over a dozen gangling xenos corpses lay smouldering in pools of their own foul ichor. The creatures were Genestealers, without a doubt – vicious clawed horrors listed in the Ordo's records as hybrids of both Tyranid and human. Their existence was a stomach-turning offence against the purity of Mankind, but as a foe they were not to be underestimated. The remainder of the hideous brood had already fled back into the shadows, though Teratus' auspex array chimed with daunting frequency as it picked out the locations of nearby creatures.

Crouched beneath a statue with two extra arms spray-painted onto its chest, Abraxes consulted the data Teratus spooled to his slate monitor. Two of the xenos heatghosts were far larger than the others – one close at hand, and another far fainter, smudged deep inside the ruin they had passed over during planetfall. Eyes narrowed, the Tempestor Prime ordered an intercept course towards the closest of the two signals.

The Militarum Tempestus made their way through the dark and dusty tunnels section by section, guns at their shoulders. When Abraxes led his men into the vaulted gloom of a ruined atrium, Genestealers skittered out from the shadows as if reacting to some unheard signal. The Tempestus Scions, well used to covering the exits of any space they entered, put their cautionary firing solutions into practice. Volleys of red light shot out, the air itself sizzling. Bulbous heads were burst open, ridged torsos were speared through and clawed arms were severed clean from shoulders. But for every Tyranid that fell ruined to the ground, another charged on.

Suddenly a Genestealer three times the size of its brethren hurtled screaming out from a second-floor archway at the end of the atrium. Abraxes and his men did not so much as twitch, for they had more immediate threats to neutralise. Tight fire patterns interlocked, a lattice of ruby-red death that scythed down the closest Genestealers even as their leader-beast sprinted for the fray.

Then the next wave was amongst them. Scion Langnus died in a welter of blood as a Genestealer grabbed his limbs with all four of its arms and pulled him bodily apart. Scion Dechius' requests for backup were cut short when a Tyranid claw yanked his throat out, and much of his spine with it. Scion Eradicus found his ceramite breastplate wrenched aside and a claw like a cluster of daggers thrust into his heart.









The Scions fought back with stoic efficiency. The xenos were fast; the muscle memory of the Scions' brutal training was the only thing keeping them in the fight. They closed their formation tighter and tighter. Point blank volleys of fire, stabbing combat knives and swinging fists combined to keep the aliens at bay. Here a Scion dropped to allow his comrade to blast a Tyranid closing in upon him; there a Tempestor swung his power sword to sever a claw aimed at one of his men.

Teratus voxed an alarm signal a split second before the hulking brood leader barrelled into the Scions. Its weapon-limbs snatched away weapons and took heads from necks with uncanny dexterity. Some unnerving quality about the thing made even Abraxes catch his breath. His skin crawled under his uniform as if it were alive. Mortis runes flashed red in the officer's helmet relay, each marking a new death among his men. A red-hot anger burnt away the choking clouds of fear, and the Tempestor Prime drew an ornate power mace from beneath his cloak.

Abraxes leapt over Langnus' limbless corpse and swung his weapon's energised head at the giant beast's oversized cranium. Even though the Broodlord was tearing Scion Grestus apart, its reactions were still horribly fast. The beast shot out a claw and caught Abraxes around the shoulder. Its talons all but sheared off the Tempestor's arm as he dangled in its grip. In the process, the Broodlord left its head exposed for a moment.

It was all the chance Abraxes needed. He brought his other arm out from under his bunched cloak, slamming the long-bladed dirk he had concealed there right between the monster's eyes. It was a trick with which he had killed traitorous kings and warrior lords alike. The Broodlord slumped to the floor in a clatter of chitinous plates, and Abraxes added the Tyranid leader-beast to the tally.

A chorus of screams echoed from the xenos creatures infesting the dock buildings, disturbingly human in their anguish. The Scions took heart at their foes' dismay, kicking and shouldering the reeling Genestealers until they had a few precious yards in which to bring their guns to bear. Hot-shot lasgun fire flashed out once more, filling the air with the stench of burning xenos meat.

Without so much as a backwards glance, the Scions fell back into a contact phalanx. Grav-chute backpacks clicked against ceramite plate as they formed defensive hexagons. It was a formation they had practiced together every day since their childhood in their Schola Progenium, and it had not failed them yet. In twos and threes the Genestealers darted forward, but where one Scion failed to put down his foe, a comrade would stab out a killing volley of fire. Genestealers fell from above, attacking from a new direction, but Teratus' vox-calls alerted his squad-mates in time to blast them back into the shadows.

In tight lockstep the troopers moved to the edge of the atrium, killing more and more xenos with each passing second. As one they turned to the chamber's centre, shoulder to shoulder with the wall at their backs. More Genestealers rushed from the shadows, but against the firing line the Scions had formed they stood no chance. The attacks became less frequent, and then ceased altogether. The only sound in the atrium was the *plink-plink* of cooling lasgun barrels.

Surrounded by a semi-circle of dead xenos, the Scions still stood at full alert. Not a single muscle twitched, not a single word was uttered. Seconds stretched out into minutes. Still no needle-toothed faces emerged from out of the darkness, no screaming alien beasts dropped from the open arches high above. All was still. The only movements across the tableaux of corpses were from the motes of glasscrete that danced in the shafts of moonlight high above.

At a brief hand signal from their officer, the Scions began systematically checking the fallen xenos. Pinpoint execution shots burst the heads of any Genestealer that so much as twitched a sign of life. Abraxes ordered Voxmaster Teratus to expand the range of his auspex to maximum. His report was matter-of-fact, as ever – not a single Genestealer heatghost prowled the docks. In fact there was no sign for a mile in all directions.

Abraxes studied his slate monitron's relay spool with hawk-like vigilance, for his instincts told him the fight was not over. A brief smudge flickered at the edge of the officer's helmet relay, and even then for but an instant. It was an ident-blink that most Imperial officers would have dismissed as a glitch or a brief exhalation from the device's machine spirit. But Uther Abraxes was no normal officer.

Summoning his men with a click of his gauntleted fingers, the Tempestor Prime led the advance.



Abraxes checked the corners as he glided through the dusty corridors of the dock-vaults. The grip of his hot-shot laspistol was reassuring in his hand, even if his wounded shoulder burned under the anaesthetic leech-strip he had hastily applied. Since his promotion to *Tempestor Prime*, he had men to check his routes for him, but old habits died hard. The training of the *Militarum Tempestus* was so ingrained that he could no more shake his old protocols than he could override the need to breathe.

The *Tempestor Prime* allowed himself a tiny, curt nod. The men advancing in a penetrat phalanx behind him were all but silent. Considering they were clad from head to toe in ceramite and armaplas, they should have made as much noise as an *Arbites* riotkiller squad. Instead they moved with such fluid grace their advance was accompanied by no more than the whisper of cloth.

After checking his slate monitron to confirm that his men were operating at peak efficiency, Abraxes scanned the darkness ahead. He held up a hand to halt progress whilst he assessed the route forward. The dripping of brackish water and the occasional soft click from *Teratus'* *auspex* relay were the only sounds that broke the silence. Abraxes could smell the oily stink of the nearby *Marivot Docks* through the nasal plugs of his omnishield helm. There was a trace of human blood laced beneath it, and something else – an acrid scent that lingered unpleasantly in his sinuses.

There was a light tap on Abraxes' wrist. He turned and halted, making the gesture to report. In response, two of his *Scions* stepped to flank him, their hot-shot lasguns trained down the shadowy corridors ahead.

Sir – advise pan monitron north-north-west maximum yield, signed vox-officer *Teratus*.

Continue report with haste, signed Abraxes, irritation clear in his gestures.

Located human vital signs near anomaly, decreasing. Transmitting data.

Abraxes tensed as the location *Teratus* had indicated flashed up on his slate monitron. It was less than ten metres away. As the vox-officer had claimed, there was indeed the fading pulse of a human life sign, a blue dot winking unsteadily at the heart of a cylindrical space nearby. What Abraxes had taken at first glance for a wide chimney or maintenance duct was, on closer inspection, a chamber with its roof open to the stars. It was occupied by a dying human – and, if the vague smudge around it was anything to go by, his killer to boot.

The *Tempestor Prime* extended a hand with three fingers pointed towards the largest men in his squad. The trio of killers muscled to the front, dutifully flanking him as he padded down the corridor. Within moments the circular chamber was on the other side of the graffiti-covered wall.

Abraxes pulled something from under his cloak, carefully removing a long-defunct shrieker-skull from a dusty alcove in the brickwork and replacing it with a live *krak* grenade. He stepped back and turned away, motioning for his men to do the same. The fingers of his gauntlet counted down: five... four... three... two...

On the count of one, the *krak* grenade detonated with an earsplitting bang. A moment later, Abraxes and his *Scions* barrelled into the wall with the force of a charging *Ogryn*. An entire section of glasscrete wall shattered outwards. Abraxes and his men rolled with the charge and came up in gun-crouch readiness.

The *Tempestor Prime* took in his surroundings in a single second, but the sight would stay with him to his grave.







There in the moonlight shimmered a Tyranid lifeform, impossibly long of limb and spined from elongated head to talon-fringed hooves. The monster was withdrawing its mouth-tendrils from the nostrils of a figure robed in the manner of an Astropath. Abraxes felt his bile rise as he realised that the creature was a Lictor, a Tyranid mind-stealer organism. Each of its tapered maw-feelers was slick with brain matter, glinting greyish-pink in the moonlight. The creature's victim was moaning and writhing weakly as the xenos beast cradled it like a mother holding a sickly infant.

As one the Storm Troopers opened fire, but the beast was skitter-fast. Some chameleonic property of its skin made it hard to score a telling hit. In a moment it was amongst them, its mantis-like claws darting and stabbing. Secondary limbs clawed through necks and swatted over the closest of the Scions taking aim.

Abraxes stepped back into the corridor, all effort at stealth abandoned as he bellowed commands for reinforcement into the vox. His men stood shoulder to shoulder to protect him, forming a wall of armour and flesh where glasscrete had stood moments before. He could hear those at the front being smashed into the splintered shards by the flailing limbs of the gruesome beast. The rest were holding their nerve, sending volley after volley into the creature's midsection. Abraxes caught a flash of movement as the Lictor leaped vertically up the cylindrical chamber. It clambered high, and was gone.

The chamber boomed loud, and the moon was blotted out. A backwash of engines blasted down the cylinder. Abraxes heard the familiar cough of volleyed heavy bolter fire. A second later the long-limbed xenos beast came tumbling down towards them, its gangly limbs striking splinters from the sheer walls. Its split corpse hit the chamber's tiled floor with a satisfying crunch. The Tempestor Prime drew his skull-tipped power mace as his Valkyrie reinforcements passed overhead. With a single bludgeoning blow he turned the beast's tentacled head to mush, just to be sure.

'Good enough, Eagles,' said Uther Abraxes, his tone flat. 'Initiate clean-up.'

Half of the Tempestor Prime's men begun piecing together the dead, the other half standing at full alert, checking readouts and listening to the sound of scrabbling claws in the distance. Medic Arobedian tended to the wounded while Abraxes took a moment to examine the chamber. There were words smeared in blood upon its walls. He looked closer. Indistinct phrases, each telling of numberless killers from the void, of death made flesh, and of a great devourer that would not be denied its feast.

A single word stood out from the ravings, over and over: Cryptus. It was the name of a binary star system that Abraxes could see glinting in the sky high above – a system so rich in human life that it would prove irresistible to the Tyranid race. Billions of unwitting souls, cut off from the Imperium by the alien static of the Hive Mind and ripe for the slaughter.

A cold sensation crept over Abraxes' shoulders like a cloak of ice draped from behind. He raised his slate monitron and punched the rune-sequence for the Commissariat.



THE SHIELDWORLDS OF CRYPTUS

The Cryptus Shieldworlds formed a thriving bulwark of the Imperium, despite many of their number being classified as lethally radioactive. Each planet had great natural resources. When such wealth lies ready to be taken, Mankind's determination knows no bounds. Over the millennia, the system's people had learned not just to live under the stars they called the Eyes of Cryptus, but to thrive.

The Cryptus System was rich not only in mineral wealth and the boundless energy afforded by its twin suns, but also in population. All but one of its worlds were so hostile that the only life forms that existed in great number were the tenacious legions of Humanity. From the nomads of Lysios to the inhabitants of the impossibly vast city of Phodia on Asphodex, the inhabitants of the Cryptus Shieldworlds had adapted to their harsh worlds and even flourished. It was perhaps this feast of human biomass that caught the attention of the Tyranids.

THE COMING OF THE GREAT DEVOURER

None truly know how the hive fleets detect their prey. Some of the Ordo Xenos believe they are attracted only to the electromagnetic signature of suns that could foster life. Others maintain that their senses are so acute they can somehow perceive their quarry across interstellar distances.

One of the most persistent theories states that the Tyranids seed those galaxies they will invade with vanguard organisms. These stowaway broods and assassin life-forms



skulk in the shadows, learning of their prey's weakness and summoning their kin for the conquest to come. All these theories are mere conjecture, however – the Imperium has ascertained only that the hive fleets have a rapacious hunger for biomass of all kinds.

In the last years of M41, the terrifying scale of Hive Fleet Leviathan's invasion became clear. After the hive fleet's early conquests, it was thought Leviathan had concentrated its attack around Segmentum Tempestus. Disturbingly, in late 998.M41 it was found that a splinter fleet, codified as the Cryptoid Tendril, was curling towards a binary system deep in the Red Scar region of the Ultima Segmentum. The tendril had diverted its course towards the Cryptus System after utterly destroying the planet of Vitria. After-action reports from the Militarum Tempestus forces that had engaged its infiltrator bioforms confirmed they bore the same colouration as the hive fleet assailing the Octarius sector.

Word of this new invasion was relayed to the High Lords of Terra through several strata of astropathic relays. The High Lords' emergency council resulted in the first unanimous

vote since the Black Scourge of 993.M41. The Imperium would fortify the Cryptus System to the maximum degree possible – though no Space Marine Chapters were able to lend their might at that time, its planets would be reinforced by the best regiments the colossal Astra Militarum could provide.

The Imperial Guard would halt the Cryptoid Tendril before it made any more progress across the Red Scar, for its path was taking it directly towards the Baal System, a site of immeasurable importance to the Imperium. Though the homeworlds of the Blood Angels were heavily defended, the Chapter's future could not be put at risk.

Once the Tyranids' advance had been stymied by the bulwark of the Astra Militarum, the sector would be reinforced again and again until the Imperium had succeeded in exterminating Hive Fleet Leviathan's presence from the segmentum altogether.

This far the new splinter fleet would encroach upon the Imperium, the High Lords swore; this far, but no further.







THE RED SCAR

The area of space known as the Red Scar appears as an angry red weal across the Ordo Astra's charts. Every star within its bounds is blood red in colouration, their rays carrying the kiss of death. Those who live unprotected beneath one of these suns soon find their skin blackening and peeling away, the clustered carcinomas conjured within them eventually killing them outright.

To settle a planet within the Red Scar is a slow and tortuous business. Still, the Imperium is loath to pass up an opportunity to expand its might. Though billions of lives were sacrificed before a solution was found, the Imperium eventually overcame the curse of the Red Scar. By imbibing the elixir satryx – a strange sap-based solution imported in bulk from the star system Satys – the people that dwell within a Red Scar system can withstand the baleful radiation of their sun for as many as four decades.

Every planet has its own theories as to the nature of the Red Scar phenomenon, ranging from the legacy of an ancient war to the displeasure of the Emperor himself. Over the millennia since the initial settlements, layers of superstition have accrued around the act of imbibing the satryx elixir, transforming it from preventative medicine to holy ritual.

Despite the Inquisition's best attempts to quell it, there is also a persistent myth that the Red Scar came into being after a bloodthirsty god slashed his sword across the heavens. Though civilised men scoff at the very notion, it would at least explain the high rates of murder and genocide that occur within the celestial wound's systems.

The
Oculus Stars

Adeptus
Astronomica
Station

Vitria System

Satys System

Hive Fleet
Leviathan

Galactic Plane

The Red Wilderness

Adeptus Astra
Telepathica Station
(Nunc Dimittary)

Baal System
(Blood Angels Chapter World)

Quarantine Zone

The Cryptus System

Disused
Empyrean Gate

The Obscura Veil



THE EYES OF CRYPTUS

Cryptus is an unusual star system even amongst those of the Red Scar. Its planets orbit not one stellar body, but two. These binary stars are famous for the spiralling trails that link them like duelling comets, solar flares that lash out and incinerate anything within their reach. Tethered by unbreakable gravitic forces, the twin suns circle one another like courtiers at a palace dance – or rather two deadly predators sizing each other up before a fight. None truly know how the strange forces that are exerted by these stars will affect the system's planets from year to year, nor what natural disasters will arise from the endless battle of the Cryptus Stars; only that these catastrophes will be destructive in the extreme.

As with all stellar bodies in the Red Scar, these binary stars emit a terrifying amount of radiation. The scientific explanation for this phenomenon has long been forgotten. Instead the people of the Cryptus System have dealt with this by becoming ever more superstitious.

The system's people have their own explanation for the glowering red orbs that claim the skies every morning, calling them the Eyes of Cryptus. They believe there is an evil red-skinned colossus in the heavens, a skyborne giant who glares down at sinners with hateful intent. Those who do not perform the necessary rituals

will slowly be burnt away by the intensity of his ire, their flesh blackening and their organs cooked to lifeless soup. Only the truly innocent can survive, they say, and they are few and far between; Cryptus is always ready to make a prideful fool pay for his ignorance. In truth it is not the innocent, but those possessed of a specific genetic quirk, that can withstand the radiation of the Eyes of Cryptus. This strange evolutionary advancement is boasted most of all by the influential Flaxian Dynasty, and so the aristocrats of that wealthy bloodline are content to let the myth thrive.

Those agents of the Ecclesiarchy who first made planetfall in the Cryptus System grudgingly admitted to one another that the red suns could indeed be mistaken for a pair of eyes. Some property of their electromagnetic radiation results in the feeling that those under their rays are being watched, and their heat burns into the back of the neck when one is turned away.

Humanity, as ever, has proved resilient enough to deal with it even in ignorance. The system's people have become accustomed not only to taking their anti-rad elixir, satryx, but also to accepting the stare of the terrifying giant that looks down at them in judgement every day. Much to the horror of the Ordo Hereticus, some even worship Cryptus as a pagan deity.



THE CRYPTUS SYSTEM

CASTELLAN BELT

Class: Asteroid Belt
(subcategory Mining World)
Population: >6,000
Tithe Grade: Exactis Secundus
Aggregate: 700:
Aestimare: C60
Principal Export: Dense Minerals
Comments: Honeycomb mines
(append: barren, 953.M41)
Defence class Aquila/Tempestus
cf. 'Cryptus Girdle,' 'The Killing Field'

Adepta Sororitas:
Order of The Sacred Rose

LYSIOS

Class: Civilised World
Population: >300,000,000
Tithe Grade: Exactis Secundus
Aggregate: 1,500:
Aestimare: C500
Principal Export: Kelp/algae-hybrid
protein cakes
Comments: Anomalous annual cycle
Permanent macrotidal cataclysm
Motile populace (cf. crawler hulk)

Astra Militarum:
Vostroyan (Mechanised)

IXOI

Class: Lunar Planetoid
Population: <30,500
Tithe Grade: Exactis Quintus
Aggregate: 700:
Aestimare: G750
Principal Export: Isotope-rich substrate
Comments: Toxin-laced atmosphere
Rebreathers minimum precaution

THE CRYPTOID TENDRIL

HIVE FLEET LEVIATHAN
Comments: Xenos invasion fleet
Threat level: Uncategorisable

AEGIS DIAMANDO

Class: Asteroid Belt (Quarantined)
Comments: cf. 'Glittering Shield'
cryothermic anomaly
Phenomena Extremis – Forbidden Zone



Astra Militarum:
Cadian

TARTOROS

Class: Death World
Population: >30,000
Tithe Grade: Solutio Prima
Aggregate: 600:
Aestimare: G50
Principal Export: Energy (c.f. Magnovitrium)
Comments: Alpha-grade solar farms
Protected by void domes against stellar proximity

PERDITA

Class: Dead World (Quarantined)
Population: 0
Tithe Grade: Aptus Non
Aggregate: 200:
Aestimare: G1000
Principal Export: None
Comments: Declared Perditas, 439.M36

THE EYES OF CRYPTUS

Class: Binary Stars



Astra Militarum:
Cadian (Airborne)

AEROS

Class: Civilised World
(subcategory Mining World)
Population: >1,200,000
Tithe Grade: Exactis Tertius
Aggregate: 2,000:
Aestimare: E20
Principal Export: Refined promethium
Comments: Jove-class gas giant
Populace restricted to filter
ships/dock podiums



Astra Militarum:
Cadian (Urban Elite)

ASPHODEX

Class: Civilised World
Population: >38,500,000,000
Tithe Grade: Solutio Extremis
Aggregate: 3,500:
Aestimare: B750
Principal Export: Munitions
Comments: Extensive urbanisation
(append: Planetary Governor under investigation
for receipt of illegal funds, 998.M41)

*'A terrible Dragon shall come,
Coiling from the void below.
Through deadly cold and through stone it shall pass,
And yet live.
Across the heavens it shall uncoil,
There it shall battle the Giant.
Under light of blood-hued stars,
It shall devour all.'*

- The Lysite Seers, 'Cryptus and the Dragon'

DEFENDERS OF THE CRYPTUS SYSTEM

The Cryptus System was the perfect battlefield in which to bring Hive Fleet Leviathan to battle. The people who inhabited its planets were hard-bitten survivors all, used to the rigours of life in the Red Scar and the corruptions borne of its rich mineral bounty. When the populations were combined, they numbered over forty billion souls. Millions of men and women were ready and able to stand by their home world's PDF if necessary – the Cryptus System had long been blighted by crime, and it was rare to find a citizen unarmed.

The Cadian Shock Troop regiments in the system, diverted from every war zone within several light years, boasted over three million soldiers. They were led by General Maelon Dhrost, one of the most well respected leaders ever to have left the Cadian Gate. The Cadians were not the only warriors from the Astra Militarum to reach the system, for deploying alongside them were several tank companies of Vostroyan Firstborn. The prevailing opinion was that the Imperial Guard's finest had been deployed in great number, and though word had spread of the coming xenos invasion, morale was high.

The forces of the Astra Militarum had allies close at hand. Stationed within the mobile convent-fortresses of Lysios were the Adepta Sororitas, the military wing of a large Ecclesiarchy presence already in-system. After hearing of the widespread belief that the Eyes of Cryptus belonged to a celestial giant that judged sinners, the Ministorum had sent tens of thousands of Battle Sisters to enforce the truth – that the glaring red orbs in the firmament were the eyes of the Emperor instead. Having spent the last three years pounding this belief into the largely pagan populace of Lysios, Canoness Magda Grace of the Sacred Rose welcomed the chance to fight a war where the delineation between good and evil was not blurred, but stark.

Although the Cryptus System's guns were beyond count and its manpower impressive, its foremost defences were the belts of stellar debris that surrounded it. The cold-void phenomenon named the Aegis Diamando was a potent shield in itself, and the gun-mines of the Castellan Belt had repelled Eldar raiders, piratical Chaos renegades, and even an Ork Waaagh! in centuries past.

The planets under the crimson suns were known as the Shieldworlds for good reason. They would not be conquered easily.



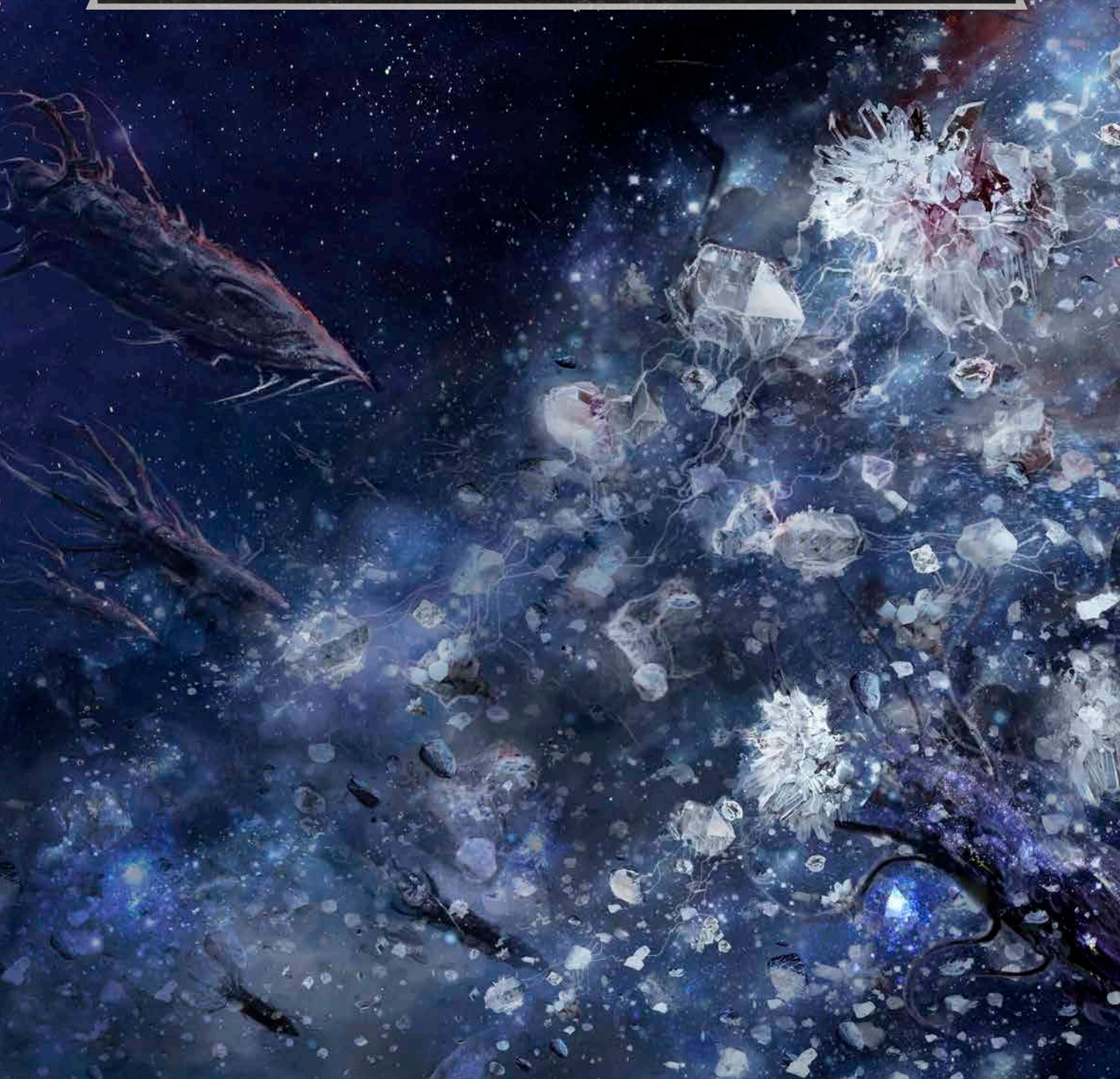


THE AEGIS DIAMANDO

The asteroid belt colloquially known as the Glittering Shield forms the Cryptus System's most formidable defence. On the very edge of the binary system is a Warp-corrupted zone hovering at the threshold of the laws of physics – and, if the cryosavants of the Ordo Astra are to be believed, sometimes even breaking them. This grand anomaly has been attributed to Imperial Warp translations that brought a measure of the Emyrean with them into realspace.

Whatever the reason, the impossible cold of the Glittering Shield freezes even those elements that remain liquid at extreme temperatures. Its reaches are studded with transparent macrocrystals, some the size of small planets in their own right. Each perfect geometric shape is of pure chemical composition.

The vast polygons that stud the shield are truly breathtaking in their beauty. They appear as a belt of perfect diamonds that spans the sky; a celestial phenomenon known on Lysios as Cryptus' Hoard. Yet their exquisite appearance conceals a deadly trap – any living thing that strays into the cold zone is flash-frozen with killing speed. Though rumours persist that the Rogue Traders that originally settled the system found non-lethal thermal tunnels that could theoretically allow travel from one side to the other, the region has long been declared forbidden. Imperial ships are required to make translation to the Warp on the near side of the Aegis Diamando, lest they inadvertently freeze themselves to death by straying into it.





TERROR AT SHIELD'S EDGE

As the weeks turned into months, the hive fleet tendrils wound ever closer. Communications, whether by conventional vox-script or Astropathic relay, became less and less reliable. A strange and distracting sound haunted the ether, sounding at first like the crashing waves of a distant sea, and later like a million hissing whispers clawing at the mind.

Still the people of the Cryptus System did not give in to the misgivings that haunted them. Any invader that sought entry to the Shieldworlds would have to negotiate the lethal cold of the Aegis Diamando and almost certainly die in the process. In the remote eventuality that the enemy fleet happened upon a thermal tunnel and made it through alive, the guns of the Castellan Belt would soon dispense with them. The alien fleet would most likely be frozen and shattered into stardust without the Cryptan worlds having to fire a single shot.

By the time the bioluminescence of the hive fleet could be picked out in the night sky, the strange susurrus that haunted the ether had risen into a chorus of alien whispers. This hellish white noise was so persistent it gnawed at the minds of those who communed with the Empyrean, causing brainbleed, mindstab attacks and even bouts of insanity that drove psychics into gibbering mania. Those vessels that plied the shipping lanes above the galactic plane found that the signal grew fainter, just as it did towards the

neighbouring systems that were closer to the galactic core or further towards its fringes. Only those in the path of the hive fleet's advance were afflicted by the mind-curse.

Of all the Imperial personnel mustered in-system, only the Navigators of the Grand Cryptan Armada had an inkling of the true threat. With the beacon of the Astronomican obscured by this bow wave of psychic interference, the Imperium's plan to constantly pour war materiel into the Cryptus System would fall at the first hurdle. Not only was the Warp rendered unnavigable, but there was also no way craft could enter the system via conventional means. The Aegis Diamando's extreme cold formed a barrier in both directions.

Slowly word spread throughout Cryptan High Command, filtering down to the system's Planetary Governors and the officers of the Astra Militarum that were to protect it. The binary system was locked down, and its defenders were on their own.



CHILLING REVELATIONS

The confidence of the system's defenders reached a peak when the first wave of Tyranid bio-ships entered the Glittering Shield. Rather than channel themselves into thin columns in order to probe the belt carefully for a safe route, the ships of the hive fleet ploughed right into the subzero anomaly.

The auspicator screens of the Grand Cryptan Armada showed the tentacles of the nautiloid vessels falling still, or else curling like the fingers of a corpse dredged from a winter lake. The slow menace of the bio-ships faded with every new report and propaganda image circulated. Without exception, the Tyranid vessels had been reduced to frosted white ruin by the Aegis Diamando's killing cold. What was formerly an invading fleet had become a field of stellar debris, frozen lumps that bumped and jostled against the titanic polygons of the Glittering Shield.

Still the void-spanning momentum of the Tyranid fleet carried it onwards. Upon the bridges of the Imperial flagships that formed a precautionary cordon around the Shieldworlds, auspicator savants reported with detached interest that the now-deceased hive fleet had split into six smaller groups. It was dismissed as an irrelevant detail by High Command – the remains of the invading fleet would be shattered, no matter their dispersal.

In their pride, most of the Imperial commanders had convinced themselves the danger was already over. They could not have been more wrong.





The bridge of the command ship Brutus Macharia was reminiscent of a grand basilica. Its vaulted walls were thronged with over two hundred naval servitors, officers and astromechanics. Yet, aside from the slow chime of its primary auspicator and the occasional murmur from the uniformed staff gathered around it, the grand chamber was all but silent.

Admiral Justus van Avacor breathed out slowly over his auspicator relay. Xenos life-sigils winked red amidst the scattered sapphire shapes of the Glittering Shield. There were just... so many of them.

'Cryosavant Thross, report,' he breathed, his voice parched.

'They are slowing. It appears as if the Glittering Shield is claiming new victims, my liege,' purred the robed savant to his right. The cryosavant's silver-blue eyes dilated in a flurry of serial clicks.

'Appears?' hissed van Avacor. 'Are they dead or aren't they?'

The cryosavant leaned in close, his gaunt features underlit by the auspicator's glare. A cold second slid past, then another, each seeming like an hour. As the assembled officers watched, the last of the red life-sigils turned completely white.

'The xenos craft are all dead, Admiral,' he replied smoothly, puffing out his chest and straightening his robes as if he himself had slain the xenos threat. 'Not a single bio-sign amongst them.'

'Emperor's Halo,' breathed van Avacor, puffing out his cheeks. 'Alright. Captain Gessirec, all ahead full, if you please. Let's shatter the corpses before the grunts in the Castellan Belt claim all the glory.'

'Aye, sir,' replied the Captain proudly, cascading the Admiral's orders across the bridge. The Brutus came alive with activity once more. Van Avacor returned to his command throne, surreptitiously wiping sweat from the back of his neck. A narrow escape, to be sure. The Admiral's mind filled with visions of promotion as he began laying plans for the total destruction of the Tyranid fleet.

An hour of bustling preparation passed, then another. The Brutus Macharia thrummed with activity from prow to stern as it prepared to blast apart the corpses of the Tyranid fleet.

Up on the supervessel's bridge, a musical chime rang out, its softness in stark contrast to its message.

'Ad... Admiral?' stuttered Thross. The lights on the auspicator below his jutting chin were changing colour, turning his haggard face from pallid white to an unhealthy red.

'What is it, Thross?' said van Avacor.

'The life-sigils, Admiral... they're changing back.'

The auspicator chime pinged again, then again, the first drops of noise growing into a tinkling shower of sound.



'Changing back? How?' asked van Avacor, his voice strained.

'I... I don't know...' gibbered the cryosavant. *'It's not actually possible... for a living creature to survive...'*

'Thross, I can hear the damn machine ping-pong away!'

'P... perhaps the twin suns are lending heat enough to resurrect them, Admiral...'

'They must be. Farghast, vox the Castellan gunners and blast those bloody things to pieces before this gets any worse.'

The vox officer barked his assent. Within seconds he had turned back to the Admiral, his face grave.

'Long-range is out, Admiral,' he said grimly. *'Just... we're just getting that horrible static.'*

'Curse it all. Forward lances, open fire!'

The deck of the Brutus Macharia shivered as the warship's colossal guns were brought to full power. Staring at his wall-sized lumin screen with wide eyes, Admiral van Avacor spotted distant glimmers in the firmament. Vox-link or not, the gun-fortresses of the Castellan Belt were making their presence felt.

The superstructure of the Brutus boomed as twin columns of ruby-red death stabbed out into the darkness, each fierce enough to core

a Battle Barge. They struck the Tyranid fleet just as a cloud of super-ordnance blossomed across the lumpy shapes drifting towards them.

'Direct hit, Admiral!' reported Farghast.

'Good work. Damage infliction?'

There was an uncomfortable pause.

'Minimal, Admiral.'

'What? Explain!'

'It's not just us, my liege. It... it appears they expelled a great deal of fluid within the Aegis Diamando, and are now encrusted in a thick layer of ice. It's making it hard to score a telling blow.'

Van Avacor felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. The metal plates in his skull began to throb in time with the frantic signals of the bridge's alert network.

'They're not... they're not intentionally using the ice as ablative armour, surely?' he whispered to himself. A sick feeling writhed in his stomach. *'Those things... they can't be that intelligent!'* he demanded, panic rising in his voice. *'They can't be, can they?'*

Silence swathed the bridge once more, broken only by the death knell chimes of the auspicator as the resurrected hive fleet ground slowly through space towards them.

THE CASTELLAN BELT

An asteroid belt of igneous rock, the Castellan Belt was known as the Girdle of Lysios until the Ordo Hereticus forced its reclassification. Shot through with rare minerals and ores, these asteroids have been so heavily mined that nearly every one of them has hundreds of miles of tunnel unwinding within it. The rival mining operations that plundered them, many of whom were in the pocket of Asphodex's criminal fraternity, took the defence of their territory very seriously – each of the asteroids boasts not only extensive trench networks but also large-scale point defences that could make the commander of a Battle Barge think twice.

From the orbital platforms and Goliath-class harvesters of Aeros, the asteroids of the Castellan Belt appear to be little more than grey lumps covered in thick networks of scar tissue. Each planetoid's inner beauty has long ago been stolen to leave only a hollow monument to greed. Nevertheless the Castellan Belt remains a potent defence for the star system that it envelops. Now that its minerals have been stripped and the mining companies have abandoned it, the belt has no better use for the multifarious guns mounted by the rival companies than to defend the worlds that have treated it so cruelly.



WAR IN THE KILLING FIELD



Despite the fact the Castellan Belt had been reduced to honeycombed rock, as a defensive position it was still invaluable. Each asteroid was dotted with Aquila strongholds and Tempestus-class firebases, and though they had been left to gather dust since the last vein of precious metal had been excavated by the Asphodan crime cartels in 953.M41, they had survived the passing of the decades intact.

General Dhrost had never really believed the Glittering Shield would stop the Tyranid advance. Pragmatic to the point of fatalism, he had ordered a cadre of experienced Cadian gunners and Tech-Priest Engineeers to split off from his artillery companies and board shuttles bound for the deserted asteroid belt that lay beyond the gas giant of Aeros. There they would make ready for the war to come, awakening ancient machine spirits and loading colossal breaches with macro-cannon shells and vortex missiles paid for long ago by Asphodex's criminal elite.

Dhrost had no wish for his artillerymen to take on the brunt of the Tyranid attack. Instead he ordered them to lie low, hidden in the pitch-black tunnels of the Castellan Belt until a prearranged signal was sent. His plan was to

allow the tips of the Cryptoid Tendril to penetrate the system without hindrance. Only once the first wave of ships had passed would the belt's grand guns open fire. With any luck, they would distract or perhaps even blast apart the next wave of bio-ships before they could reinforce the Tyranid vanguard.

If the Cadian regiments fought at their full potential, those Tyranid invaders that had already entered Cryptan space could be contained and even beaten in the resultant ground war. The reinforcements the xenos relied upon from their second wave of invasion would be disrupted and perhaps denied altogether by the sudden firestorm erupting in the hive fleet's midst. By cutting the neck of each invading sub-tendrill, Dhrost would give his men a fighting chance to destroy the xenos invaders wave by wave.

The Cadian officer's theory was tested soon enough as the Tyranid tendrill pushed deep into the Castellan Belt and emerged on the other side. Selfless to the last, the men stationed there gave their lives to buy their comrades a better chance. They would take as heavy a toll as possible on the hive fleet before they were overrun completely.









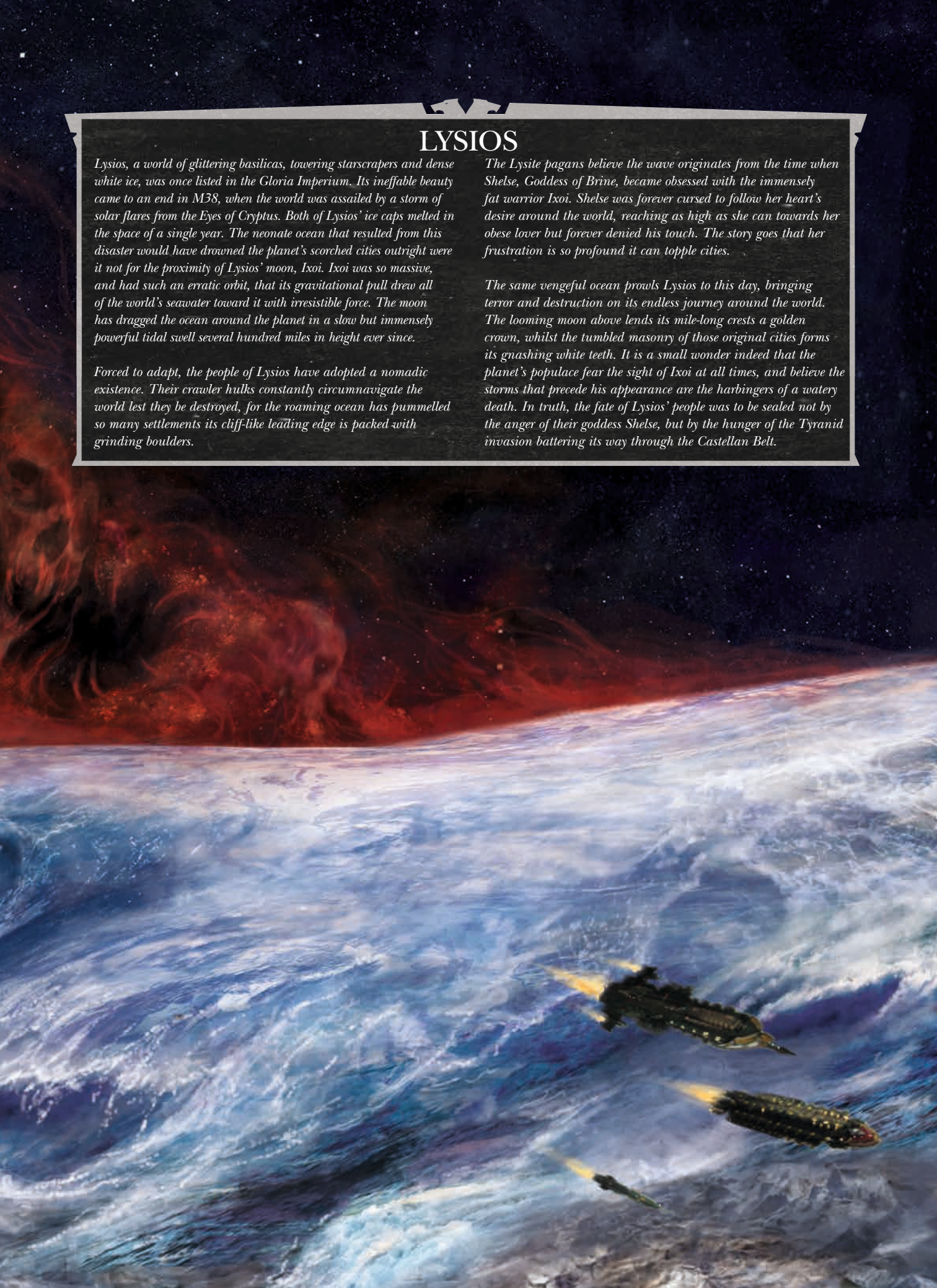
LYSIOS

Lysios, a world of glittering basilicas, towering starscrapers and dense white ice, was once listed in the Gloria Imperium. Its ineffable beauty came to an end in M38, when the world was assailed by a storm of solar flares from the Eyes of Cryptus. Both of Lysios' ice caps melted in the space of a single year. The neonate ocean that resulted from this disaster would have drowned the planet's scorched cities outright were it not for the proximity of Lysios' moon, Ixoi. Ixoi was so massive, and had such an erratic orbit, that its gravitational pull drew all of the world's seawater toward it with irresistible force. The moon has dragged the ocean around the planet in a slow but immensely powerful tidal swell several hundred miles in height ever since.

Forced to adapt, the people of Lysios have adopted a nomadic existence. Their crawler hulks constantly circumnavigate the world lest they be destroyed, for the roaming ocean has pummelled so many settlements its cliff-like leading edge is packed with grinding boulders.

The Lysite pagans believe the wave originates from the time when Shelse, Goddess of Brine, became obsessed with the immensely fat warrior Ixoi. Shelse was forever cursed to follow her heart's desire around the world, reaching as high as she can towards her obese lover but forever denied his touch. The story goes that her frustration is so profound it can topple cities.

The same vengeful ocean prowls Lysios to this day, bringing terror and destruction on its endless journey around the world. The looming moon above lends its mile-long crests a golden crown, whilst the tumbled masonry of those original cities forms its gnashing white teeth. It is a small wonder indeed that the planet's populace fear the sight of Ixoi at all times, and believe the storms that precede his appearance are the harbingers of a watery death. In truth, the fate of Lysios' people was to be sealed not by the anger of their goddess Shelse, but by the hunger of the Tyranid invasion battering its way through the Castellan Belt.



THE SWARM DESCENDS



When the Order of the Sacred Rose brought the light of the Emperor to Lysios in M41, they found that the populace still clung to their strange myths. To the Lysites, it was far more palatable to believe a romantic legend was behind the cataclysm that had ruined their world instead of some celestial fluke. The Adepta Sororitas intended to see that belief expunged, and were prepared to implement severe religious persecution to accomplish it. One way or another, the Emperor would be given his due.

When the Sisters of Battle first made planetfall upon Lysios they were confronted by a world of emptiness and death. The vast majority of the planet's surface was clustered with shattered and algae-clad ruins. Every crumbled plaza and weatherbeaten temple reeked like a seabed drained of brine. The grandiose buildings that had adorned its reaches in ages past had been reduced to the bare bones of a once-great civilisation, an empire drowned in some terrible deluge and dredged back up to face the cruel light.

Not a single soul walked the seaweed-strewn streets, for the populace had long ago found a way to avoid the slow but deadly menace that casts its shadow across their lives. To their mounting amazement the Adepta Sororitas realised that the world's cities had been submerged not once, but thousands of times, and that its people had learned to eke out a living from their world regardless of the natural disasters that had stolen all hope of stability.

A LEAP OF FAITH

When the bio-ships of Hive Fleet Leviathan pushed their way through the Glittering Shield, a large contingent of Adepta Sororitas had already begun their religious pogroms. They had mobilised just under seven thousand Battle Sisters from the Orders of the Sacred Rose and Our Martyred Lady, and ensured their optimum deployment throughout the system. The Ecclesiarchy stood ready to enact a full-scale religious persecution upon Lysios and its neighbouring planets.

As the Cryptoid Tendril grew ever closer, it became more and more obvious that fate had a different role in mind for the Adepta Sororitas. When word of the encroaching Tyranid swarms reached the Cardinals of the Ecclesiarchy, Canoness Grace, who was in overall command of the Battle Sisters stationed upon Lysios, found her orders changed – she was not to prosecute the populace, but to protect it. After a year spent in constant movement as her rolling crusade weeded out heresy from the Lysite crawler hulks, Grace's astonishment mingled with several other emotions; frustration at the jarring change in orders, relief that her executions of the civilian populace could end, and a healthy dose of fear.

The Canoness had encountered the Great Devourer once before, upon Dessecran, where she had learned both to hate and respect its deadly singlemindedness. Though her Sisters of Battle rooted out the Tyranid breeder-organisms before they could do too much damage, it was a victory won at a high cost in lives. Grace still woke sweating every night with memories of endless scratching and xenos teeth glinting under the strobe-lumins of Dessecran's sewers. A lesser woman would have resigned her position or even succumbed to madness long ago, but Canoness Grace instead tempered her inner steel with the knowledge that the Tyranid hordes could be beaten.

After receiving news that the Tyranid fleet would descend upon Lysios in the space of less than a week, the Adepta Sororitas wasted no time in adopting new tactics. The vast resources of the Adeptus Ministorum were brought to bear, and those parts of Lysios not currently underwater were fortified, impromptu defences raised en masse before the invasion struck home. Salt-stained quadrants were dotted with drop-bastions, algae-covered architecture was reinforced with veritas bars, and deserted streets were ringed with layer after layer of Aegis Defence Lines. If the planet's nomadic populace kept themselves to a predetermined exclusion zone, the Sisters of Battle believed Lysios had every chance of riding out the coming invasion.

MAGDA GRACE OF THE SACRED ROSE

Canoness Magda Grace has fought against the uncaring tides of the universe for eighty-three long years. From childhood she has held fast to the belief that the righteous have an inner strength, a core of iron within them that stands untarnished by the twisting tides of fate. She wears her conviction like a forcefield, an invisible barrier that keeps out despair and heretical thought. When Grace speaks, there is something in her tone that makes people listen; an absolute surety that draws lost souls into her wake like sheep to the shepherdess. Those near her find themselves unconsciously holding the same beliefs as Magda herself – that the Emperor protects, and whatever terrors the universe visits upon them, the faithful will die content.

Upon the night world of Dessecran, Canoness Grace battled ceaselessly to contain the vanguard swarms that had infested the planet. She rallied the planetary defence force time and time again as they engaged in a series of desperate battles beneath the planet's capital city, hunting down the Genestealers infesting the sewers even as the beasts hunted them in turn. Only the presence of Grace's Battle Sisters prevented Dessecran's entire military structure from collapsing into panic and disorder. When Magda eventually emerged triumphant from the undercity, she bore a livid gash across her eye and down her cheek – a parting gift from the six-eyed Tyranid Lictor that had hunted her night and day until she finally put a mass-reactive bolt into its bulbous head.





THE GREAT CORRAL



The skies above Lysios turned a livid purple as the planet's doom drew close. Static-laced vox chatter counted down the hours, but the world's inhabitants still stood divided. The pagan nomads of Lysios, despite having received everything from hand-delivered scrolls to hovering cantor-skulls demanding their compliance, had not agreed to abide by the Imperial exclusion zones. In fact they had not changed the course of their world caravans by a single degree.

Though the nomads believed themselves safe in their limpet-encrusted crawler hulks, Magda Grace had tried to tell them they were fleeing one enemy merely to deliver themselves into the hands of another. If even a single brood of Genestealers cut their way inside one of the colossal engines, every one of its passengers was likely dead. The Lysite nomads would have to disembark and defend their homes with every weapon at their disposal, taking the field against the Tyranids, or else perish, cut to ribbons in the dark.

Redeploying some thirty miles ahead of the grinding caterpillar tracks of the Lysites, the Order of the Sacred Rose drove their convent-fortresses and grand transports through the slime-slicked ruins of Aguapolita Prime. There they took up position as a miles-wide roadblock, forcing the nomad caravans to come to a halt in a spray of brackish fluids.

The most senior Battle Sisters debarked from their transports to parley with the outraged caravan elders. After their recent persecution of the world's religious leaders, however, the Sororitas did not get far. Negotiations broke down and the matter had almost come to gunpoint when several of the delegates found the slime that slicked the streets slowly sucking at their feet. Seaweed grasped at those who strayed close to the ruins all around, its once-green fronds turned sickly white. Strange crustaceans scuttled from the shadows to snip and claw with surprising strength, each bearing the same livid purple carapace as the bio-ships high above.

The Sisters made the sign of the aquila as the Lysite elders muttered prayers for Cryptus to ward off evil and conferred amongst themselves. Many posited the idea that the bio-ships glistening in the firmament had somehow bestowed an evil sentence upon the native creatures of the planet. It looked as if the flora and fauna of the planet was changing, perverted into deadly and aggressive hybrids that owed as much to the xenos as they did to the natural world. Even the skies were darkening to an unearthly twilight.

Though she could not understand their patois, Canoness Grace saw the suspicion in the nomad elders' posture, and changed tack. The Cryptites and the Imperials had a mutual foe, and they needed to work together to defeat it.

Her smouldering conviction turned the logic underlying her speech into an inspiring battleplan. One by one, the nomad elders agreed to acknowledge the new leader in their midst.

Within the hour the crawler hulks had ground their way through the city until they formed a vast corral of ready-made fortresses. Every roof and battlement was manned by Lysite nomads. Around this wall of monolithic vehicles were stationed the tanks and transports of the Adepta Sororitas, a circle of heraldic black, white and red around the stained gunmetal ring made by the nomad vehicles.

Here they would make their stand. The Tyranid drop-spores could rain down from the skies like a fleshy hail, but so long as the double wall of armoured vehicles remained strong and the area within its concentric circles was clear of xenos lifeforms, the defenders could ensure they fought upon a united front.

As the black specks that blighted the bruised skies began to resolve into spore pods that descended in astonishing number, it became frighteningly clear that Grace's plan would be tested to the limit.



BROOD-RAIN

A storm of tentacle-fringed spores hurtled out of the bruised skies, disgorged by the Tyranid hive ships bellying low above the planet. Canoness Grace fired off the interception signal, and all across the cityscape quad-barrelled Icarus guns swivelled upwards and sent a thunderstorm of their own into the skies.

Flak took perhaps one in every dozen of the vile things, then, as the number of spores hurled their way increased, one in every score. Wherever the interceptor fire struck home Tyrannocytes would spew gouts of orange-white matter and hissing ichor, further filling the air with filth. Some were bullseyed by so many high-velocity shells that they burst apart altogether. Flailing weapon-beasts spilled out of each ruptured egg-sac to plummet downwards, and drizzling showers of biological waste pattered onto Sororitas vehicle and crawler hulk alike.

For every spore that was torn apart in mid-air, a clutch hammered down unharmed. The majority struck the earth with thudding force before distending to spray their mucous-covered passengers in all directions. Some burst on impact to reveal crouching monstrosities that roared in alien fury as they stood up to their full height. Others closed back up after their swarm-beasts spilled from their grisly petals, their tendrils caressing the ground as if feeling for a weakness.

Still more spores made planetfall with such force they sank their undersides halfway into the earth. Armoured slabs of chitin folded out from their sides to dig down in the manner of parasites burying claws into unprotected flesh. These strange burrower-spores spat flaccid sacs into the air, large tentacled membranes that filled up like gas balloons and drifted away on unguessable errands.

Only when a squad of Seraphim soared in close, jump packs spitting blue flame, did the floater-spores' purpose become clear. The bloated sacs exploded with such force the nearest Sisters were physically torn apart. Their comrades were hurled backwards, cries of dismay and pain stark amongst the mechanical chatter of anti-aircraft fire. In the wake of each explosion smaller Spore Mines dispersed, tasting the air for more prey with their own twitching feelers.

On the ground below the scattering Seraphim, the swarming weapon-beasts that had been disgorged from the main body of spores began to mass together. Seen from on high, the broods behaved like beads of quicksilver on an incline, flowing together to form a puddle, then a pool, then a tide. The wave of xenos bioforms spilt across the salt-stained cityscape, a composite horror of purple chitin hungry for the kill.

Magda Grace gave the command to fire at will. All around the gigantic corral's perimeter, the Adepta Sororitas that had taken position in the upper levels of the ruins levelled their bolters and opened fire. Mass-reactive shells stitched strings of explosions across the nearest weapon-beasts, sending them tumbling into the algae-slicked debris. Their broodmates leapt over the fallen without slowing, driven onwards by the sinister leader organisms stalking in their wake. Scythe-limbed horrors darted through arch and courtyard with supernatural speed, the fallen masonry of Lysios hindering them no more than the grass of a planetary governor's lawn.

Battle psalms rang out, and teams of white-armoured Retributors stepped out from the shadows in the upper stories of each ruin, each framed by an arch that once housed the icon of an Imperial saint. The Sisters frowned in disgust at the xenos skittering below as their heavy bolters coughed out a litany of death, the din echoing off the ruins nearby. Dominions and Celestians added their firepower to the salvo. Each of the Tyranid broods that scurried into the open was torn to pieces, shredded by more bolter fire than an entire company of Space Marines could hope to muster. Whenever a Battle Sister needed to reload she would pivot and back off, her place taken by a fresh warrior hungry to take her own toll on the swarm. The cull had begun.



THE SHIELDMAIDENS OF LYSIOS

The Adepta Sororitas were initially stationed upon Lysios to hunt down and exterminate the pagan giant-worshippers of the crawler hulks. When the Tyranids invaded, however, they quickly turned from persecutors to saviours. Under the leadership of Canoness Grace, they gave their lives freely to ensure the citizens of the algae-slicked planet had a chance to escape.



CANONESS GRACE

Magda Grace of the Sacred Rose is a firm advocate of the sacred trinity of bolter, flamer and melta weaponry. During the war for Lysios she wielded either a bolter or a bolt pistol at all times, refusing the lure of more elaborate weapons point blank. She maintains that mass-reactive shells spread the authority of the Emperor in a far more concise and compelling fashion than even the sermons of St. Lucius. High praise indeed, for the saint is her role model, and the author of the hymnal she keeps with her for guidance.

BATTLE SISTER OF OUR MARTYRED LADY

So deeply did the Battle Sisters mourn their founder Katherine's death that they renamed themselves the Order of Our Martyred Lady, and for many centuries thereafter they wore only black. The red cloth of their livery was adopted in remembrance of the Sisterhood's martyrs. Even amongst the devout warriors of the Sororitas, this order has a reputation for incredible determination, inspired by the need to avenge their fallen. This was proven anew when the order defended a Lysite crawler against a living tide of Tyranids without taking a single backward step.



BATTLE SISTER OF THE SACRED ROSE

Many of this order's Battle Sisters pray to their founder's spirit for liberation from doubt and rash action, for Sister Arabella was known as a particularly disciplined, even-tempered Sister. However, behind her serenity lay the determination of a resolute warrior, and her symbol was thus a white rose, held aloft in a mailed gauntlet. The white armoured Sisters of the Sacred Rose embody these same virtues, and faced down the Tyranid invaders of Lysios with stoicism, laying down a hurricane of firepower where lesser warriors would have panicked and faltered.





Canoness Grace reiterated her standing orders: they were not to let a single attack organism approach within a hundred paces of the outer ring. Sharp-eyed Sisters levelled kill-shots at gaunts and Tyranid Warriors alike until the corral was ringed by a half-mile-wide belt of smoking xenos corpses. Squads of Seraphim soared out from the ruins whenever a flock of winged Tyranids came in close, squeezing off round after round from their bolt pistols to send shattered bodies flailing out of the skies.

Here and there a leader-beast stormed forward, and though the bolter shells sent winging towards it cratered its armoured bulk they would not slow it. Wherever one of the things got too close, a team of melita-toting Dominions would debark from their Rhinos and vaporise the monstrosities in mid-stride. Even the Tyrannocytes that were dropping from the skies into the cordon's interior were neutralised before they could land, reduced to diaphanous strings of gruel by the missiles arcing from Grace's Exorcist tanks. The cityscape strobed with the light of overwhelming firepower as the Sororitas established a zone of death through which no living thing could pass.

Hammering fire upwards from the anti-air batteries of their crawler hulks, the nomad gunners swiftly began to reassess their position as foes of the Imperium. The rain of spores showed no sign of stopping, but with allies as fearless as the Adepta Sororitas fighting at their side, victory could surely be won. Whether it was in the name of Cryptus or the Emperor seemed a distant concern indeed.

The twin suns ground across the spore-churned skies, peering at the carnage unfolding below. To the Adepta Sororitas each passing minute seemed like an hour. The number of broken Tyranid bodies ringing the corral had reached insane proportions; by Magda Grace's calculations they already numbered in the tens of thousands. Spent shell cases covered the ground, a clinking carpet of brass and silver that hid the writhing slime underfoot from sight. Armoured vehicles, crawler hulks and Lysite ruins alike were spattered with the stringy excreta of dead Tyrannocytes. Wheezing hunks of xenos matter were dotted here and there, slowly bubbling into dissolution. Heedless of their successes, the Adepta Sororitas held position, their voices raised in blissful prayer to their God-Emperor.

Still the rain of spores from high above hammered down, wave after wave of weapon-beasts pouring through the ruins. Against such an implacable defence as that made by the Sisters of Battle, heretics, traitors, even Orks would have broken and fled long ago.

But the Tyranid attack came on.

Canoness Grace spat a goblet of bloody saliva into the sea of spent shell cases tinkling around her ankles. She had lost a few teeth to the ugly spore that had killed so many of the Seraphim, but it would take more than that to kill her. Unfortunately quantity was something the Tyranids had in great measure. Even behind the walls of the shattered manufactorums she could hear the hateful hiss of the xenos voidspawn scurrying closer.

Striding back to the front line, Grace felt bile rise in her throat. She infinitely preferred killing xenos to her previous duties executing civilians, but there was no breaking this foe. Even her tested tactic of concentrating fire upon the larger organisms bought but momentary respite. So far none had dared give voice to the thought lurking at the back of every mind – they would run out of ammunition before the bio-ships ran out of beasts.

One of her Celestians fell back to reload, and she stepped in to replace her, loosing a triple burst from a fresh clip. Each of her bolts slammed into a Tyranid body, detonating in a spray of vile fluids. 'A pox on the so-called Cryptan Armada!' shouted the Canoness as she fired another two bursts. 'If they had done their job right, this would have long been over!'

Sister Elspeth, a brute of a woman even outside her power armour, merely grunted. Sweat stood out on her broad brow as she emptied her heavy bolter at an alien form that had made it through the cordon of fire. She knocked out the spent clip with her knee and reached to the small of her back for another. Her hand came back empty, and her growl rose into a bellowed curse.

The clack of empty bolters came from the upper stories of the ruins above, confirmed by more oaths and shouts of anger. Grace's pulse thundered hot as she felt her order's rain of firepower stutter out around her.

On the xenos horrors came, the nearest creatures caught by streams of enfilading fire from the transports at the edge of the corral. From the left, thermal beams lanced out towards a trio of towering warrior-forms. They cut one in half at the waist and vaporised the torso of another. Grace added her own fire to the carnage, cutting down the last of the brood and sending its minion-creatures scattering away. Her smile of triumph was lit briefly by muzzle flare before her bolt pistol too ran empty.

'Here they come, Sisters,' she called, her voice tense. She scanned the shadows for a moment, looking for her nemesis-beast, but saw nothing. 'Stand ready!' she continued, forcing herself to focus. 'Be strong, and the Emperor will lend us his might!'

Her Sisters shouted their assent as the scuttlers surged forwards in a great hissing mass. They were almost close enough to smell. Suddenly great sheets of flame roared out from the lower story of the ruin to the right, filling the air with promethium reek and bowling the leading mass backwards with the sheer force of the conflagration. A dozen survivors plunged through the flames. Three of them were put down by a last smattering of bolter fire as the rest leapt between the tanks ringing the ruins, each Tyranid transformed into a comet of trailing flame.

Grace sprang down from her firing position with a clear, high cry of battlelust. Her Celestians followed close behind, voices raised in a prayer for the Emperor's favour. They met the oncoming Tyranids at pace, ceramite splintering chitin with the force of

their charge. Grace barked a harsh cry of triumph as the edge of her shoulder armour punched into an unprotected neck.

The sermons that the Canoness had delivered before the battle had been simple – cut off the head, and the body will die. Now it was time to practice what she had preached. She smashed her elbow hard into the mouth of a nearby leader-beast, feeling needle teeth crunch against her armour. A prayer for strength spill from her lips, and when she slammed her pistol sidelong into the thing's crested head it came apart in a spray of ichor.

Nearby, her squadmates were laying into those xenos creatures that still remained inside the cordon. She caught sight of Sister Elspeth wrenching a beast the size of a small horse away from Sister Felicitas before hurling it into the rubble and leaping forward to stamp on its neck until its writhing ceased. Grace muttered thanks to the Emperor before turning back just in time to dodge a stabbing talon. She lashed out with a gauntleted fist, punching another biting mouth away from her with a snarl.

Suddenly a fat-bodied monster rose up on stilt-like legs and flopped its grotesque bulk between two Rhinos. Their storm bolters blasted chunks from its chimney-ridged carapace, but did not slow it in the least. The sheer weight of the thing pushed the personnel carriers aside, buckling their armour as it bullied a path through the cordon. Grace primed a Krak grenade and flung it at the creature's head, but the blast had little effect.

As she searched for a way to kill the xenos terror, the undulating sac dangling underneath it split wide of its own accord. A constellation of malevolent red eyes glimmered from the humid darkness within. The creature screeched, heaved, and sent a shower of barbed spines from its carapace, knocking two recoiling Sisters from their feet. At the same time the awful orifice under its torso yawned wide. Strings of mucous flew out as it disgorged a pair of scuttling horrors in an obscene mockery of birth.

Grace stumbled back in shock, her bolt pistol dead in her hand. She cast around for allies, for a way out, for something to stop the organic monstrosity forcing its way towards her. A single bolt shell, miraculously unspent, lay upon a nearby pile of casings. Manually sliding her pistol's breach open, Grace grabbed the shell and scabbled it into her bolt pistol as the vile xenos heaved out another clutch of scuttlers. The broodbeast waddled forward on pincer legs, roaring as it drew closer. Grinning gaunts closed in around her, their symbiote-weapons buzzing.

Crying out, Grace sent the blessed bolt into the creature's yawning mouth. A heartbeat later the Tyranid's blunt head burst apart with a wet thump, and its hideous mass slumped to the floor. The brood-beast's agony was echoed a dozen times over as its death throes wracked the minds of its young. As one the lesser xenos spasmed, shook, and slumped lifeless to the ground.

'Emperor be praised!' came a cry from a ruined arch high above. 'That was... that was the last of them! We... I think we did it!'

Canoness Grace raised her eyes to the heavens, a rapture of relief flowing through her.

The rain of spores had stopped.







ASPHODEX

Asphodex is a grey, desolate world permanently wreathed in thick clouds of pollutant. From space the planet is shrouded, hidden by centuries of the foul-smelling smoke coughed out by the factories that stud its surface. On the rare occasions the cloud banks part, the Eyes of Cryptus stare down through the gap, bathing the landscape in a hellish red glow.

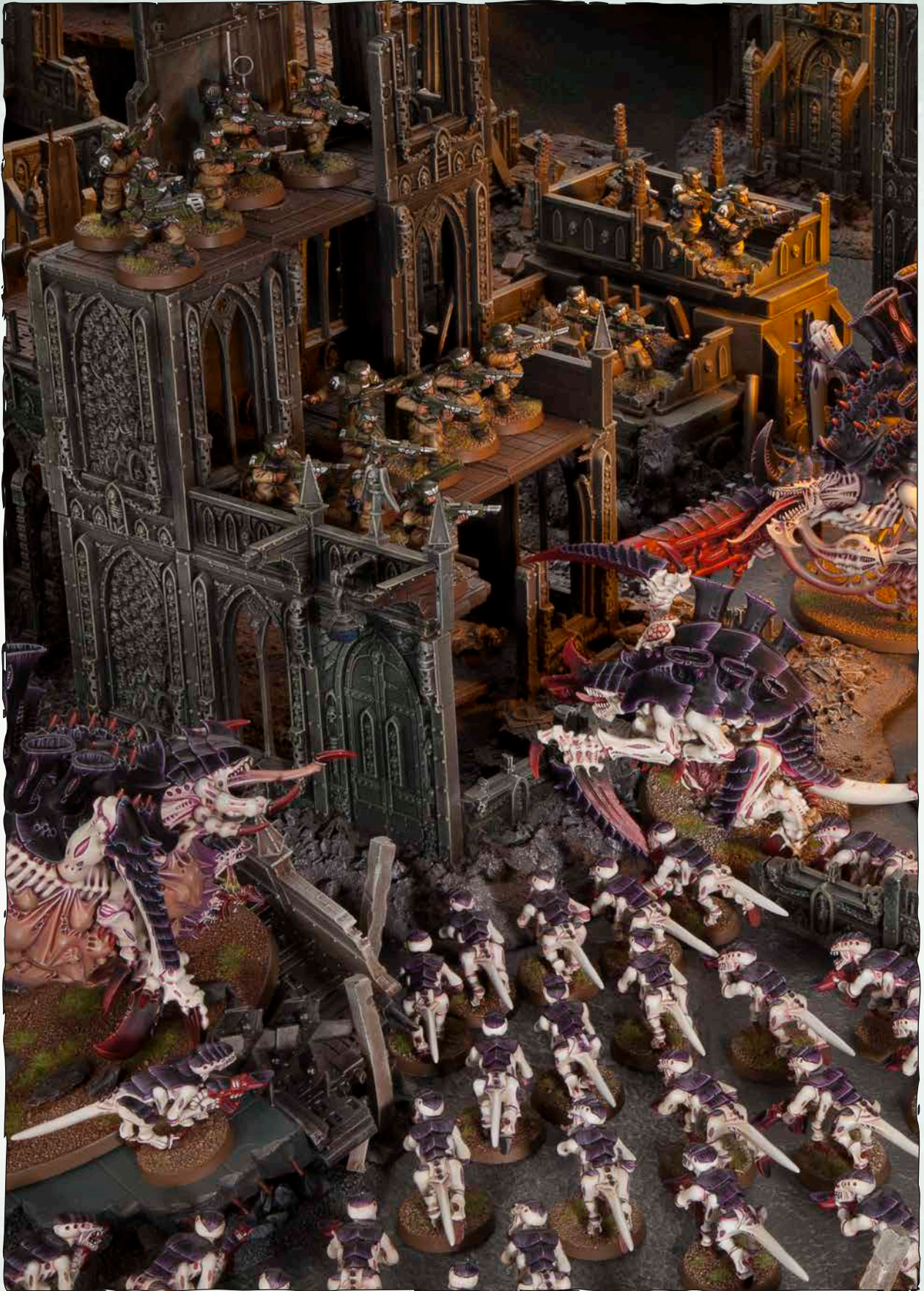
Because the system's twin suns rarely light its streets, Asphodex has become a haven for criminal activities of all kinds. The network of kingpins and murderer queens that infest it believe that Cryptus does not care to look upon Asphodex, and that they are therefore exempt from his judgement. The planet has accrued such unimaginable wealth under the purview of its many crime

lords that the megametropolis of Phodia now covers two thirds of its surface, a sprawl of corruption-funded cloudscrapers and urban gang districts that is so extensive that Asphodex's Arbiters find it impossible to enforce their jurisdiction.

The Planetary Governor, Augustus Flax, is seen as little more than a figurehead at best. In truth his influence has shaped the world, if not its population, for he has abused his position to become one of the richest men in the sector. It is said he has spent the latter half of his life building a subterranean complex of stunning grandeur underneath the city, and that should he need to, he would be able to ride out even Exterminatus by hiding within its walls.







SHADOWS OVER ASPHODEX

During his voyage from the Cadian Gate, Maelon Dhrost had memorised every dataslate and meta-dossier detailing his destination, the urbanised sprawl of Asphodex. By the time the general and his Cadian Shock Troops had made planetfall, he knew more about the world's current status than any man alive – certainly more than its Planetary Governor. Persistent vox-stabs had ascertained that Flax, the self-proclaimed King of Phodia, believed the incoming xenos to be little more than a nuisance.

If the dataslate reports told true, Flax made only a token effort at keeping order in his domain. He cared little about the inhumanities perpetrated by the crime lords. Every year the armed forces of the Flaxian Dynasty rounded up those of the criminal classes clumsy enough to get themselves caught and sent them to prison hulks in low orbit, but if anything this only helped the other members of the criminal fraternity thrive. Over the years the internecine struggles of the crime lords drowned entire districts of the city with unbound violence, turning even its wealthiest zones into crumbled warzones.

Yet it made little difference to Flax. Over the course of a long and paranoid life, the man had built a luxurious underground empire that was as much fortress as it was playground. Paid for by numerous 'contributions' from the cartels that supported him, its extensive tunnels and state rooms were hidden from the sight of men and gods alike. Its

heavy vault doors were protected by genecode scan-savants, the subterranean paradise inaccessible to anyone save the Flaxian Dynasty itself.

Having spent decades preparing for invasion, Flax considered his dynasty safe from the xenos bio-fleet fouling the stars above. He conceded the surface of Asphodex to the Astra Militarum without hesitation, with one condition: they were to stay above ground. To do otherwise would be to invite a war fought on two fronts instead of one.



GENERAL DHROST

Maelon Dhrost is a veteran of over one hundred and fifty gruelling years of war, every one of which has been spent fighting the scourge of Chaos that blights his native soil. There is no Astra Militarum honour that the man has not won in Cadia's defence – his regiment likes to boast that Dhrost's medals provide more protection than his standard issue flak. Despite the juvenat treatments that keep him looking little more advanced in years than the soldiery he commands, Dhrost is known behind his back as Grandsire Cadia. Still, he is well respected by all, and trusted even by Ursarkar Creed himself.

The general felt a great well of bitterness at the news he would have to leave his life's work – defending the Cadian Gate – in order to fight a completely unrelated war. He is a pragmatic soul, though, and given the sheer number of regiments under his command he realised that such a move would not have been made lightly. By meditating on the foulness of the alien, he has already transformed this vexation into a smouldering hatred of the Tyranid race. Determined more than ever to succeed, Dhrost intends to shatter the Cryptoid Tendril and rejoin the war effort in Cadia as quickly as possible.

General Dhrost had no time for the power games of aristocrats and kingpins. Even peacetime notions of law and order were foreign to the Cadian mindset. With the Tyranids on the brink of planetfall, the only distinction Dhrost intended to draw was between human and xenos. In his experience the citizens would fall into line soon enough once they had seen the death raining from the skies. Flax would follow soon enough. By the general's reckoning, the crime syndicates and gubernatorial armies of the planet would stand united before a single day was out. Like as not, they would be too frightened to do anything else.

Whilst the Adepta Sororitas mustered their Great Corral upon Lysios, Maelon Dhrost orchestrated a masterful defence network across the continent-city of Phodia. Dhrost's Cadians were well used to keeping the horrors of the galaxy at bay after many years fighting in the Cadian Gate, and they were arguably better versed in the art of urban warfare than any other force in the Astra Militarum. They intended to use the densely-packed cityscapes of Phodia to maximum effect.

The general had read that the Tyranids were wont to come on in a great tide, and that the claustrophobic confines of the megametropolis would make traditional warfare all but impossible. Even with millions of well-trained soldiers at his behest, the Cadians could not hope to match the Tyranids body for body. In General Dhrost's opinion, however, they did not need to.

Though several of his Commissars murmured that the very idea was heretical, Dhrost intended to cede the main streets and thoroughfares altogether. His men would instead form a thousand bottlenecks within the buildings and alleyways that covered the planet. If they could not slaughter the foe at range, Dhrost's urban elite would deny the Tyranids their strength in numbers, engaging them in narrow naves, up stairwells, and within dark corridors instead of upon the open field. The ruins of Phodia were the rocks upon which the Tyranid tide would break. If General Dhrost's plan worked, each new wave of invasion would lose cohesion, dissipate and recede until it was nothing more than a stain.

The sight of endless regiments of Imperial Guard deploying together soon put paid to the disorder that simmered amongst the populace. Each platoon functioned like a cog in a machine, hurling sandbags and field-linking Aegis lines with methodical efficiency. Once the streets had been strewn with defences they took up positions in the upper floors of every stable manufactorum and hab-block. In the process they cleared each zone of its populace, shepherding the citizens into fortified spaceports so they could be conveyed to the relative safety of the planet's coreward side.

Asphodex's syndicate kings objected mightily to their territory suddenly being occupied by millions of the Astra Militarum's finest, though none were brave or foolish enough to make more than a token protestation. Given the rumours of the enemy they would soon be facing, the crime lords were content enough to look to their own defence. It was a testament to the fear engendered by the whispers of Tyranid invasion that not one citizen turned his blade upon another in the period before the war began. Every man would have his part to play in the coming days.

THE SHIELD TESTED

By the time the first wave of Tyranid spores began to rain down, Phodia had been transformed into a continent-sized fortress reminiscent of Cadia itself. Unlike on the neighbouring planet of Lysios, where the storm of Tyranid spore-forms was answered with an indiscriminate counter-barrage, the Cadians targeted only the winged beasts that descended from the cloud-wracked skies.

Any creature that could potentially reach the upper stories of the buildings was lit by floodlights, each column of white light a death sentence. Those so demarked were blasted apart by Hydra Flak Tanks, vertically canted lascannons or krak missiles from the weapon teams on the roofs below. A grisly downpour of Gargoyle corpses and dismembered Shrikes spattered down across the urban zones, their numbers thinned to such an extent that barely a few hundred of their number made it to the relative safety of the streets. Even those were quickly put down by volleys of lasgun fire, priority kills for the riflemen hidden in the city's buildings. Phase one of Dhrost's plan was complete.

With the Cadian firing doctrine focused upon the winged beasts of the invading swarm, uncounted thousands of fat spores struck the slabcrete of Phodia's streets completely intact. Some of the slime-slick ovoids bored down into the hard grey surface of the roads only to hurl spore mines into the air, others disgorged their inhabitants downwards in a drizzle of amniotic fluids. Soon the dusty streets were spattered with nameless ichor.

In the space of a single hour, a full third of the Phodian megametropolis was crawling with Tyranids. The grey-skinned roads and plazas were all but obscured by the seething tides of purple chitin as the bio-ships high above vomited endless streams of xenos onto the planet's surface. It was a terrifying display of the invading fleet's potency, a full-scale invasion waged at such speed that even the mightiest Ork Waaagh! would have struggled to compete.

THE HIDDEN THREAT

The stationing of a large contingent of artillerymen within the Castellan Belt was not the only gamble General Dhrost had taken in the planet's defence. Upon reaching the system, the Cadian commander had secretly ordered the prison hulks that had languished in Asphodex's orbit to be sent at top speed towards Perdita. The criminals held in the endless cell blocks of those hulks would amount to a considerable amount of biomass. With a little luck the hive fleet would split off one of its tendrils to feast upon them, and the system's defenders would have a few million less Tyranids to contend with.

The hive fleet had taken the bait, and upon passing through the Aegis Diamando it had sent a portion of its bulk curling around the Castellan Belt towards the barren world of Perdita. The Cadians were only too happy to see the Hidden Threat, as it had been codified, divert away from the main war. Only Dhrost and a handful of others knew the truth of it; that he had sacrificed hundreds of thousands of guilty people in order to better the chances of the innocent.





DHROST'S URBAN ELITE

Over half of the regiments under Dhrost's command were experienced in urban warfare. Amongst their number were several thousand men considered to be true specialists. In the days before the invasion of Asphodex, Dhrost collected these men into the Cadian Urban Elite, a bedrock of resistance upon which the rest of his war effort could build.

A DHROST'S COMMAND

Every one of Dhrost's personal unit has seen over a half-century of war. Down the years the general's aide Olleran has saved his commanding officer from daggers, Daemon blades and demolition charges alike. Despite Olleran's best efforts, the unit's medic, Nedryn Nomar, has had to bring the old man back from the brink of death more than once. Much to the annoyance of Colour Sergeant Beggs and even the unshakeable Vox-Officer Gorda, Dhrost keeps the arrogant flamer specialist Thrysk at his side at all times, for he has long believed there is no better way to scour a city than with purifying flame.

B TECHMAGOS ACOBLESTIS

The Tech-Priest Engineeers that accompany the Urban Elite to war are fierce rivals, but whilst their mutual antipathy spurs them to excel, Dhrost forgives their eccentricities. The eldest of the two, Acoblestis, has an uncanny ability to calm even the most outraged machine spirit. He has been known to coax a burning Leman Russ back into the fight with words alone.

C VAXAHORIAC, ENGINEER WEAPONS GRADE

Vaxahoriac's genius lies in cybernetic weaponry. His combat-synched servitors boast so many subroutines they act in an oddly human fashion. At times, they even seem to share their master's arrogance and disdain for unaugmented beings, a trait that the common Cadian soldiery detest. Only the tremendous rate of fire they can sustain keeps Vaxahoriac his place in the front line.

D 132ND VETERAN ENGINEERS, 'WRECKER DETAIL'

The combat engineers of Dhrost's company are exceptional sappers. With the use of only a few well-placed melta bombs they are able to demolish an enemy fortification in a matter of minutes. Though Wrecker Detail prefer to confine their destructive talents to demolishing buildings, they are inventive and deadly fighters at close quarters. Woe betide the foe who strays too close whilst they still have demo-charges at their disposal.



E **THE CADIAN 184TH, 'KASR WARDENS'**
 The Kasr Wardens were hand picked for their skills at close quarters urban warfare. Even a single platoon can hold a hab-block or manufactorum for weeks at a time, its soldiers nestled inconspicuously in archways and gunscreyer nests. Spread out across a war zone, the Kasr Wardens have turned back whole insurrections by themselves, their every minute spent wisely to confuse, delay, divide and kill.

F **THE CADIAN 185TH, 'METROPOL GUARD'**
 Due to their regiment having been honoured with the Exemplar Profundis, the Metropoli Guard have a very formal approach to war. Their interlocking firing discipline is without fault, and they make for deadly foes whenever the enemy comes within lasgun range. The men of the Metropoli Guard are adept at deploying from Valkyrie Assault Carriers onto the roofs of buildings, the better to take a heavy toll on lesser marksmen in the streets below.

G **CADIAN 186TH ARMoured, 'DHROST'S PORTCULLIS'**
 Though Dhrost prefers to defend with massed infantry in built-up areas, he is not fool enough to neglect the aid of armoured support. The 186th is mainly comprised of the ever-reliable Leman Russ and its variants, though they have a great number of Bane Wolves and Devil Dogs in their ranks too. This makes Dhrost's Portcullis a deadly barrier at close quarters as well as at range.

H **SUPPORT DIVISION, 'SPEAR OF KASR HONNEN'**
 The ranks of the 186th Armoured include a support division of artillery and anti-aircraft tanks. This division was seconded to the Urban Elite principally for the Wyvern Suppression Tanks

in its number. In the past Dhrost has seen entire floors cleared of Chaos worshippers by a single Wyvern volley, and fully intends to use that capability upon Asphodex.

I **ABHUMAN AUXILIA, 'THE MEATCORPS'**
 Despite typically being deployed in areas with little to no cover, the Meatcorps excel at controlling the flow of urban warfare. By standing shoulder to shoulder they can seal off streets and even plazas, simply braining anything that tries to force its way through their cordon with blows from their power maces and brute shields.

J **HELLHOUND DIVISION, 'MAELON'S TORCH'**
 The tankers of Maelon's Torch are frequently lambasted for being Grandsire Cadia's favourites. It is an undeniable fact that whenever Dhrost is in command, his Hellhound squadrons inevitably enjoy pride of place in the battle line. These flame tanks are given every chance to incinerate as many of the enemy as possible with their reeking inferno cannons and heavy flamers. They claim a high tally of kills each time, but that does not stop them from being seen as over-privileged glory hogs by their tanker comrades.

K **ABHUMAN AUXILIA, 'THE QUICKFINGERS'**
 Since having his engraved hip flask stolen in 996.M41, Dhrost has harboured a grudge against all Ratlingkind. Luckily for the regiments he commands, he is professional enough to put his personal feelings aside – after all, there are no better snipers in the Astra Militarum than these eagle-eyed abhumans. When war breaks out in a city's confines, having the rooftops covered by these small but stealthy assassins is a boon indeed.

CHAMPIONS OF ASPHODEX

Amongst the defenders of Asphodex there were several warriors who proved integral to the war effort. The overall commander of the Cadian war effort, General Dhrost, proved to be as capable a bladesman as he was a strategist. Were it not for his trusted lieutenants, however, the defences of Asphodex would have fallen on the first day of invasion.

GENERAL MAELON DHROST

Dhrost is something of a hero to his men, though in truth he has served the Astra Militarum for so long that he has little compassion left for the common soldiery. Men come and go, but war is eternal. Being a stalwart foe of the Ruinous Powers, Dhrost knows full well that victory against the horrors of the universe will always come at a high price; amongst all of those who wore the binary star icon of the Cryptus campaign, Dhrost alone realised the cost the system's defenders would have to pay.



VAXAHORIAC, ENGINEER WEAPONS GRADE

The Cadians like to say men like Vaxahoriac have more in common with the clanking, oil-guzzling machines of the Astra Militarum than they do with good, honest soldiers. The Tech-Priests are nevertheless potent allies; Vaxahoriac himself held a main street against a seething swarm through sheer, unremitting firepower. Engineers bearing the sacred skull-and-cog emblem of the Ommissiah were present all across the metropolis, though only a few adopted the Cryptus campaign badge, and even then it was extensively modified.



GERROCK THE BRICK

Of all the Bullgryns that defended Asphodex's streets, Gerrock of the 112th Goliaths was undoubtedly the most tenacious. His entire unit was cut down around him when the substrata grilles of Spinster Alley were slid aside and a dozen Genestealers slithered out to assault the Bullgryns at close quarters. Enraged, Gerrock battered so many of the creatures that the rest fled his onslaught. Gerrock then held Spinster Alley for the next five hours, abandoning his position only for a moment to relieve himself against the alley wall after slaying a Carnifex with a lucky blow.



THE ASPHODEX GROUNDSWARM

The sheer number of beasts hurled downwards from Asphodex's orbit exceeded even the most pessimistic estimates. This was a world that Hive Fleet Leviathan meant to devour, and fast. In response the Cadians voluntarily ceded ground in order to take the measure of the monsters spilling through the streets, giving each new breed of terror an epithet – the better to identify and put down specific foes.

A TYRANT COMMANDER
The towering nightmares that waded through the tides of their smaller minions were nicknamed Tyrant Commanders. Wherever one of the fell things appeared, the Tyranids nearby fought with far more cunning and determination. Once this fact had been established to his satisfaction, Dhrost gave the order for his heaviest weapons to engage the creatures wherever they could be found.

B THE GUNBEASTS
The initial invasion saw several wasteland districts claimed beyond contest by the Tyranids, areas of little strategic value that the xenos beasts seeded with pools of viscous ichor. These sites were guarded by large quadrupedal creatures that prowled the streets at a slow but menacing pace. Anything that got close, be it infantryman or tank, was electrocuted or impaled by the spear-like projectiles flung from their bio-cannons.

C THE DRILLERS
The term Drillers sprung up after a brood of Tyranid Warriors fired their bio-weapons into a unit running for cover across a flat roof. The Cadian corpses were recovered later, bored right through so many times it looked as if they had been attacked by a mob of berserk construction servitors.

D THE WHITE WHIP
The leader bioforms directing the largest warrior-organism broods were at first thought to be a single creature: a grinning fiend with a bony blade as one upper limb and a writhing white whip as the other. By the end of the first day, however, the Cadians had come to realise that there were dozens of the things abroad in the city. They fought with such uncanny intelligence that the Cadians soon treated them with as much trepidation as Xenos Command itself.



E THE DRAKE'S EGGS

With psykers across the system referring to the Tyranid hive fleet as the Dragon, it was not long before the hard-shelled organisms bearing the swarms to the surface became known as Drake's Eggs. Viewed from the top of Phodia's cloudscrapers they appeared more akin to the birth-seeds of some great celestial insect, dotted liberally across the city in daunting quantities.

F THE SCYTHERS

In Cadian legend the Scyther is a figure synonymous with premature death; a gaunt and purple-robed figure that cuts short men's lifespans with a bone-handled scythe. Though Dhrost forbade the term's use, the name 'scyther' was attached to the leaping, blade-limbed beasts that bounded through the rubble of the violated city in their millions.

G THE SCUTTLERS

When engaged in open streets and superhighways, the creatures dubbed Scuttlers were little threat. No bigger than a horse and with little in the way of chitin to protect them, they were put down by lasgun, mortar and flamer with comparative ease. It was only when the beasts made it into the dense landscape of ruins that the true lethality of their fleshborer bio-weapons became clear.

H THE EATERS

Though small, the bioforms known as Eaters attacked in a seething wave of wriggling bodies. To engage such a mass with lasguns alone was folly, for they boiled through the rubble like the overspill of some terrible volcano. Many of Phodia's defenders found they had little choice, each picking off one or two of the writhing little fiends before they were surrounded, borne down into the dirt, and messily devoured.

I THE BRUTES

The lumbering wrecker-beasts the Cadians called Brutes were aptly named. Wherever a platoon sealed the sanctum doors of an intact Basilica Administratum or manufactory block against the milling hordes outside, one of these monsters would inevitably appear in the streets outside. Using raw brute strength, these creatures could break down even magvault doors – or simply smash down the building around them to let the seething hordes inside.

J THE FLAMEBACKS

The Cadians were not the only ones to use scouring flame against their foes. Wherever the squat-bodied bioforms known as Flamebacks stalked, acrid plumes of chemical fire would squirt out into nearby buildings. These could set even metal aflame, each new blaze burning or choking citizens and soldiers alike.

K THE SPOREFLINGERS

Though the idea was met with incredulity at first, the Cadians soon realised that the invading Tyranids had their own version of artillery. From their dank hiding places in the poor districts, the creatures nicknamed Sporeflingers would fire strange sentient bombs from their dorsal cannons. Each volley of Spore Mines that did not culminate in a stone-juddering explosion left a handful of living munitions floating through the dusty air, tentacles waving as they sought new targets.

After having fought against the armies of Chaos, Dhrost was well used to the concept of unstoppable force, but the sheer speed of the hyper-aggressive Tyranid invasion had unsettled even him. His men were focusing their fire on the winged bio-forms as per his orders, but the reports flooding back over the vox told of towering xenos monsters that roamed the streets unchallenged, ripping away locked doors and barricades with alarming ease. Soon the seething tides would be inside the buildings the Cadians sought to protect, and the war effort would dissolve into countless pockets of resistance rather than a united front.

Worse still, in those areas of the megametropolis that were still relatively untouched by the gang warfare that blighted Phodia, Tyrannocytes had disgorged their passengers directly onto the roofs of buildings garrisoned by Cadian troops. Many a platoon was already fighting a battle not only to keep the giant Tyranids in the streets at bay, but also to repel those smaller bioforms that had wriggled their way down from the roofs through antiblaze vents and interior crawl spaces.

No matter the odds, each squad fought on without complaint, for it was not in the Cadian mindset to give up. Here a group of riflemen fired as many lasgun volleys as they could into the Hormagaunt broods bounding up rubble-strewn stairs, there a cluster of veterans dropped frag grenades into the midst of the broods massing in the streets below. Wherever a Tyranid burst through the

cordon of soldiers to reach the upper floors, sergeants and Commissars would meet it with power swords and plasma pistols, clearing the room once more or dying in the attempt. Where a building fell to the unstoppable numbers of the swarm, Wyvern Suppression Tanks would sow the corpse-strewn floors with clusters of explosives until each window gouted plumes of dust and blood.

Confident in the air superiority ensured in the opening hours of invasion, Valkyries would then belly in low to hover above each smoking ruin, their passengers rappelling down to reclaim the building and engage the swarms in the streets once more. The stale air in the city's streets soon filled with the stench of burning xenos bodies and the faint scent of human blood.

In Phodia's Barter Districts, the Cadians began the reclamation phase of Dhrost's plan. Bullgryns locked their slabshields and bodily forced waves of gaunts from the narrow streets, the abhumans' grenadier gauntlets thumping explosives into the packed weapon-beasts. Careening Chimera personnel carriers slewed to a halt front-to-rear, their expert drivers blocking off streets and funneling the teeming xenos hordes into plazas where their comrades lay in ambush. Making good use of the promethium relay pipes that wound through the city, the gunners of each Hellhound squadron combined their fire into a rolling conflagration that reduced the swarming Tyranids to ash.



Even the Cadian artillery had a part to play, despite being rendered almost blind by the profusion of buildings all around them. Sharp-eyed Ratlings relayed the coordinates of Tyranid leader-beasts to the artillery squadrons Dhrost had ordered bulk-lifted onto Phodia's battlements. Moments later, areas that had been thronged with Tyranids were filled with deafening explosions so fierce they shook dust from the vaulted ceilings beneath the streets. Those injured Tyranids that stormed roaring from the smoke were soon laid low by Ratling sniper fire. The diminutive abhumans smiled grimly in their eyries as their shots found eye sockets and open maws, each Ratling counting his kills in an attempt to outdo his fellows.

For every building or plaza reclaimed by Dhrost's big push, another fell to the sheer volume of weapon-beasts assailing it. The Tyranid attack was every bit as relentless as Dhrost had warned. Orders to fall back were bellowed over the damnable hissing of the xenos beasts pouring in through windows and clambering up ladder rungs. Floor after floor was ceded, the Cadians fighting a rolling battle on the vertical plane as well as the horizontal.

The Cadian infantry fought furiously to thin the hordes, sprinting up stairwells to the next level when the situation became untenable, and beginning the process all over again. Dhrost authorised the use of demo-charges to collapse the lower floors wherever necessary. Though this ended in calamity in several districts, in many others the buildings were left hollow but still standing, their top floors gun nests with excellent views of the carnage below.

Having concentrated their early efforts on the flying elements of the Tyranid invasion, the Cadians found safe haven with altitude. Whenever leaping scythe-beasts or nimble scuttlers got too close they were met by lasgun volleys and clouds of flame. The Tyranids fought with frenzied aggression, but they rarely got close enough to kill. Even the splattering bio-weapon fire of the larger xenos organisms was largely ineffective. The windows of the Phodian buildings were narrow and long, and the Cadians taking shelter behind them were well versed in cover doctrine.

As the suns set on the first day of battle, the fury of the Tyranid onslaught slowly abated. The sense of relief amongst the Cadian ranks became almost palpable. A great proportion of their number were now stranded in the upper stories of the buildings they had sought to defend, and most likely those citizens who had not fled for the safety of the bulk landers were already overrun. However, the fact remained that the vast majority of regiments deployed upon Asphodex were still at operational efficiency. The pervading belief amongst the men of Cadia was that this war could yet be won.







General Dhrost rubbed his eyes with the tips of his thin fingers, the tiredness of a month's hard fighting compressed into a single day. He felt every one of his one hundred and eighty years, even if the face reflected in the guildhall's sryer-screen bore barely a trace of wrinkles. The screen fizzed for a moment, crackled, and turned blank once more.

'Nearly had it there,' said Dhrost, turning to Enginseer Vaxahoriac. The Tech-Priest's mehadendrites writhed nervously as he socketed, unplugged, retroblessed, and socketed again. With the company Astropath incapacitated by the mind-curse, Dhrost had ordered his aides to coax the guildhall's tight-beam las-emitter into commission, but its stuttering machine spirit had been all but petrified into silence.

The circular screen crackled again, but remained alight. This time a face swam in front of Dhrost, that of a scar-faced woman, framed by a dark archway.

'Canoness,' said Dhrost, making the sign of the aquila. 'How goes the war?'

'A good third... with... Emperor's grace,' said the Canoness, her solemn words interrupted by static. 'But... corral holds. For now.'

'No mean feat. My congratulations,' said Dhrost. 'Your grand plan may bear fruit yet.'

'Provided you... us those bulk landers... the next wave makes its appearance. The Lysite Ministorum has already taken its leave... But what about...?' A fizz of interference stole her question, but the raise of a scarred eyebrow spoke it nonetheless.

'We've been forced to retreat into the upper stories, but we're still at fighting strength. My artillerymen in the Castellan Belt have stalled their reinforcements for long enough to give us a chance. The streets are being reclaimed, district by district.'

Magda Grace nodded, making the sign of the martyr and whispering a quick prayer of gratitude. To his right, Tech-Priest Vaxahoriac gave a binary blurt that the General recognised as a litany of thanks to the Ommissiah.

'Speed over haste, Maelon,' the Canoness said, her tone heavy but clear as Vaxahoriac eliminated the interference altogether. 'Cadia can wait.'

'Fear not, Magda; I'm committed to this and this alone,' replied Dhrost. 'Only in death does duty end.'

'Well spoken,' said Grace. A sad half-smile crept across her ravaged face. 'Share that attitude with the troops, and we can prevail yet.'

Something moved in the dark archway behind her, something gangling and lithe with multiple ruby-red eyes. It loomed into the light for a second, maw-tentacles rubbing together like the forelegs of a fly in an abattoir, before disappearing back into the darkness.

Maelon Dhrost shouted a warning just as the connection crackled and cut out.







IXOI

The vast planetoid that fills the night skies of Lysios was originally codified IX01 by Imperial astromancers, though over the millennia its name has been misread with such frequency that it is now simply known as Ixoi.

Though Ixoi's sheer size and rich isotopic resource should have seen the moon colonised a dozen times over, the thin white mists that wind their way across its surface can have a man coughing blood within a matter of days. Only a single mining expedition has shown tenacity and discipline enough to claim the planet's natural bounty, ferrying their goods down to Lysite spaceports via the cargo dirigibles of the Three Great Tethers.

The moon's mineral resource is of inestimable value to the Cryptus System. Without the isotopes mined there, Tartoros' void domes

would soon flicker and die, exposing its energy farms to the sickness and death of unfiltered radiation. The knock-on effect would soon see Lysios and Aeros robbed of the solar power that sustains them.

Because of the moon's value to the system's infrastructure, the Cadian high commander, Maelon Dhrost, assigned all of his Vostroyan assets to defend it. Where a Cadian infantryman would quickly fall victim to the strange gases that haunt Ixoi's surface, the mechanised Vostroyan Firstborn had a double layer of protection – the iron skins of their tanks, and the brass rebreathers issued to every Firstborn soldier upon recruitment. Should a Tyranid sub-tendrill snake out to strike Ixoi, it would find the tank regiments of the Vostroyan Astra Militarum waiting, their souls hardened and their cannons loaded for war.

THE HAMMERS OF IXOI

The 1635th Firstborn Mechanised, better known as the Vostroyan Hammers, were en route to reinforce the Satys system when the company Astropath informed them it was already lost. Tasked with requesting reassignment orders, the eyeless psyker said there was no way he could reach Segmentum Command without a full psychic choir. Their commander, Alaxei Dymetrin, was discussing unsanctioned redeployment with the captain of his Navy troop carrier when a potent teleprayer was received. The missive was from a Cadian commander stationed in the next system. It bore the electrosigil of none other than the legendary General Dhrost.

Though he was surprised to hear of the man they called Grandsire Cadia this far from the Eye of Terror, Dymetrin was also flattered by his contact with a genuine war hero. The Vostroyan commander immediately ordered his bulk landers to a new heading – the Cryptus system.

Within the month the Vostroyans had joined the military council of the Cadian officers stationed at Asphodex. Recognising that his armoured division had the best chance of waging a successful campaign in a toxic environment, Dymetrin took his posting upon the barren planetoid of Ixoi with good grace. He researched the moon's meagre conurbations with commendable diligence, and refitted the tracks of the *Tundra's Bite* to better suit the moon's surface.

It was several weeks before the Cryptoid Tendril unfurled from the galactic south. Dymetrin and his Enginseer aides watched the hive fleet spread across the stars, passing through the Aegis Diamando and brushing aside the system's proud armada. Even without magnoculars, the mottled smudge of its massed bio-ships was visible high above. Nightmares of constricting tentacles and stabbing claws became common, but none among the Firstborn would speak of them, for they were confident their tanks were equal to the task ahead.

Several distinct tendrils were slowly extending across the firmament, and one of these was headed towards Ixoi. Night by painstaking night, the Vostroyans watched the sub-tendril heading towards them grow in size and clarity until it all but eclipsed water-cursed Lysios far below.

The evening before the bio-ships launched their dread cargo, Dymetrin's own council of officers went over their battle plan for what seemed like the hundredth time. The isotope mines were ringed by Leman Russ squadrons, and the excavator habs around each Great Tether Terminus were patrolled by three entire tank companies. Dymetrin and his men were ready for whatever the hive fleet could throw at them.





TANK COMMANDER DYMETRIN

It is said amongst the 1635th Firstborn Mechanised that Alaxei Dymetrin has oil running through his veins instead of blood. Dymetrin has never really embraced the lifestyle of the officer, and is more comfortable in the steel belly of one of his beloved tanks than he is in the comfort of command headquarters. However, after the death of his own superior officer during the Eighteenth Great War of Vostroya, Dymetrin led his regiment's Leman Russ squadrons with such efficacy that he broke the Ork siege plaguing his world's capital. His field promotion was quickly made an official posting, and he has been regretting it ever since. Reasoning that rank has its privileges, he has since given his orders from the command cupola of Tundra's Bite, a Baneblade super-heavy tank whose interior is covered in etchings, friezes and kill markings.



A TOXIC FATE



When Hive Fleet Leviathan began to hurl its spores through the thin atmosphere of Ixoi, Tank Commander Dymetrin led his armoured regiments on as straight an intercept course as possible. His Leman Russ squadrons, pushed to full throttle in their eagerness to make their mark, fired their battle cannons at extreme range as they closed. Accuracy was not an issue, for the Tyranids were invading in such force that they could hardly miss.

Dymetrin had always been a firm adherent to the Imperial Tanker's Primer, and its instructions for fighting a xenos swarm were quite clear. The armoured phalanxes ignored the scuttling tides of lesser warrior-beasts that scratched and scabbled at each tank's armour, instead focusing their cannon fire upon those beasts large enough to pose a serious threat. The sheer weight of the tanks themselves took care of many a minor threat, for Dymetrin's regiments were always in motion, grinding the swarm-beasts under their tracks wherever the biological tide flowed thickest.

Caustic bio-weapon fire spattered and clanged from the armoured hide of Baneblade, Stormhammer and Leman Russ alike, but each machine spirit was roused for battle, and the hulking machines fought on. From his command chair within the *Tundra's Bite*, Dymetrin issued a cascading series of orders and firing solutions that would have made even Knight Commander Pask nod in approval. The barren moon's surface proved a perfect shooting gallery for Dymetrin's operation, and the kill count mounted with gratifying speed.

Wherever they appeared, lumbering Carnifexes were punched from their feet and sent skidding across the lunar landscape by serial volleys of battle cannon fire. Hive Tyrants were designated priority targets for the stalking Armoured Sentinel Squadrons that acted as outriders for each tank company. The lascannons of each Sentinel struck home to send first bodyguard-creatures, then the leader-beasts themselves, writhing into the dust.

The first few hours of the battle for Ixoi were little more than a large-scale slaughter. Dymetrin's phalanxes hunted the areas where the Tyranid attack was fiercest, either staying out of reach of the larger Tyranid creatures or concentrating fire upon them when they drew close. As the fighting intensified, isotope-rich dust and debris was thrown up in thin clouds, but wherever vision was low the Vostroyan gunners merely recalibrated their eyepieces and got back to the business of killing.

Still more Tyrannocytes rained down. This time they disgorged wriggling, serpent-bodied creatures that dug their way into Ixoi's surface even as the viscera of their

birth dried upon their skins. Amongst them were tentacle-armed monsters with faces full of clustered tendrils; some were the size of Sentinels, others larger even than the Leman Russ that trundled across the warscape towards them. Wherever these beasts appeared, visibility would drop sharply, a mustard-hued fug swathing them and the swarms around them.

Dymetrin rightly guessed that this was a deliberate tactic evolved to give the Tyranids shelter on a planet that had next to none, but he had little conception that the strange gases had a far more deadly purpose.

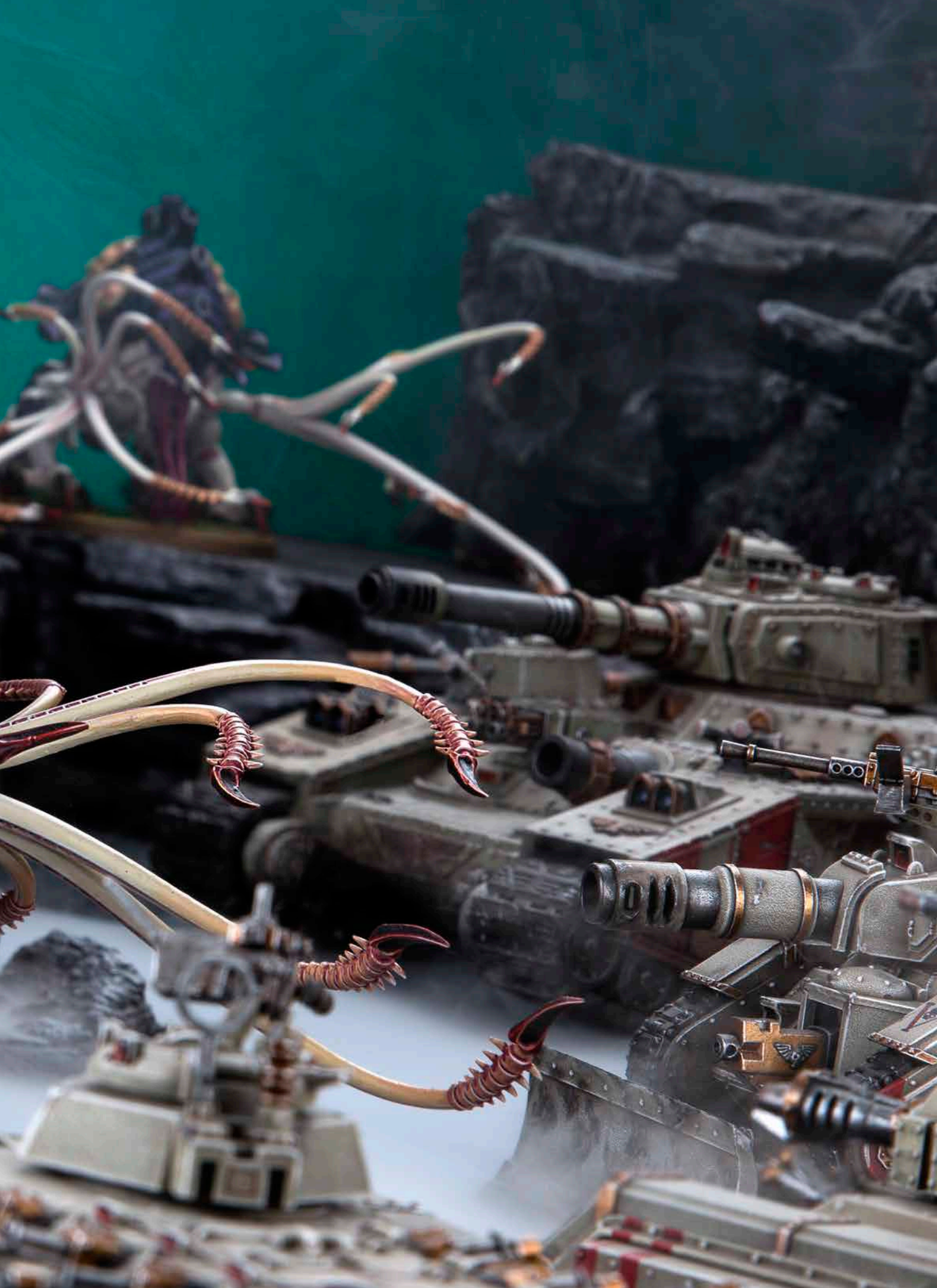
The war for Ixoi took a dramatic new turn when Tyranid burrow-beasts began to appear out of the cratered moon's surface. By following each tank's thunderous vibrations from below, the serpentine things were able to strike right at the heart of each armoured squadron. Everywhere puffs of moon dust erupted, and newly-emerged Raveners scratched long gouges in the flanks of each tank. Where larger tanks prowled, larger bioforms emerged to prey upon them. The Baneblades and Stormhammers of Dymetrin's heavy tank brigades found their hulls compromised by the stabbing limbs of the giant Trygons and Mawlocs attracted by their earth-shaking rumble. Bladed scythes pierced armoured hides that their commanders had thought inviolable. Strangely, though, the Tyranids would retreat as soon as they had struck, either snaking off into the yellowing mists or burrowing under the surface once more.

Never one to turn his back on good fortune, Dymetrin ordered his Engineers to affect field repairs wherever possible and continued fighting. He commanded his aides to consult the Tanker's Primer, but its parchment missives had nothing to offer about the nature of the strike-and-fade nature of the xenos attacks. Only when the yellowish clouds began to drift through the stale atmosphere towards him did the terrible truth begin to dawn.

Wherever one of the larger tentacled beasts prowled, its chimneys coughed out thick columns of Tyranid spores. Barbed tendrils waved as if commanding the yellow miasmas to attack, and the mists would come alive, snaking towards the wounded tanks like the sulphur-ghosts of Vostroyan legend. Dymetrin ordered his tank regiments to pound shells into the strange fug hiding the tentacle-beasts from sight, though with their eagle-sharp eyesight rendered moot by the thickening fog, the most they achieved was the occasional shallow wound.

Then the sulphur-ghosts seeped into the open wounds in the hull of each tank, and the killing began in earnest.





There was another booming thump, and the telltale screech of tortured metal filled the Baneblade's ornate interior. Dymetrin span in his command chair, staring in horror at the furrows ripped in the iron hide of his beautiful machine. Claws the length of girders were gouging open the hull. Behind them Dymetrin could glimpse a xenos goliath looming out of the mists. Its serpentine body was so large it completely blocked his view of the battlefield behind it.

The Vostroyan officer growled into his rebreather, snatching up his plasma pistol and running in a hunchbacked crouch to the tank's rear. Pushing a profusion of cables back into place as he went, Dymetrin whispered a prayer to the Omnissiah before kneeling under the largest of the open wounds in the Bite's hull. He drew a bead on the looming Tyranid's pock-marked cranium, held down the pistol's maxis node, and fired.

A sphere like a miniature sun burst out from the fat-barrelled pistol. It struck not the monster's head as he had hoped, but its throat. The Tyranid spasmed as the energies of the plasma blast ate away at its neck. The smell of burning alien filtered through the Vostroyan commander's rebreather, making him gag, but the deed was done.

Dymetrin's fierce grin of triumph soon ebbed away as fat fingers of sulphurous mist began to probe the tears in the Baneblade's hull.

'Tech-Priest, get these rents sealed over!' he barked. The Enginseer duly shambled over with his servo-arm whirring. Alacryos was the best in the regiment, and Dymetrin had seen him jury-rig repairs for extensive damage within minutes.

But the Baneblade's crew did not have minutes to spare.

'Rebreathers at maximum filter!' shouted Dymetrin. His skin itched fiercely. The acrid stench of Tyranid poison was clogging his rebreather, turning the air yellow, even inveigling its way into his heavy clothing. He muttered a prayer to the Emperor and soon regretted it, bloody ulcers swelling to burst in his mouth as the xenos miasma did its evil work.

Grimacing, the Tank Commander bullied his way up to the cupola, plasma pistol whining in recharge. He and his crew were already dead – of that he had no doubt – but that did not mean they were out of the fight.

'All cannons, target the largest visible bio-form,' coughed Dymetrin, blood drizzling from his mouth. 'Sponson gunners, clear a path!' Dymetrin's commands were answered with a double crack-boom as his Baneblade's main gun and demolisher cannon opened fire simultaneously.

Through a fug of spores ahead, the Vostroyan saw a quadruped monstrosity take a direct hit. Its pallid torso opened like a gory flower, ejecting a shower of unknowable fluids into the lunar dust. Over its corpse came a trio of smaller tentacle-beasts, bladder-sacs on their backs wheezing spores from the ridged chimneys which protruded from their backs.

'Hellhounds, flamer units – engage the sulphur-ghosts themselves,' coughed the Vostroyan. A whooshing bank of flame came from the far right flank, burning the skies clear of the clouds reaching towards the tanks nearby. It was the right tactic, he could feel it, but it was too little too late. They may as well have tried to burn away an oncoming sandstorm.

Dymetrin hacked up another lungful of fluid, eyes stinging hot. 'All other units, g-g-get clear,' he stuttered into the vox, every syllable burning on his tongue. He felt shivery-cold, now; not the honest cold of the Vostroyan winter, but the sick type of chill that starts in the bones.

'R-r-repeat, all other units get clear – head for new g-g-ground. This battle... this battlefield is c-c-corrupt...'

Dymetrin pushed up over the cupola and staggered out onto the fore hull of his Baneblade. A bank of yellow fog rolled towards him even as the Tundra's Bite backed away. Tentacles flailed in its midst. The Tank Commander saw an Armoured Sentinel yanked from its splayed piston-feet, crushed into scrap, and hurled bouncing across the lunar landscape.

Men stumbled from their tanks everywhere he looked, clutching their throats, shivering as they curled into foetal balls. Here and there a massive snake-bodied terror would emerge from the ground, its maw gaping wide to consume those trying to escape.

The yellow spore-clouds were everywhere now. They had lost Ixoi, thought Dymetrin – lost it within a matter of hours. They were facing a foe that attacked on every level, from the miniscule to the gigantic. A foe that could not be beaten.

But it could be made to bleed.

'All ahead full... full forward...' he coughed into the vox. *The Baneblade lurched beneath him as his men, obedient to the last, accelerated towards the sulphurous clouds. Dymetrin was proud of them, with the pride a father feels for his offspring. They would make their mark upon Ixoi yet.*

The Vostroyan staggered over the tank's proud architecture like a sick old man going to his deathbed. As the Baneblade crested a lunar crater, he stumbled and fell, a thin gruel of infected blood drizzling from between his lips. On his hands and knees, he scrambled his way to the reactor housing at the tank's rear, his vision all but gone. The image of old man Dhrost swam in his mind's eye, and it gave him strength. He had to be strong. To do what was right.

Dymetrin lifted his pistol, its weight suddenly so heavy he had to use both hands. Yellow fog billowed and swirled around him, and tentacles writhed out of the mist like curious snakes. Blind to them, guided by memory alone, he jammed the pistol's barrel under the vanes of the reactor's sanctum vent.

'Fry, you voidspawned scum,' muttered Dymetrin as toxic xenos bioforms leered out of the mists.

He pulled the plasma pistol's trigger, and the world around him exploded into light.



THE BREAKING STORM

As the first day of the Tyranid invasion slid to a bloody conclusion, choirs of veteran Astropaths struggled to penetrate the psychic interference swathing their worlds. Here and there a brief missive could be forced through the cloying mind-shadow to a neighbouring world, though even that effort caused serial brain-bleed and frothing bouts of insanity.

Before long the Commissars accompanying Dhrost's expedition were stationed with each astropathic conclave, pitilessly executing any of their number that claimed all was lost. Amidst their gibbering and wailing, many of the Astropaths prophesied a greater doom yet to come. It was a claim that the evacuation vessels stationed in high orbit reluctantly confirmed. The bulk of the Tyranid swarm had yet to descend.

Nonetheless, Dhrost's gambit in the Castellan Belt had bought the defenders a valuable reprieve. Morale was holding, and despite all contact with the Vostroyans defending Ixoi having been lost, a mood of grim determination still suffused every populated world under the Cryptan suns. The Imperials had weathered the first day of the storm, and a large proportion of the war effort had yet to commit to the fight. If this system were to be swallowed by the Tyranids it would at least stick in their throat, or – as Dhrost himself put it – force the void-spawned monsters to choke.



The King of Phodia poured another glass of vintage amasec from his favourite crystal decanter, the one shaped like a willowy nymph. Above him, fluffy jade clouds of Aerosian incense rolled across the crystal blue vault of his sanctum. They smelled simply divine, and took the edge off the sun-lamps that shone brightly from each interstice.

'Another glorious morning,' Augustus Flax said to his nephew Garrard. 'Even though I understand it is raining rather heavily outside.'

Garrard snorted a sputtering laugh, spraying his own amasec across the king's quilted chaise longue.

A chime came from the female slave-servitor in the corner of the room. The porcelain-clad figure delicately set the empty cocktail glasses sitting on her vidscreen to one side before turning it to a vertical alignment. A glowing schematic of the Flaxian complex flickered into view.

'Unscheduled access to sanctum districts detected,' said the servitor, her voice as smooth as honeyed cocoa.

'That's odd,' said Flax, wrinkling his nose. 'Constance's lot are never out of bed before noon. Not even for one of their so-called pranks.'

'Multiple lifeforms inbound in Elixir District,' purred the servitor conspiratorially.

'Yes, yes, we get the picture,' spat Flax, his good humour evaporating. 'Stop bleating and channel the feed from the nearest servo-skull. Let's have a look at this merry band of japesmiths.'

The servitor's screen flickered once, and hard-resolved to show movement in the gothic splendour of the Elixir District. It flickered again, magnifying. Dark and spidery figures crept through the subterranean boulevards and plazas. Scores of them, by the looks of things; perhaps as many as a hundred.

The vidscreen flickered and zoomed once more, focusing upon the giant, many-limbed nightmare in their midst. The creature stared hard into the servo-skull's pict-lens, superhuman malevolence burning in its beady eyes.

Flax's nymph-decanter fell from his suddenly limp hand, shattering upon stained gold.

'He's back,' whispered Flax, his eyes straying to the evac chute. 'Cryptus damn it, Garrard, he's back.'







AEROS

A gas giant of immense size, Aeros is a green-blue orb of ethereal substance but immeasurable value. The constituents of the planet's outer layer are stable enough to be mined by colossal Imperial filter ships and even breathed for short periods of time, though the dangers of doing so are high. However, therein lies their value – the gaseous elements mined from the planet can be condensed and refined into liquid promethium, and hence

are greatly sought after by not only the neighbouring worlds, but also the pirates and renegades that plague the shipping lanes of the Imperium. It is not unheard of for skirmishes or even large-scale battles to break out on the surface of Aerosian mining platforms, their combatants seeking to plunder as many promethium cylinders as possible before making their escape.





THE SKYWAR OF AEROS

The gas giant of Aeros was classified as a civilised world, despite the fact its mining podiums held a fraction of the billions-strong populations that thronged Asphodex and Lysios. The miners that worked bone-aching shifts in the Aerosian gas refineries had seen an opportunity for much-needed rest in the coming invasion, retreating to the hab-blocks and battening down the hatches behind them. In truth each of the slate grey platforms, held suspended by helium tanks at varying altitudes throughout Aeros, had little in the way of defences. They were little more than flat-bodied aircraft carriers, bases of operation for swollen filter-ships that sifted the gas giant's substance and later delivered it for condensation via promethium refiner pipes.

Dhrost's metadossiers detailed several incidents of bio-fleets assailing Imperial gas giants. Each time they left nothing but a smattering of barren debris in their wake. The Tyranid race would devour anything, not just flesh and bone, in its constant quest to multiply and consume.

Knowing that conventional Astra Militarum tactics would be all but useless upon a gas giant, Dhrost sent his airborne divisions to defend the planet from the inevitable incursion. Under the command of the ambitious Major Henrig Jenst, the newly formed 1433rd Cadian Airborne would take up position in the blue-green Aeros mists above the mining platforms of Vantor Alphus and Vantor Kai. Using these floating bases as a rendezvous point, they would respond with lethal force to whatever threats came their way.

Knowing his ally's habit of leading from the front, Dhrost had specifically ordered Jenst to concentrate on the war effort as a whole rather than the glory of the battle in front of him. It was an order the major intended to obey, for though he would never admit it, he too saw Dhrost as something of a role model.

Jenst's Valkyrie pilots quickly familiarised themselves with the three-dimensional grid of gas mining podiums dotted throughout the planet's outer layers. It was well they made haste to do so, for Dhrost's suspicions were proved correct: one of the larger sub-tendrils was snaking its way towards the world of Aeros with the inevitability of death.

Major Jenst, who by this time had incorporated a system of lumin blink-codes to bolster the vox-links between his squadrons, was more than ready for the war to come. If he could hold Aeros against whatever the hive fleet threw at it and keep its material bounty from the all-devouring swarm, a promotion to Dhrost's personal staff was as good as won.





1433RD CADIAN AIRBORNE

Upon arrival in the Cryptus System, Dhrost had seconded the majority of his airborne units to Major Henrig Jenst. Jenst's Valkyrie squadrons included many of Cadia's finest pilots, even before the influx from Dhrost's regiments. Now over six hundred aircraft stood ready to defend the gas giant against whatever trespassed within its jade-green mists.



AQUILA PRIME

The command Valkyrie piloted by Henrig Jenst himself is known as *Aquila Prime*. The craft's stark grey hull has shrugged off all attempts at overpainting on a dozen occasions – only the white Imperial Eagle stencilled across its top has remained intact. Jenst's familiarity with the vehicle's truculent machine spirit has seen him score aerial kills that have impressed even Thunderbolt pilots.



SWORD OF DOGMA

The ruddy hull of the *Sword of Dogma* is a welcome sight amongst Cadia's airborne fraternity. Its pilot Yuri Deigr, though famously foul-mouthed, is exactly the kind of wingman Jenst appreciates – daring, vicious, and too stubborn to know when to give up. The *Sword* and the *Aquila Prime* have saved each other from certain death so many times that the Valkyries are always repaired between battles in adjacent bays, lest their machine spirits cease to function in protest.



VECTAR SQUADRON, 'THE SONS OF DHROST'

The trio of Valkyries codified Vectar Squadron have fought under Dhrost's command for decades. They trust the old general like a father, though some in the Imperial Navy say they are foolish to do so. Though Jenst has yet to earn their respect, they will obey the orders of their Cadian mentor to the letter – even if it means flying to almost certain death under the command of a stranger.



VIGILOR

Vigilor is the brother craft to *Aquila Prime*. The decoration that marks its ash-grey hull is the snarling mouth of a rift shark rather than the noble wingspan of the Imperial Eagle. This difference is reflected in the craft's temperament as well as its appearance, for where Jenst's *Aquila Prime* is a noble exemplar around which the rest of the regiment rallies, the *Vigilor* and its pilot Einsen are vicious predators both.

A DEADLY CARGO

Though the gunships and assault carriers of the Cadian 1433rd Airborne formed the spearhead of the Aeros war effort, its main thrust came from the squads inside. Wherever a mining platform or Skyshield provided a stable base from which to defend the gas giant, units of brave Cadian veterans would deploy to cleanse them of xenos spore-filth and repel winged horrors alike.



MAJOR HENRIG JENST

Major Henrig Jenst is perhaps the most gifted pilot in the 1433rd. Though his command position should in theory see him removed from the cockpit of his beloved Valkyrie *Aquila Prime*, he prefers to lead by example, and hence has one of the best kill-to-disengagement ratios in the entire Cadian Airborne.

JENST'S GRENADIERS

A lucky few of the 1433rd Airborne have received additional training from Jenst himself, and now excel in airborne insertion ops. Proudly referring to themselves as Jenst's Grenadiers, this squad typically lays down a barrage of grenades from their Valkyrie before they deploy. Only once the foe are bloodied and reeling do the Grenadiers slam down into their midst to finish the job.



THE PLASMAFISTS

The veterans known as the Plasmafists boast they gargle promethium and gnaw on the armour of their foes. Those who have fought alongside them know that their bravura is in part a defence against the high death rate in their ranks. After all, those who specialise in the use of plasma weapons often have as much to fear from their weapons as they do their foes.

THE AEROS SKYTIDE

The hive ships hovering in orbit around Aeros prepared the world for invasion by hurling numberless spores into its outer layers. The true invasion came when millions of winged bioforms swooped down into the planet's jade mists, hunting man and machine alike with their repulsive bio-weapons.

THE SKYTYRANTS OF AEROS

The winged monstrosities that led the assault upon Ventor Alphus showed a terrifying level of intelligence. They concealed themselves and the deadliest of their weapon-beasts amongst flocks of smaller Gargoyles, ensuring that the Imperial air squadrons were unaware of the true threat until it was too late.

THE SKYBROODS OF VENTOR ALPHUS

The mists of Aeros were infested with countless winged organisms, but those that fell upon Ventor Alphus took the greatest toll upon the Cadian war effort. Driven by the synaptic imperatives of the Hive Tyrants in their midst, these creatures were collectively known as the Skybroods by the veteran soldiers that braved their assaults.



THE SCOURGE OF VENTOR KAI

Though the refinery of Vantor Kai was a good deal smaller than Vantor Alphus, the Tyranid invaders practically smothered it in weapon-beasts over the first hour of invasion. By ensuring that Vantor Kai fell in the opening assault, the Hive Mind meant to establish a base of operations where its synaptic amplifiers could cluster, allowing the attacks upon Vantor Alphus to intensify.



COWARD'S BANE

Constantly drooling acidic liquid as it veered and swerved over the mining platforms, the creature that came to be known as Coward's Bane seemed to deliberately persecute not only the Valkyries at the perimeter of the fighting, but also those Aerosian miners and regrouping Cadians that sought cover amongst the refinery pipes.

THE SCREECHFIENDS

The deafening screams of the beasts nicknamed the Screechfiends were debilitating rather than deadly. The same could not be said for the assaults which followed. The winged terrors would stitch venom cannon fire across each mining platform before darting in low and sweeping their victims into the Aerosian mists, never to be seen again.

THE SPOROCYST CLAWS

The armoured spores that hurtled through Aeros to latch onto the mining platforms were not attack beasts in their own right. Instead they were biological factories that disgorged smaller spores until the outer layer of the gas giant was infested with living mines. It was because of these clusters of claw-like organisms that Aeros became polluted beyond recovery. Some even magnified the psychic ability of the synapse beasts around them, giving rise to the theory they were integral to the latter stages of each Tyranid incursion.



THE SPOREFIELD

In the first phase of invasion, Aeros was seeded by countless millions of spores. Though most of these were egg-shaped Tyrannocytes that kept their contents hidden, the remainder were tentacled bladder-sacs that could sense the proximity of non-Tyranid lifeforms. Possessed of a rudimentary hunting instinct, these Spore Mines would drift close before exploding with such force they ripped the Imperial defenders to gory shreds.



THE DOOM IN THE SKIES

The Mucolid Spores disgorged by each Sporocyst Claw were in essence larger versions of the Spore Mine. They hovered close to Imperial craft before detonating with such force even the shock wave of their explosion could send a Valkyrie spinning to its death.

THE WAR OF MISTS

The sub-tendrils that unfurled towards Aeros split and split again as it approached, streams of bio-ships paring off to surround the gas giant in a tentacled embrace. In the blue-green mists below, squadrons of assault craft peeled off from the mining podiums and followed the path of the Tyrannid vessels, hungry for the imminent battle.

The first wave of xenos invaders was not far behind. Volleys upon volleys of fat-bodied spores were shot out from the orifices quivering in the flanks of each titanic vessel. Down they came at shocking speed. Instead of passing straight through the outer layer of the gas giant, when they reached the populated strata most began to slow, and then to stop altogether.

Jenst ordered all xenos lifeforms shot on sight, but though the Cadian Airborne took a heavy toll upon the first wave, the spores they burst with lascannon and heavy bolter fire were quickly replaced. Before the hour was out a constellation of ovoids hung eerily in the turquoise mist, their contents as veiled as their intent.


Not all of the invading entities drifted to a stately halt. Some of the chitin-armoured organisms were spat into the planet at such high velocity they slammed into the mining podiums, their diamond-hard edges locking them tight. Before long each platform was studded with the damnable creatures, clustered like limpets clinging to the underside of a prison hulk. Spores both large and small were ejected from each Sporocyst in great number, filling the jade gloom with tentacled bladder-beasts.

Through this hovering forest of spores came the gunships of the Astra Militarum. Squadron upon squadron of Valkyries burst apart the bioforms under their crosshairs, their pilots executing a set of overlapping fire patterns that made Jenst proud. As gunfire chattered overhead, claw-like Sporocysts would retract their fleshy chimneys like startled anemones before pulsing grotesquely to fling out yet more Spore Mines. In response veteran Cadians would launch pinpoint grav-chute landings onto the platforms nearby, blasting the vile things free with plasma and melta fire. Those infantry platoons already posted upon the pontoons would instead wait for the sticky pseudo-mouths at the top of each spore to open before hurling Krak grenades into the opening. It was imperative the Hive Mind did not fill the planet's strata with its creatures, for once critical mass was achieved even the most skilled pilot would eventually make a fatal mistake.









The hive fleet would not give up its hard-won beachheads easily. Winging through the azure haze came clouds of Gargoyles, their shrill screeches piercing the air. Lasfire stabbed out in tight volleys from the platoons that had taken position on the skull-embossed deck of Vantor Alphas. The winged creatures flew headlong into the firestorm, and each platoon of veterans sent dozens of the gaunts wheeling away into the mists, oozing ichor. Seeing an opportunity, Jenst ordered his Valkyrie squadrons to come in close and flank each swarm, hammering away with heavy bolters and rockets launched from underwing pods.

Everywhere across Aeros the sky-broods broke upon the mining platforms like swarms of locusts falling upon a harvest of human flesh. The chitinous creatures scattered and wheeled, spitting acidic venom at the Guardsmen below as they parted to reveal the monstrosities in their midst. Titanic bioforms emerged from the flocks, majestic and terrible as the drakes of Cadian legend. Their wingspans rivalled or even exceeded those of the assault craft coming about to intercept them.

These new terrors plunged down to clutch at the Cadians clustering behind the refinery pipes of each mining platform. Hive Crones looped low to hook bony spurs and tail barbs into the fuselages of hovering Valkyries, the largest beast opening assault craft one after another with the ease of a hungry Catachan slicing his knife through a rations

tin. Bat-winged Harpies harried veteran troopers with shrieks of such abominable volume the men were driven cowering to the decks. The fiends themselves followed close behind, sweeping their victims over the edge of the platforms with their clawed wings. Each plummeting man's death scream was hopelessly lost as more shrieking Harpies descended in search of an easy kill.

Major Jenst, never shy of taking the helm personally, drove in hard. Ignoring the swooping horrors attacking the veterans below, he aimed the nose cone of his Valkyrie right at the winged tyrant circling above Vantor Alphas. His lascannon speared the mist, blowing a leg clean from the creature's lower body. The wounded leader-beast peeled off as the Valkyrie passed by and soared off after it.

Jenst darted a glance towards the cockpit's rearward pict-feed. He caught a glimpse of the long-barrelled biomorph that sprouted from the Hive Tyrant's lower limbs. The xenos gun spat a crystalline projectile after his craft, and the Valkyrie's proximity augurs chimed fast.

The cockpit was plunged into darkness for a second as the craft's affronted machine spirit rebelled against the bio-weapon shards penetrating the fuselage. Without taking his eyes from the scene unfolding beyond the cockpit, the major rode out the stalling swoop and yanked hard at the steering column, bringing the massive craft around in a wide barrel roll.

A nerve-shredding screech echoed through the craft's passenger compartment. They had not shaken the winged monster on their tail; far from it, in fact – the beast had sunk its scythe-like limbs into the Valkyrie's rear. Jenst's wings flashed crimson alert signals as its banked and rolled, but the giant Tyrantid would not relinquish its prize. Only when Deigr fell in behind and cored the beast's torso with a surgical strike from his own lascannon did the creature fall away, its claws clustered tight like some enormous arachnid. Jenst's wing lumens blinked a gratitude signal as he came about to rejoin the fight.

THE WINGED HUNT

Back at Ventor Alphus, a trio of Hive Crones wheeled above the tight knot of Cadians clustered amongst the refinery pipes. The creatures swooped low, acidic drool drizzling from their ribbed maws to boil the flesh of the men seeking shelter below. When a Valkyrie Squadron came in to intercept, tentacle-symbiotes would emerge from under each Crone's wings and wriggle like serpents through the skies towards them.

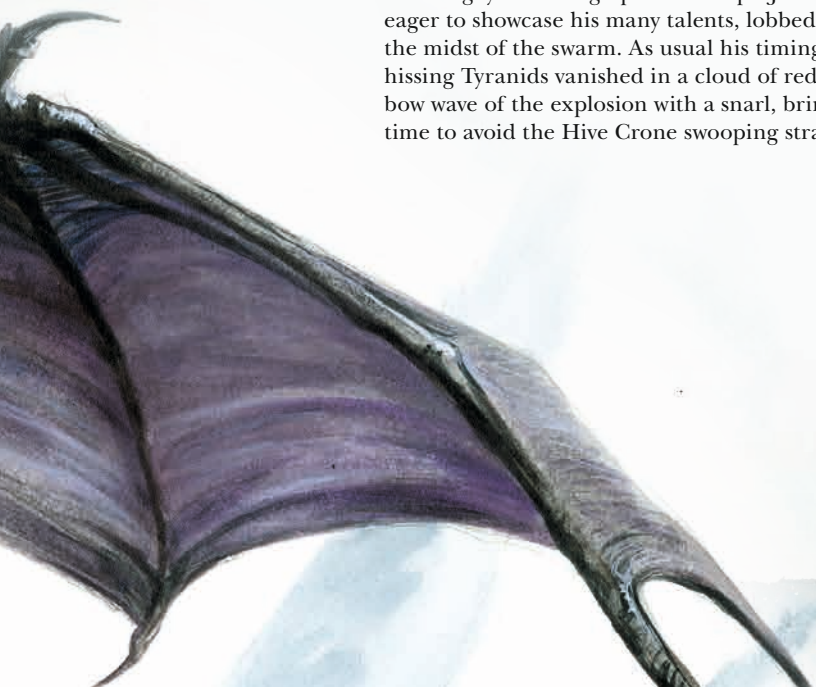
Many of the living missiles were torn from the skies by thudding heavy bolter fire, but not all. Some tentaclids were quick enough to latch on to a passing Valkyrie, discharging crackling bursts of bioelectricity that enveloped the entire craft. Those carriers caught in these shrouds of lightning turned black inside and out, their paintwork scorched and their systems shorted out. Down they tumbled into the mists, dead as spent coals, their screaming passengers left with seconds at best to live.

Jenst ordered those Valkyrie squadrons that had already dispatched their passengers to converge on Ventor Alphus, knowing in his gut that the nexus would be critical to the Aerosian war effort. Three squadrons left the fuel hub at the peak of the Aerosian vapour conveyer, peeling off from their vigil above the gas conduit to join the fight.

Jenst's own Valkyrie shot through a storm of winged organisms no bigger than sniffer canids, one of the beasts cracking the craft's windscreen as he accelerated back to the platform. The time for caution had passed; now was the time to strike.

Jenst gave the order to fire as two more squadrons, each at full strength, came alongside. Lances of ruby lascannon fire stabbed through the spore-choked skies towards the wheeling giants that were circling the platform. Two of the Tyranids took direct hits, corkscrewing uncontrollably in their death throes. The Valkyrie *Creedscall*, intent on the kill, ploughed straight into a thicket of hovering Mucolid Spores. The bloated things detonated with a series of wet thumps, tearing the wings from the assault craft and sending its brutalised remains scattering into the jade mist.

The Valkyrie squadrons carved through the skies over the platform, door-gunners bracing their legs as they boomed heavy bolter fire into the Gargoyles boiling up to intercept. Jenst's vox officer Ferroch, ever eager to showcase his many talents, lobbed a demo-charge down into the midst of the swarm. As usual his timing was impeccable; a dozen hissing Tyranids vanished in a cloud of red-grey mist. Jenst rode out the bow wave of the explosion with a snarl, bringing the Valkyrie level just in time to avoid the Hive Crone swooping straight for his cockpit.



All around them Tyranid wing-beasts were dropping, exterminated by the concerted assault of the Cadian Airborne's finest. The men on each platform below sent streams of las and plasma fire through membranous wings and pallid underbellies, ducking for cover whenever a heavy xenos corpse thudded down. A rallying point was being forged where the madness that had assailed Aeros had abated somewhat. Jenst's wing-lumens switched from defence frequency to attack, his squadrons quickly following suit. They had the measure of their foes, and now the killing could begin in earnest.

There was an ear-piercing screech as something terrible, bone-white, and huge emerged from the mists. Its wings, each large enough to sweep a platoon to its doom, gave a thunderous crack as it powered towards Ventor Alphas. The Valkyries securing a perimeter took evasive manoeuvres, but it was too late – the monstrosity's bio-cannon limbs had already twitched mid-swoop. A double volley of hard white spheres punched right through two of the Valkyries just as they were bringing their missile pods to bear, the rear of each assault craft blown wide open. Each aircraft's passengers spilled to their deaths as the Valkyries fell away into the mists.

Then the white-bellied beast was in the midst of the next Valkyrie squadron, jaws yawning wide. It stretched its long neck over to crunch down on the cockpit of the *Vigilor*, and Jenst's wingman Einsen died in a spray of bloodstained glass. The monster's wings boomed as it came upright, tearing off a chunk of the Valkyrie's wreckage and flinging it into the midst of the Cadians on the platform to its left. Several men were consumed in fire as the mangled remains of the craft rolled crazily across Ventor Alphas and disappeared off the other side in a storm of flame.

Nearby, a squadron of Valkyries swooped low, hellstrike missiles whooshing from under each wing. A heartbeat before impact the white giant dropped like a stone, snapped out its wings, and glided away into the mist.

Jenst could hear Dhrost's orders in the back of his head, commanding him to concentrate on the war effort as a whole, not the battle immediately in front of him. All across his cockpit dataslates, the mort-signals of his lost brethren flared red.

He ground his teeth and pushed his Valkyrie to full pursuit anyway. It was a fatal mistake, for though Jenst and his men plunged into the mists, they did not come back.





TARTOROS

Tartoros is world of roiling magma and tortured earth. Its surface is so saturated with radiation that to set foot upon it is to sicken and die. Given that the planet is frequently wracked by solar storms, even getting into the planet's orbit is a feat fraught with difficulty. Nevertheless it has been settled by the Imperium, for the amount of raw energy that can be harvested from Tartoros' surface powers an entire star system. Its void-shielded domes protect solar farms to which Dhrost assigned a garrison of Astra Militarum well before Hive Fleet Leviathan penetrated the Aegis Diamando. However, even the Cadian elite do not have equipment advanced enough to ride out the tornados of fire that rage across the surface of Tartoros, and hence soldier and citizen alike are restricted to the protective hemispheres of their void shield generators.

Once one of these void-shielded energy domes has harnessed the maximum amount of energy from the Eyes of Cryptus, it is shut down in a state of humming readiness. Only when the ancient lens array that hangs in low orbit, known as the Magnovitrium, is steered into place above it does the void dome release its pent-up energy. Ancient capacitors fizzing, the dome sends an invisible column of energy almost a mile thick into the Magnovitrium's primary lens. The archeotech array is then pivoted, deflecting and channelling the harnessed energy column across the system to prearranged receptor dishes on the surface of the system's civilised worlds. In this manner Tartoros supplies the life force of hundreds of cities and conurbations across the system.





THE BEASTS OF TARTOROS

Unlike their comrades upon the rest of the system's worlds, the Cadians stationed upon Tartoros received several reports of the overall Cryptan war effort. With their Engineers triple-blessing the chronotransmitters of the Magnovitrium, the officers in command of the Tartoros defence forces were comparatively well informed.

Dhrost had organised looped tight-beam broadcasts that told of the desperate cityfights unfolding across Phodia, the Adepta Sororitas' stalwart defence of the crawler caravans of Lysios, and even the aerial war unfolding upon the gas giant of Aeros. Each planet had been subjected to a barrage of xenos spores that had disgorged warrior organisms without number. Given that one of the sub-tendrils had curled towards it over the last few nights, Tartoros should soon expect the same. It was to prepare accordingly and meet the fury of the xenos assault with a vengeful wrath of its own.

Lord Commissar Strengel, leader of the Cadian war effort upon Tartoros, was outwardly a man of fanatical devotion to the Imperial creed. In his heart, however, there lurked a seed of doubt. With every broadcast and pict-capture that made it through the electrical interference swathing Tartoros, that seed grew a little more.

The Tyranids were a foe so numerous their bio-fleets could be seen curling across the night sky of Tartoros like some vile brown stain seeping from the void into the honest darkness of the heavens. With barely ten thousand Cadians under his command, and perhaps twice that number of civilians, Lord Commissar Strengel was unsure of how he would hold the teeming hordes back from the solar farms so precious to the Cryptus System.

The sub-tendrill heading towards Tartoros grew ever more distinct, and the atmosphere amongst the planet's defenders became tense and tinder-dry. Strengel personally visited each of the major void dome complexes to reassure them, telling his men that the swarm-beasts they would likely be fighting were small and skittish, and they would probably perish in the first day. Caught in the open between the radiation storms of the Cryptan stars and the fury of the Cadian lines, no living thing could hope to survive for long.

By and large, the Lord Commissar's claims were convincing. As Strengel made the last of his rounds the night before the invasion, he even managed to convince himself.

The armoured spores that rained down the next day were larger than even the pict-captures from Lysios had suggested. They crunched onto the arid surface of Tartoros amid clouds of dust, each splitting open to disgorge its repulsive contents.

For this, the defenders of Tartoros were ready, for they had seen these things at work in the pict-captures from Lysios and Asphodex. Yet the creatures that pulled their way from the stringy viscera of the transport pods were nothing like the weapon-beasts that were drowning the neighbouring worlds in their limitless number.

Each brood-pod deposited not a score of swarm-creatures, but a single monster, unfolding from the slippery bio-matter of its host organism to roar at the crimson suns above. Weapon-limbs thrashing, the beasts stomped towards the nearest void domes with a sense of terrible purpose. Lord Commissar Strengel felt a claw of fear clutch his throat as the vox crackled over and over. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Tyrannocytes had shot out of the skies, and each fleshy meteor had borne an armoured terror to their doorstep.

From every Aegis line and martyr-pattern trench system across the planet, punishing fusillades blasted through the crackling force shields to hammer into the charging monsters. The concurrent boom of heavy bolters blended together into a percussive barrage of noise. Mass-reactive shells the size of a man's fist blasted from bony carapaces with no more effect than hurled stones. Krak missiles dug chunks from the armour of the largest monsters, but even the most direct hits did little more than anger their targets.

Plasma teams concentrated their fire, but under the intense energies of the Cryptan suns they overheated quickly. The weapon specialists held the triggers down nonetheless, reducing the xenos horrors pounding towards them to clouds of drifting ash.



Then the Tyranids returned fire. Wherever the Cadians gathered thickest, arch-backed weapon-organisms brought to bear the strange biological cannons fused to their forelimbs. The largest beasts loosed spherical projectiles into the Cadian lines, but they did not hit home, instead detonating upon the void shields with blinding flashes of light. Buzzing beetle-things emerged from strange limb-nests only to crackle and burn up in mid-air. Venom-coated crystals vanished before impact, and hurtling seed pod ejecta was reduced to little more than puffs of steam. The void shields, designed as a defence against Titan-class weaponry, were making short work of the bio-ammunition used by the Tyranid race.



Having stationed himself at the largest of the solar farms, Lord Commissar Strengel took a moment to assess the situation. He was shocked to find his own infantry company at Furnacedome unassailed. Yet redeployment was not an option – even to cross the scorched wasteland of Tartoros' surface in times of peace would lead to a painful death by radiation poisoning. In came more crackling reports of the terrors stalking the wastes, and dutifully Strengel voxed back orders to hold position in as strident a tone as he could manage. Yet the inactivity gnawed at him like acid. When the Tyrannocytes finally fell around his position, he was almost relieved that the agony of waiting had ended.

A clutch of spore-creatures landed with a liquid thud little further than a half-mile from Furnacedome's walls. Their armoured flanks heaved, and six boulders of chitin burst out, each unfolding from its foetal crouch into a headlong charge. In their midst was a massive beast with great talons and a hideous bio-weapon that spat death as it thundered towards the defenders' position. For an awful moment, Strengel's gaze locked with that of the beast, before he wrenched himself away to address the threat lumbering towards them.

The Lord Commissar began to bark out orders, directing the lascannon teams to engage the closest of the approaching beasts and cascade their shooting until all of them were dead. His men dutifully obeyed, calling out firing solutions and stabbing lances of light through coordinated breaks in the void shields.

Almost instantly the huge beast at the spearhead of the lumbering pack took three lascannon beams right in its torso. Smoking ichor burst out from each impact, gouting out to wet

the arid landscape around its hooves. Another three beams shot home, and the beast finally tumbled to a halt, its tusked jaw gouging a furrow in the singed earth as it went down.

The lascannon teams were pivoting their weapons towards new targets when the beast's corpse twitched, spasmed, and stood back up, the once-smoking holes in its hide already sealing over with shiny new tissue. Strengel blinked in confusion, barking for his men to take aim at their original target and bring it down fast.

Out stabbed the laser beams once more, blinding in their intensity. This time the beast's hide seemed to absorb a lot more of the punishment meted out to it. A nearby plasma team added the incandescent rage of their weapons to the fusillade, and the creature tumbled roaring into the dust.

Everywhere the Cadian defenders were adopting the same tactic, concentrating their fire upon the nearest xenos terror at the exclusion of all else. It was a ploy dictated by the instinct of self-preservation just as much as by Strengel's orders. Many of the Lord Commissar's units could hear nothing over the electromagnetic static plaguing the vox-net, but no soldier wished to engage one of the wrecker-beasts at close quarters. The void domes were on their own, each an island of resistance in a deluge of horrors.

The survival tactic worked, for a while at least. One, then two, then half a dozen beasts were put down outside each void dome, their corpses dotting the planet's surface like warts on a rad-sufferer's back. But in focusing their fire on those nearest to them, the Cadians had left those beasts heading for the generator buildings unimpeded.



THE SHIELD SHATTERED

Outside Furnacedome, the lead Carnifex rose again with a screeching roar. The fiery orange of the setting Eyes of Cryptus could be seen through the smoking holes that had been punched through its carapace, and one of its legs was little more than a shattered shell. It lurched upright nonetheless, dragging itself on through the dust.

The lascannon teams shot oblique volleys towards the monster as they struggled to recalibrate. One of the beams blasted a bony protrusion from the beast's back, but it staggered on, the damage done to its hind legs by the last volley all but healed. Dust puffed from its broad hooves as it accelerated into a loping run.

Strengel barely had time to curse before the great Carnifex ploughed through Furnacedome's shimmering void shield and crashed into its generator complex. Its tusked jaw gouged into huge Dornium coils, ripping through strata of tightly wound wire as it barged another semicircular array into the dust. Talons scythed through reinforced pipework and tree-thick cabling with daunting ease, tearing out the guts of each generator as the massive bioform barrelled onward. Electric discharge crackled in a halo around it as the beast stormed through forests of industrial wire, trailing strings of the stuff like an eater-fish destroying a pelagic net.

All across Tartoros, the rest of the Tyranid wrecker-beasts began to emulate their unkillable alpha. Carnifexes forced their way into generatoriums and modulation hubs, laying about themselves with oversized claws as they crushed and stamped and roared. Here and there a Haruspex ejected its clawed stomach to snatch a stumbling servitor and yank it back into its acid-filled gullet.

At close quarters the wrecker-beasts were unstoppable. Lasfire was ignored altogether, whereas those that gouged holes in the monstrous beasts with melta weapons and demolition charges were soon smashed into bloody paste for their presumption. Mushroom clouds bloomed across the horizon as flare capacitors discharged and damaged rad-banks lit up the night. In the space of a single hour, a network of irreplaceable technological wonders had been reduced to fizzing wreckage.

With the void shields gone, disaster quickly began to unfold. The scent of tortured ozone and burning hair tinged the air as the Cadians fought back hard in the baking heat, desperately trying to contain the beasts within the perimeter. The things were seemingly impervious to injury, to pain, even to the lethal radiation pouring down from the Cryptan suns. Only by concentrating heavy weapons fire were the Cadians making any mark whatsoever on their foes.

A few hundred yards from each breached complex, bio-weapons were brought to bear once more. This time there were no barriers to intercept them. The solar farms of Garviel Dome were thrown into silhouette as bio-plasma arced from the backs of beasts that were more gun-symbiote than host. Each crackling sphere burst amongst the Cadians caught in the open, reducing them to little more than blackened stumps.

At Cryptgate Dome, where the platoons defending the installation hunkered down behind their trench lines, the monsters stomping towards them ejected buzzing swarms from their shuddering forelimbs. Black clouds of beetle-things burrowed under the armour and into the flesh of those that thought themselves safe. Traventius Dome's metre-thick curtain wall was smashed open like an eggshell by the rupture cannons of the hissing Tyrannofexes stalking towards it.

Cadian weapon teams spilled out of each besieged complex, skin blistering as their flamers threw up walls of greasy chemical fire, but the gunbeasts stormed straight through each inferno without slowing. Acid gouted from their forelimb bio-cannons, reducing dozens of men to no more than slicks of infected gore.

At Furnacedome, Lord Commissar Strengel decided he had seen enough. Their defence had been shorn away with brutal efficiency. All that remained was to attack.



Barking commands at the squad of Ogryns he had personally requested from the *Militarum Auxilla*, Strengel vaulted over the trench shields and charged out onto the irradiated planet's plains. The Ogryns pounded along close behind him. Three of the nearest Carnifexes fired bio-cannons at them, and Strengel ducked as one of the pods passed close overhead. There was a series of wet pops and a flurry of movement. From each pod burst a profusion of barbed tendrils that whipped around two of the armoured abhumans racing behind Strengel, tearing them apart with unsettling ease. The strangler-tendrils writhed redly in the starlight before falling still.

His skin stinging in the radioactive glare of the suns above, Strengel bellowed the command to charge. The rest of the Ogryns, angered rather than daunted by the death of their fellows, ran headlong into the Tyranids' midst. The Lord Commissar took shot after shot with his bolt pistol, his targets so large it was nigh impossible to miss even in the blinding glare of the Cryptan suns. Around him his Ogryns started laying about themselves with their heavily-built ripper guns. Their fury was such that the first of the Carnifexes was battered flailing into the dust, the Ogryns emptying their ammo clips into its unprotected underbelly until the beast was little more than a ruined lump of xenos biomatter. Then the other two wrecker-beasts joined the fight. Scythed limbs flashed, and the Ogryns were quickly scissored apart.

The Lord Commissar darted underneath a swinging scythe-limb and hurdled over a bony club of a tail, firing blind behind him as he sprinted out past the Tyranid lines and onto the Tartoros plains. The Carnifexes turned and lumbered after him. Strengel's breath came short as he scanned the horizon for a place of refuge, somewhere to shelter from ravening beast and baking sunshine alike. To the north and northwest there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of Cadians spilling out of the breached complexes, the soldiery choosing to take their chances under the pitiless gaze of the Cryptan suns rather than fight the Tyranids at close quarters. This had all the hallmarks of a war already lost, but Strengel would be damned if he was going to admit it just yet.

The Lord Commissar doubled back, his footprints sending puffs of dust into the air as he ran headlong for the relative safety of the shattered shield domes. He had attacked the beasts head-on, despite the fact his skin was burning and his eyes were boiling in their sockets. Surely he had earned the right to regroup, to find others who had shown less bravery in the name of the Emperor and punish them instead?

His mind whirled, casting about for ways to salvage some kind of progress from this disaster. Somehow he had lost his peaked cap. He scratched his itching scalp, and his hand came back with a clump of loose hair. His skin was taut and hot. He had to get back into shelter, and fast.

Given enough time, they could form echelons on the arid plains, and level enough fire to keep the xenos fiends away. Maybe, if he could jury-rig one of the transmitters that he could see poking up from the crackling wreck of the gen-stations, they could even summon some aerial backup and enact a fighting retreat all the way off-planet. It was still possible. It had to be.

Strengel sprinted for the shelter of a ruined vox-dome with skull-tipped antennae bristling from its roof. He darted into the shadow, pulling his black greatcoat over the brass of his carapace armour to blend better with the darkness. Out on the Tartoran plain he could still see the xenos monsters rampaging through the Cadian lines, unstoppable as an avalanche of boulders and just as impervious to harm.

There was a screech of metal from his right. The Lord Commissar turned, bloodshot eyes wide, a small part of him hoping to see a fellow human. But the better part of him knew that he would see nothing of the sort.

Two narrow eyes stared out at him. Within their void-black darkness, Strengel saw again a cold intelligence that shocked him to his soul.

Then the wrecker-beast's talons swept down, and Strengel knew no more.









PARASITES FROM THE UNDERCITY

As a new day sent dim light across the tumbled cityscapes of Phodia, the Cadian High Command upon Asphodex allowed themselves a glimmer of hope. The first wave of Tyranid invaders had been repelled, and Dhrost had received word from Planetary Governor Flax that he and his private armies intended to join the fight after all.

When challenged as to his absence thus far, the Governor was ready with excuses, explaining that he had been ensuring his people's safety by clearing the evacuation routes. The prevailing opinion amongst the Cadian officers was that the snake now believed himself safer behind an army of Astra Militarum than skulking in his subterranean lair. Dhrost counted the reinforcements welcome nonetheless. With the well-funded defence force of the Flaxian Dynasty at their side, the Cadians could consolidate their gains and perhaps even reclaim sites of strategic importance from the milling swarms.

By midday the clouds that hung over Asphodex were beginning to darken once more. Cadian Astropaths and Phodian seers alike began to quiver in fear, their eyes rolling back and hands twitching as if in palsy. Everywhere the same phrase kept cropping up, gibbered from the mouths of a hundred psykers – the Dragon reared back, only to strike.

The hours ticked past, Augustus Flax's men filing up near the Cadian ranks with unseemly haste. At first this was a point of some amusement amongst the soldiery until Dhrost realised what was likely behind the aristocrat's sudden change of tactic. Thinking quickly, the general ordered every sewer grate and undervault door surrounded by as many men as his officers felt they could spare.

Dhrost's command came seconds too late. Whilst the last of the Flaxian Dynasty hurried out of their underground empire, the infiltration organisms that crept its passages had little in the way of prey. Substrata grilles were ripped open by clawed hands right the way across the district, and long-limbed Genestealers spilled out from the tunnels like insects from a hidden nest, pouring into the streets with preternatural speed.

Shouting oaths that would have made a Catachan blush, Dhrost commanded his Hellhound and Chimera squadrons to move in. The tanks gouted flame or spat bullets through every ground floor in which their cupola-riding crewmen saw movement.

The crews of Maelon's Torch gleefully hooked their siphons to the promethium relay pipes that wound like rust-brown intestines through the megametropolis. The resultant conflagration was spectacular. Here and there the whoosh of flame was answered by human screams, for some of Phodia's populace still sought shelter in their old habs. For the most part, though, the crackle of infernos came accompanied by the gratifying screech of burning xenos.



As the Cadian tanks rumbled through the streets, gangling Lictors and Genestealers leapt from hiding places on second floors and atop ruined roofs. The beasts landed nimbly upon the tanks passing below, tearing gunners and commanders alike to pieces with their razored claws before disappearing inside the vehicles' hulls. Chimeras trundled off course, ploughing their dozer blades into burning buildings as blood gouted from their cupolas. Here and there a veering Hellhound toppled over to detonate with a dull crump, spraying burning promethium across the street. It was then that Flax's true contribution to the Cadian war effort became clear.

The flames raging through the lower stories of the Phodian districts had culled an impressive number of Genestealers, but if anything the Hellhound crews had been too successful. The Cadians stationed in the upper stories of the urban sprawl began to cough or even to choke as clouds of greasy black smoke drifted up towards them. Those that had retaken the lower stories were forced back upstairs by the fierceness of the flames beneath. Dhrost feared his haste to deal with the Genestealers had cost them dearly – that is, until the flames began to curl out into the street like pagan legends come to life.

Before a minute had passed several infernos roared around the city, blazing down Genestealer-haunted alleyways and plunging into substrata plates to burn the xenos broods inside. Spirits made of living fire plunged past the Cadian cordon zones to reduce the Tyranids in the streets beyond to ash. Imp-like figures danced and cackled within the cordon, flames shooting from their hands to engulf skulking Termagants and force their brood-kin to scuttle away like startled bloodroaches.

Striding down the main processions came Augustus Flax's personal psyker corps, leather trenchcoats flapping. The tallest of them had serpents of fire wound around his arms that he flung towards the Genestealers massing in the shadows. Another did not walk so much as float towards the foe, fists grasping as if he was crushing invisible insects. In the streets ahead, a pair of rampaging Carnifexes simply imploded, ichor spurting out in all directions. A third psyker, his enlarged cranium glowing white, sketched a dismissive wave of his hand. Nearby a brood of Hormagaunts that had been rushing out towards him froze, toppled over, and died.

Emboldened by the success of their leaders, a chanting mass of lesser psykers emerged from the ruins held by the Flaxians. They joined their thin voices in a chorus of rage and fear, hurling bolts of psychokinetic force into the xenos scuttling through the buildings around them. Cadian and Flaxian trooper alike added their lasgun fire to each volley.

Not only had the Tyranid infestation been contained, it had been beaten back. With the swarms unable to force their way past the cordons the Cadians had reestablished, Dhrost had time enough to enlist Flax's psyker corps into the command structure of the Cadian army and factor them into his plans. Better still, Tech-Priest Acoblestis had received a clarion-clear vox from a Tempestor Prime whose regiment was inbound on their position.

The general allowed himself a measure of hope, already sketching out plans for a long and bitter war of reclamation. What he had yet to realise was that the appearance of the Flaxian psykers had merely spurred the hive fleet into action once more.





THE PHODIAN GUARD

The third day of fighting amongst the ruins of Asphodex's primary city saw the Imperium united against a common foe. The time for rivalries and enmities had passed. The war had simply become a matter of survival – both for the combatants, and for the planet itself.

THE CADIAN URBAN ELITE

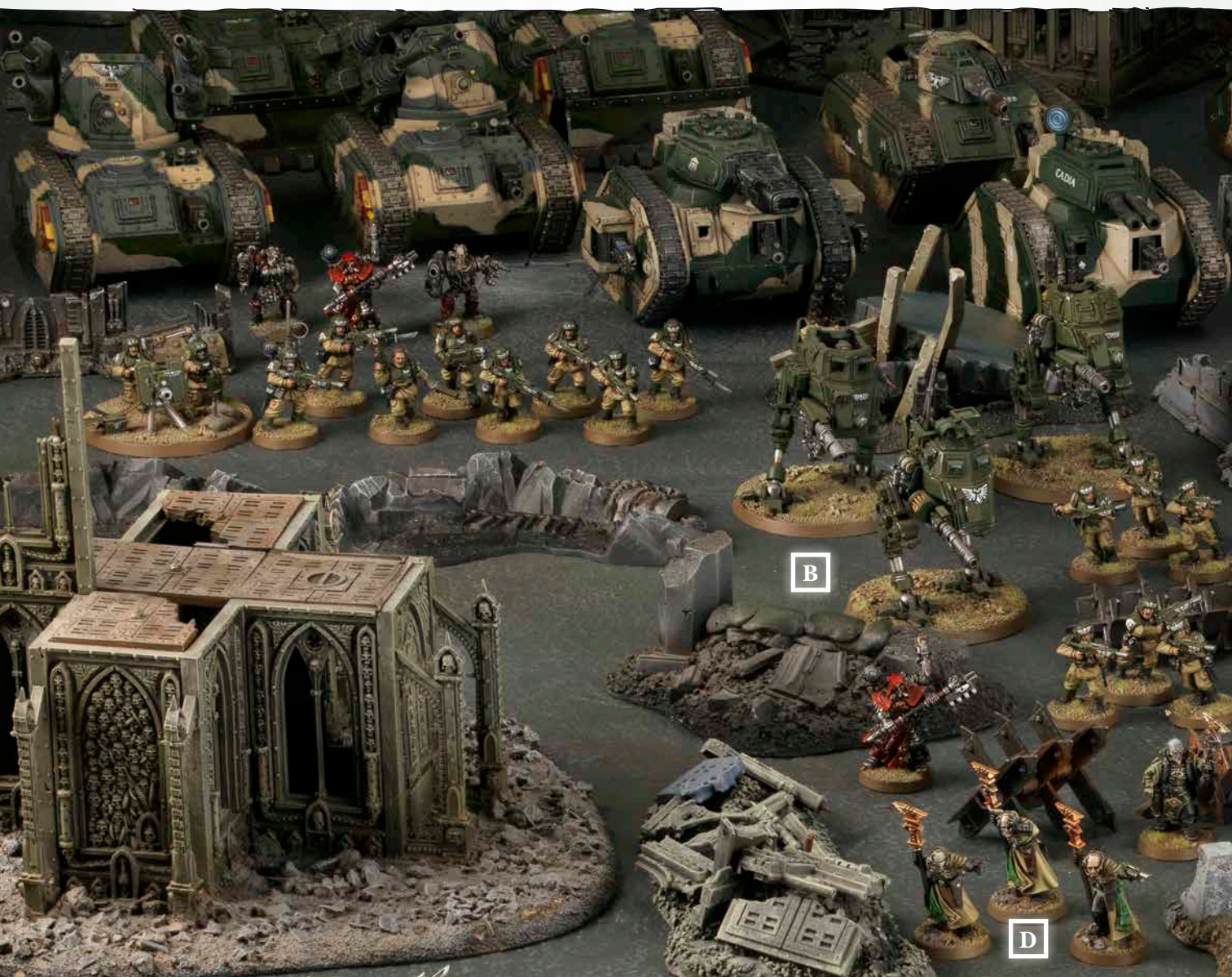
Though Dhrost's forces had suffered a daunting amount of casualties in the first wave of invasion, he still had enough soldiers to form a cogent defence around Phodia's inner districts and prepare an evac zone in case they needed it. Perhaps sixty percent of the megametropolis had been ceded to the Tyranids thus far, but there was still hope they could claw it back.

DELEGATO MINISTORUM

At the insistence of Cantor Emeritus Rylde, the Ministorum saviour-craft *Chalice* had abandoned its flight from the neighbouring world of Lysios and joined the war effort upon Asphodex instead. It was a testament to the fighting spirit of its priestly passengers that they would voluntarily face the Leviathan once more – and a damning indictment of the Ecclesiarchy in general that their ship came alone.

FLAXIAN DYNASTY INDUCTEES

Such was the crisis at hand that when the Flaxian Dynasty finally offered their aid General Dhrost was ill inclined to turn it away. Though the psykers in their midst numbered only a few dozen, Augustus Flax claimed they were powerful enough to turn the tide. On the second day of battle, they did just that.



A CANTOR RYLDE'S
FIRST LYSITE ECCLESIANDS

The priests and confessors of the First Lysite Ecclesiands, having been goaded into a religious fervour by Rylde's speeches, hit the Phodian war zone like a thunderbolt. Bellowing praise to the Emperor, the priests took their righteous ire – and their roaring weapons – to Termagant and Hive Tyrant alike.

B SENTINEL SQUAD SANCTOR

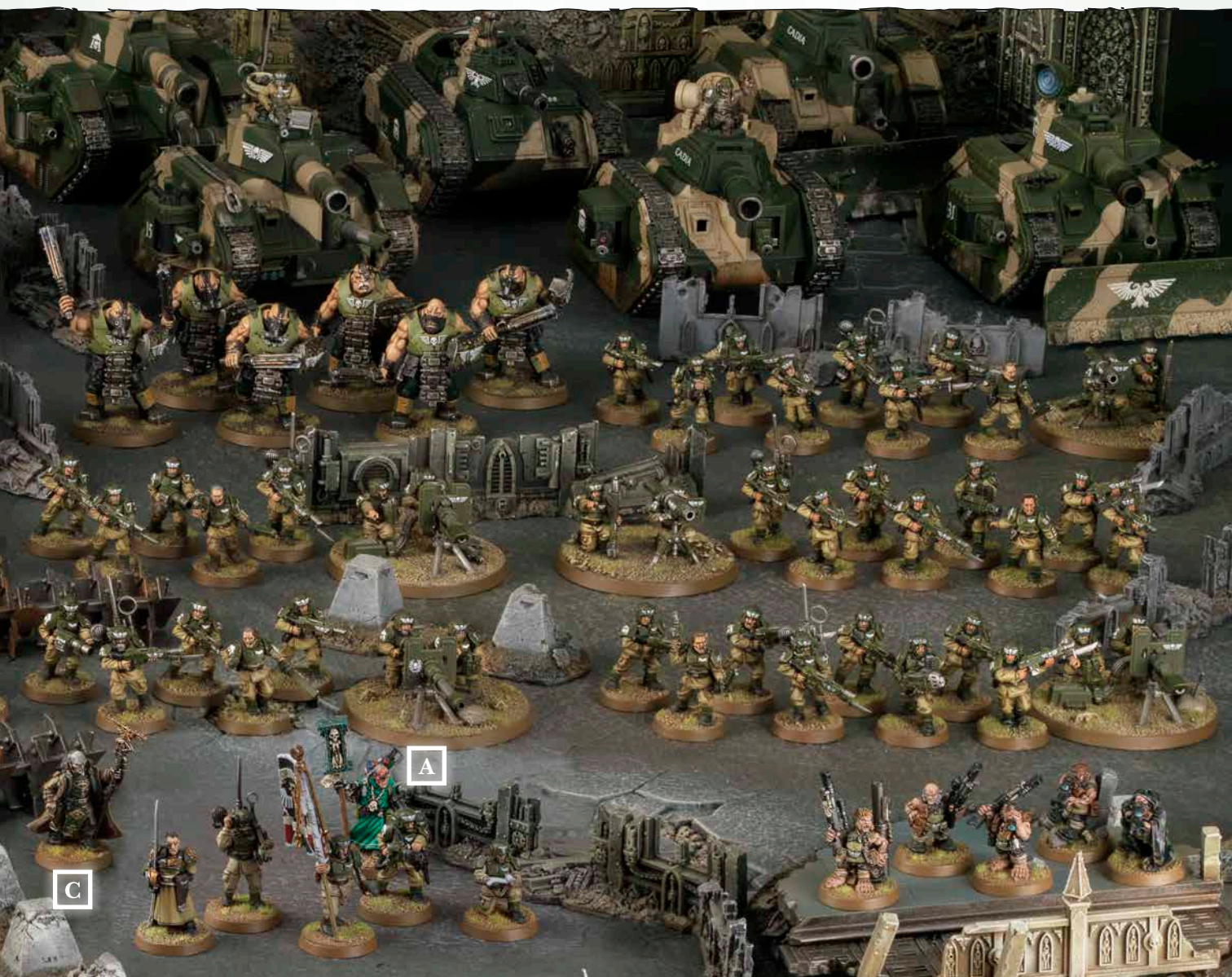
Though Cantor Rylde's Ecclesiands made planetfall some way from the main Cadian lines, the remnants of some outrider Sentinel squadrons escorted them to the thick of the battle without a word of complaint. The Ministorum Priests blessed them extensively in return, and since then not one of the Sentinels has suffered so much as a scratch in combat.

C PRIMARIS INDUX

It is rumoured that the wizened scarecrows leading the Flaxian Dynasty's contribution were once Alpha-level psykers, fugitives that Flax recovered after an Inquisitorial Black Ship crashed upon Ixoi. Each was eccentric to the point of being a liability, but the situation was such that Dhrosth inducted them anyway. They were renamed the Primaris Indux, given Cadian uniforms, and deployed in the upper levels of Tenebrae District. Within an hour of the Genestealer infestation boiling out of the Flaxian underworld, they had proved their worth a dozen times over.

D THE WYRDVANE CHOIRS

Alongside the Primaris Psykers offered to Dhrosth's cause, Flax had his custodians present over two dozen lesser psykers of varying ability. The general quickly had these separate into three smaller groups, each of which moaned and complained mightily about their task until they saw what the Tyranids had done to their home world.





11TH KAPPIC EAGLES

After uncovering the unsavoury truths behind the Vitrian infestation, Uther Abraxes and his 11th Kappic Eagles had made all speed to the Cryptus system. Abraxes had arrived too late to stem the initial tide, but intended to give the Cadians the chance they needed to turn a losing battle of attrition into sudden, glorious victory.

A **TEMPESTOR PRIME Uther ABRAXES**
Despite his arm having nearly been ripped out of its socket upon Vitria – or perhaps because of it – Tempestor Prime Abraxes was eager to start killing Tyranids as soon as possible. After requisitioning ancient Rogue Trader records from an ally in the Militarum Tempestus high command, Abraxes and his men braved the fabled thermal tunnels of the Aegis Diamando to approach the system and rejoin the fight.

B **COMMAND ABRAXES**
The Tempestor Prime's direct command are heroes all, their determination only hardened by the horrors they witnessed on Vitria. Although the clarion vox-net used by Scion Teratus was obscured by the high levels of interference, it was still clear enough for Abraxes to coordinate a devastating series of strikes with the Scions already planetside.

C **SCION SQUAD ICTAVIUS**
The men of Scion Squad Ictavius are considered callous by all who encounter them, even by other operatives of the Militarum Tempestus. Still, their spotless military record speaks for itself.

D **SCION SQUAD BENEFICUS**
The Scions under Tempestor Beneficus are experts in the use of hot-shot weaponry, from the personalised pistol used by Beneficus himself to the hot-shot volley guns touted by whichever squad members are currently in his favour.

E **SCION SQUAD ALARES**
Scion Squad Alares has a chequered past, for it is said they once hesitated before carrying out a kill order on a crowd of civilian heretics. Since the repercussions of that dark day they have taken pains to be as obedient to the directives of their superiors as possible.



F ABHUMAN AUXILLA
'THE BLUNTSHIELDS'

The Bluntshields are famous for being pig-headed and obstinate – difficult qualities in the fallow periods between war zones, but ideal when their commanding officer wants a living roadblock that will not budge, no matter what terrors assail it.

G ABHUMAN AUXILLA
'THE THUNDERGUTS'

It is best not to enquire how the Bullgryns known as the Thunderguts got their nickname. Despite their dubious personal hygiene, Abraxes has them on permanent secondment to his regiment. When deployed en masse, they are as close to a fusion of unstoppable force and immovable object as the Tempestor Prime has ever seen in the Astra Militarum.

H WINGED PERSECUTION

The Valkyrie that carries Abraxes and his command unit into battle is a veteran of a dozen wars, and its steersman Djubic is a natural pilot. It is a testament to Djubic's skill that Abraxes hardly ever speaks to the man – he trusts his pilot's competence and innate understanding of war, no matter the task at hand.

I VEX SQUADRON

Vex Squadron has served with Uther Abraxes for over six years. Though they outwardly claim they have hated every minute, they realise better than most that under the gruff and frequently insulting exterior lies a man who has no time for anything other than the betterment of the Imperium.



J WRATH SQUADRON

Wrath Squadron has the unenviable task of bearing Abraxes' Bullgryn shock troops into the fray. The pilots usually deploy one of their pict-skulls alongside the Bullgryns so they can at least enjoy watching the carnage meted out by their thick-headed charges. During the war for Phodia, they harnessed vid-steals of truly surpassing violence.

THE EAGLES' CLAWS

The Tempustus Scions of the 11th Kappic Eagles, under Uther Abraxes, were skilled and deadly warriors to a man. Hardened still further by their clash with the Tyranid menace upon Vitria, they would give their all in pursuit of their mission.

TEMPESTOR PRIME UTHER ABRAXES

Uther Abraxes is everything that a Tempestor Prime is meant to be. He is as cold and uncompromising as the void of space, as hard as adamantium, and as merciless as the most feared Commissar. His skills in personal combat are prodigious – indeed, he won the title of Scholam bare-knuckle boxing champion on multiple occasions. Abraxes has faced down xenos warlords and heretical monsters without flinching, and has walked away every time. He has myriad scars to show for these close encounters, of course, but in return he has left foes uncounted lying facedown in the dust.

However, it is not his martial prowess has earned Abraxes his rank. Rather, the Tempestor Prime is a determined and decisive commander of men, a leader who thrives under fire. Abraxes wields his Scions like a power maul, not just defeating his foes but brutalising them with a relish that defies the ordo's psycho-conditioning. Whether or not this is due to some ghost of an emotional response is irrelevant; Uther Abraxes is one of the Kappic Eagles most successful leaders, a merciless officer who gets the job done every time.





TEMPESTUS SCION BRANZANO

The Tempestus Scions that make up Squad Beneficus are, to a man, gifted marksmen. Scion Branzano is no exception to this trend, having been hand-picked by his Tempestor after displaying exceptional scores on the hot-shot ranges, both in static and 'live-target' exercises.

Branzano exhibits a strange mental tic, however, most likely a holdover from the childhood memories expunged by his mindscaping. Whenever firing upon the foe, Branzano can be heard to whisper a mantra, a list of names the significance of which eludes even the Scion himself. Whether this is a roster of those for whom he once sought revenge, or some group of tormentors subconsciously superimposed onto Scion Branzano's targets, it matters not. The Scion can reliably place a hot-shot round through the eye of a running foe at three hundred paces, and that is all Branzano's Tempestor cares about.



TEMPESTUS SCION VALENCIN

A member of the notoriously callous Scion Squad Ictavius, Scion Valencin is as cold as they come. He is a recipient of the Honour of Antillus, a medal borne given only to those Scions who have personally slain a senior enemy officer with their bare hands. Valencin's gun – along with his left eye – had been lost to the Ork Big Mek he was fighting, but he still proved more than capable of completing the task at hand, wrestling his massive opponent to the ground and pushing his armoured thumbs through its eye sockets, into its brain. To date, Scion Valencin has made no comment about this notable victory, or the rare accolade he was awarded in response. Indeed, some wonder if Scion Valencin is even aware of the honour he has been given – it is, after all, nothing to do with his current orders, or optimal combat efficiency.

THE SHADOW INCARNATE

The psykers set loose by the Flaxian Dynasty had drawn the immortal gaze of the Hive Mind itself. The Tyranid horde launched into Phodia on the third day of invasion was unlike any the Imperium had encountered before, its component beasts so attuned with the Shadow in the Warp that it coiled visibly around them.

A **THE NEXUS LORDS**
The towering bipedal creatures codified as Hive Tyrants had already been identified as the leaders or 'nexuses' of this new invasion, and targeted appropriately. This time the leader-organisms were protected by shield-creatures that interposed themselves whenever Imperial firepower threatened them, allowing each Hive Tyrant to bring its potent psychic powers to bear undisturbed.

B **THE CHILDREN OF CRYPTUS**
Attracted to the surface by the close proximity of the Hive Mind, the Genestealers that prowled the Flaxian warrens emerged in great number during the second day of fighting. Many of the larger broods were led by ruby-eyed Broodlords whose hypnotic powers saw the Cadian gun nests stutter and fall silent at the most critical of times.

C **THE LEVITATUM**
All Zoanthropes are surrounded by crackling Warp shields that can deflect enemy fire, but those floating eerily through Phodia's vaulted manufactorums appeared all but invincible. Only a handful of Cadian gunners got the chance to find out, for the raw psychic force that hurtled from the overgrown craniums of the Levitatum burned through even battle tanks with startling ease.



D THE SOULTHIEVES

At the heart of Leviathan's largest Zoanthrope broods lurked a new genus of weapon-psyker. Officially codified as Neurothropes but known to the common infantry as the Soulthieves, these spine-ridged terrors acted as living siphons for psychic energy. Once they had glutted themselves on the minds of nearby Cadian troopers, they would discharge their stolen energies in blasts of bastion-shattering force.

E THE BROOD MOTHERS

From translucent incubation-sacs underneath their torsos, monstrous Tervignons disgorged broods of Termagants, each beast fully mature and eager to fight. Their Cadian foes often mistook them for gravid mother-beasts, but this was a purely human construction – the vile things care no more about their offspring than a man cares about the dust mites crawling on his skin.

F THE MIND-DEATH

The psychic powers of the centauroid Maleceptors not only bolstered the ferocity of the beasts around them, but also sapped the strength of those standing against the horde. However, it was their grotesque ability to cast out tendrils of ectoplasm that gave them their reputation as the Mind-Death, the most feared of all the hive fleet's creatures since the war began.









A NEW DOOM



Initially the Tyranid assault came like the first few hesitant raindrops of a storm. Each falling spore was reduced to a shower of pulp by the autocannons of Hydra squadrons and Icarus quad-guns. Then, as dull thunder boomed in the tortured skies, the deluge of spores intensified until they plunged down in their thousands.

Wherever one of the things landed in Dhrost's exclusion zone, Cadian weapon teams toting melta and plasma weaponry hustled through the streets. Running from building to building they closed in on the Tyrannocytes, intending to destroy them before they had disgorged their contents. As soon as they drew close, however, the men would fall back screaming, clutching their heads and pulling off their helmets to clap their hands over bleeding ears, their targets forgotten.

First came the Zoanthropes, uncurling their tails from one another as their oversized craniums hovered up into the air. Lasfire flashed down towards them from the roofs and gun nests nearby. Even the most carefully aimed volley was subsumed by the unnatural energies around the creatures; krak missiles sent winging their way flared briefly before impact and disappeared.

Amongst the ranks of these monsters were evolutions of their genus, each sporting a spine of psychoconductive matter that crackled at the back of its oversized head. Vestigial limbs clicked and rubbed as the horrors floated free. They cast their blind gaze across the nearby rooftops, needle teeth grinning under segmented helms of hard chitin. Wherever their attention fell, snipers toppled from arched windows and battlements, clutching at their hearts as they dropped into the streets to land in a tangle of limbs and splashing blood. With each kill, the nimbus of power that crackled along the spines of these new terrors would grow brighter until it was painful even to look at them.

A squadron of Armoured Sentinels stalked from a nearby alleyway in a bold flanking attack, lascannons overloading the energy shield of the nearest Zoanthrope and bursting its distended skull in a welter of black ichor. The nearest soulthief turned its carapace in their direction for a moment. A searing column of energy roared out from its head crest, blasting all three of the prowling walkers into showers of molten iron.

Less than a hundred yards away a Baneblade ground down a wide thoroughfare, its main cannon swivelling to blast a man-sized shell into the midst of a brood of Genestealers running across the street. Most of the creatures were blown to smithereens, but those that survived – despite being burned black from head to toe – turned sharply to sprint towards the super-heavy tank.

Thrown off guard, the sponson gunners poured heavy bolter fire towards them, but the Genestealer mind-puppets had done their job. Three Zoanthropes hovered towards the Baneblade's flank from a nearby ruin, actinic lances of force boring into its hull. The psychic beams carved through the armoured behemoth like knives through a slab of meat, the giant tank falling into three chunks of steaming metal. A cloud of superheated vapour billowed out from its malfunctioning reactor, and a nearby platoon had the flesh scalded from their bones.

Behind the Zoanthrope broods were larger spores, each opening like ribcages pulled apart by invisible claws. From inside rose up Hive Tyrants with elaborate crests, their bodies all but hidden behind the guard-creatures that were clustered tight around them. Lascannon beams shot out towards them, but the Tyrant Guard were too dense to avoid. One lost its eyeless head to a well-aimed shot, but it stalked on regardless, its master-beast leering over the smoking stub of its neck.





As if summoned by the presence of the Hive Tyrants, the swarm-creatures that had gone to ground after Flax's attack boiled up from the underworld. This time the scythers and scuttlers did not run pell-mell through the streets, but instead sneaked in single file through relay pipes laid open by crab-clawed brutes at the rear of the Tyranid lines. Emerging from substrata plates at the base of occupied buildings, they climbed the sheer walls of ruins and bastions alike to fall upon the Cadians and Ratlings stationed on each roof.

Dhrost ordered his Ogryns to counter-attack, and the lumbering abhumans moved in to batter the clambering Tyranids from the walls with powered clubs and buckler shields. The hissing creatures abandoned their climb and fell claws-first upon their assailants. One of the Ogryns fired his grenadier gauntlet at close range, the explosion igniting the mass of promethium-slicked gaunts that had pushed their way through the relay pipes. The creatures shrieked shrilly as they burned, scrabbling and clawing with frantic energy.

Then the Hive Tyrants and their guard-beasts joined the fray, battering aside the slabshields of Bullgryn reinforcements and slamming their bladed primary limbs right through the stocky bodies of their foes. One of the Tyrants hissed as it shook the dead meat of an Ogryn from its claw, the heavy corpse flicked into the remnants of its squad. Bellowing in primal fear, the abhumans broke formation and fled.

The famous discipline of the Cadian Shock Troops was finally beginning to break. Wherever a Cadian heavy weapon team added its firepower to the fight, a clutch of Genestealers would swiftly divert towards them, the leader-beast in their midst hissing open-jawed. Those that met the ruby gaze of these beasts found their eyes widening and their jaws hanging slack, the fusillades from their gun nests stuttering and falling silent. Then the Genestealers were amongst them, and the butchery began.

Everywhere the spores fell a dozen kinds of death blossomed amongst the Cadian ranks. Venom cannon fire spat from the Sporocysts that dotted each plaza and junction, sparking crystals killing machine spirits in a bright bursts of bioelectricity. Ministorum Priests charged towards the Tyranid Warriors prowling the streets, their bellowed imprecations drowned out by the chittering Termagants that boiled out to intercept them. Neurothropes hovered down each street and alley like xenos overseers sent to inspect the slaughter, their Zoanthrope escorts reducing Cadians and Ogryns alike to charred skeletons.

Above the cityscape, the ominous rumble of thunder gave way to the throaty roar of aircraft engines. Suddenly, squadron after squadron of Valkyries descended from the clouds, the matt blue-grey of the Kappic Eagles proud against the ominous skies. The *Militarum Tempestus* had joined the fight.

The roaring skimmers flew down into the widest streets in close formation, prow-mounted lascannons stabbing death. Transport bay doors were flung wide and heavy bolters brought to bear, each stream of shells passing through doors and windows to detonate within the xenos broods skulking inside. *Tempestus Scions* leapt from the back of their Valkyrie transports in perfect formation, engaging their grav-chutes so they drifted slowly down towards the city with their hot-shot lasguns spitting and sizzling. Abraxes' own craft, the *Winged Persecution*, had to veer aside as a trio of armoured spores hurtled down into the Plaza Excelsine. The assault craft slowed, engaged its vertical engine arrays, and turned back around. Missiles streaked from its underwing pods, hammering into the meaty ovoids and burning back layer after layer of xenos gristle. The rest of the Valkyrie squadron followed suit, forming a concentric ring around the trio of spores that had nearly smashed into them and loosing their own missile volleys at the foul organisms amid clouds of white smoke until the whole of the plaza was aflame. Acre by acre, the *Militarum Tempestus* would scour this city free of alien taint.





Uther Abraxes snarled in contempt as the egg-pods disgorged their passengers. The frill-crested things that emerged from inside were large – massive, in fact. They were far bigger than the wrecker-beasts he'd expected, and with an anatomy unusual even for the xenos. Inky ectoplasm curled around their heads; perhaps some primitive attempt at camouflage, thought the Tempestor Prime. But just like the rest of the creatures infesting the megametropolis, they were earthbound, and so they would be put down just the same. Dhrost had done well to prepare the stage for their arrival. Here, only the Eagles had the power of flight.

'OK, Scions, let's make a start,' drawled Abraxes, his eagerness hidden under a shroud of disinterest. 'Largest first, starting with these three jokers below. Vex Squadron, take the kill. Wrath; once the plaza's clear, I want the Ogryns in there fast.'

The Tempestor Prime's slate monitron pulsed as his pilots voxed their assent. Vex Squadron opened fire, their hellstrike missiles arcing down to detonate hard amongst the beasts below.

The Tyranids did not fall. Instead the coiling shadow crowning each of the three beasts thickened and then lashed out, faster than Abraxes could follow, to strike at the cockpits of the Valkyries harassing them. The officer recoiled despite himself, but although each black tendril penetrated the prow of one of his skimmers, they did no physical damage.

Puzzled, Abraxes was about to re-order the attack when he realised that his pilot, Djubic, was convulsing in his seat. The steersman and his co-pilot screamed through clenched teeth, shaky hands clawing at their helmets.

Then both of their heads exploded.

Abraxes staggered back blind, ears ringing. He clutched reflexively for support as the nose of the craft began to dip.

'Bail! Bail out now!' he shouted, dimly aware he could not hear his own voice. His men answered the call of their training nonetheless. Abraxes felt a blast of humid air push into the craft's belly, his eyesight returning enough to see the bulky silhouettes of his men flashing before him. The Valkyrie lurched. He could make out the flaring red of a mort-lumin confirming critical damage. Seconds left at most.

Abraxes hurled himself towards the open hull door, his bad arm flaring with pain as he punched his grav-chute active. A leap, and he hung in the air above the city, his vision returning. Almost the entire district below him was boiling with pale fire.

The overcast skies above had thickened to become almost solid. Ribbed tendrils of impossible size descended from each cloud bank, disappearing into the skies to connect with the pallid

bellies of Tyranid bio-ships. All but one of Abraxes' Valkyries was nosediving fast, their sides spilling Scions as each team made an emergency exit. He felt a pulse of unwelcome emotion flare in his chest as he noticed each cockpit was stained red from the inside.

All around the plaza's edge, Storm Troopers were descending in rings, fighting to stay in formation against the updraft from the Valkyries' explosive crash-landings below. Bursts of white energy crackled from nearby rooftops, and for a moment Abraxes could make out the distended brains of xenos psyker-beasts lit by an x-ray glow. Squad Beneficus went limp to a man, their hot-shot lasguns dropping from lifeless hands. Another burst, and Squad Alares shook like puppets before slumping still themselves.

One of the alien psykers emitted a thin shriek before bursting into flame and toppling from its rooftop perch, but its broodmates ignored it, shooting beams of mind-force into the Scions near a wrecked carrier below. Aghast, Abraxes pummelled his grav-chute to maximum descent. His men had been slaughtered. Two-thirds of them were dangling in the air above the streets like criminals hanging from invisible nooses.

The Tempestor Prime hit the plaza's slabcrete with a jolt, and the pain in his shoulder stabbed his fear clean away. Thumping their way across the plaza came the three quadrupedal psykers that had grounded his Eagles. Translucent shadow fringed each head like the tentacles of some ethereal cephalopod. Abraxes watched in horror as the awful things lashed out to touch the bare scalps of his Bullgryns. There was a string of wet explosions, and the abhumans fell headless to the floor.

Abraxes yelled in defiance, channelling his anger into action. Racing forwards to join Scion Teratus in the shadow of a fallen statue, he darted his head out for a moment to take stock of the three creatures.

'Call in backup!' he shouted, priming a Krak grenade and flinging it over the statue's shield as Teratus called terse commands into his vox-array. There was a sharp bang as the grenade went off, and a series of low thumps. A kill-sound, thought Abraxes. Thank the Emperor. That... or heavy footsteps.

A winding pseudopod of shadow emerged from the statue, right from its stony heart, and touched Scion Teratus on the back of the head. Another came from its eye, right in front of Abraxes. He lurched back, scrabbling at the ground, but the thing struck out like a snake to tap him on the bridge of his nose.

The Tempestor Prime's vision went grey, his head suddenly full of a trillion screeching screams that merged into liquid agony.

Uther Abraxes had time to see the head of his vox officer bursting redly before his own skull flew apart.







All across the city the Cadians were in full retreat. Each platoon was desperately conceding ground as it scrambled for the evac zones that Flax was holding open with his own troops. Psychic horrors were emerging from every street, Genestealers scurrying through the ruins to claw apart those too slow or too stubborn to withdraw. Even the reserve line was overrun now. Mayday calls and mort-signals fought the static-laced vox from every quarter. Only the drop-ship site, an evac zone that had been cleared of buildings, remained green upon Dhrost's dataslate.

The remnants of the Urban Elite fought a running battle towards the drop-ship site, tank crews and infantry units working together in overlapping fire patterns that had served them well upon Cadia. The zone was not far.

All around were scenes from a nightmare. The Guardsmen fell back past spasming psykers crying out in agony as their own mind-fires consumed them. Ogryn corpses by the dozen littered the main processional, already half-devoured by the ravaging beasts seething around them. Ridged tubes as thick as Cadian redwoods reached down from the skies; wherever they touched down, crater-wide mouthparts slurped liquid biomass from the streets.

Another sprint, and the Cadian survivors arrived in dribs and drabs at the fringes of the evac zone. They staggered to a halt, guns hanging listless at their sides as they took in the seething mass of Tyranids that was pouring into the site from all directions. The evac vessels were buried under a shifting horde of armoured bioforms, some of them as large as hab-blocks.

Neither the men of the Flaxian Dynasty, nor General Maelon Dhrost himself, were anywhere to be seen.





THE WRATH OF SHELSE

Upon Lysios the Adepta Sororitas had won their own reprieve. Having reconnected with their supply train and cleaned the worst of the xenos filth from their armour, the orders were blooded but unbowed. Though she had been harried by a half-glimpsed terror that haunted her daytime activities and her dreams alike, Canoness Grace was still maintaining discipline. Certain that the nomadic people of the world would listen to her after their narrow escape from the swarms, she had her Order Dialogus rig a network of vox-skulls and laud hailers. It was time the word of the Emperor was heard anew.

The new suns that rose over the algae-slicked landscape shone down upon the Canoness at her finest. With the Book of St Lucius raised high, she harangued the populace with a sermon so impassioned they climbed to the hatches of their crawler hulks and stuck their heads out to listen. She spoke to the entire corral of the light of the Astronomican, the flame of defiance that burns in every human breast, and the evils of alien, heretic and mutant alike. She spoke of the need to fight, but that the timing of each battle was critical, and the corral needed to move whilst it still could.

Every so often a die-hard Cryptite would call out an obscenity or bellow pleas for the celestial giant to smite her down, but the catcalls became less strident with every passing minute. When the horizon began to turn purple-black, hiding the binary stars from sight, the heckling stopped altogether.

It was then that the Lictors attacked.

A great commotion burst out amongst the Celestian honour guard standing proud in a semicircle around their Canoness. Blood spurted high as something tall and sickeningly fast leapt feet-first into the ranks of the Sororitas, whipping a mantis-like upper limb around to decapitate Sister Elspeth as she brought her heavy bolter to bear. Pistols barked and flamers plumed, but the thing had already disappeared like a bad dream.

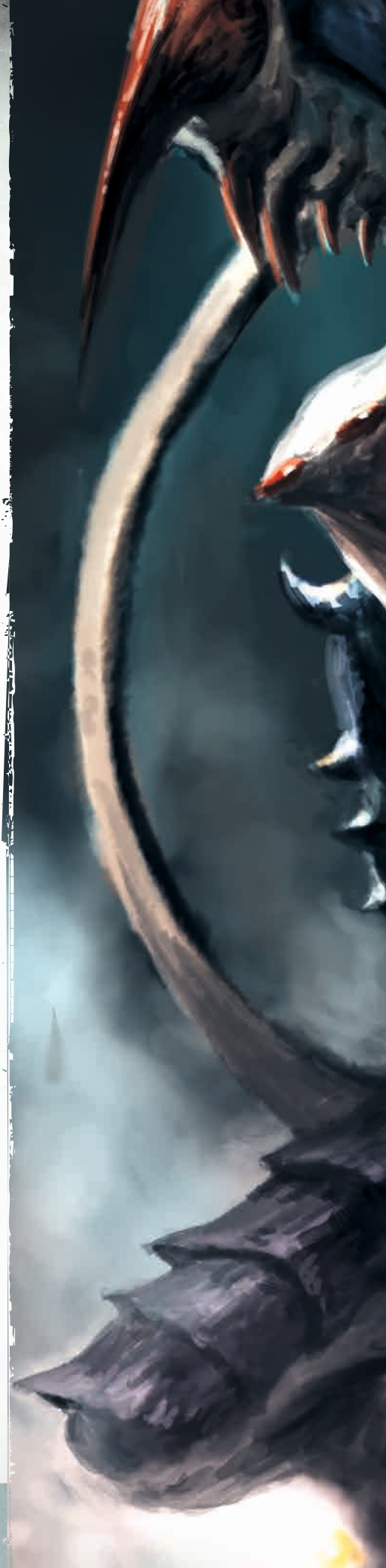
Atop the hull of the Exorcist missile tank she had chosen for her pulpit, Magda Grace suddenly pitched forwards with a cry of surprise. A long-limbed beast loomed out from the shadows of the tank's missile array to stoop over her, blade-like limbs stabbing down fast.

They clanged from metal alone, for the Canoness had rolled with the impetus of the beast's previous blow instead of fighting it. She clattered down the front of the Exorcist to land in a loose crouch. Without looking she drew her engraved bolt pistol, reached back over her head and pulled the trigger.

Her instincts were true. The bolt plunged right between the creature's eyes and detonated, painting the front of the Exorcist with the contents of its cranium.

In the shocked silence that followed, the nomads of Lysios began to mutter. Some even started to pray. Here was the slayer of dragons they had prayed for, sent by this new Emperor to deliver them from harm. Some called out towards the woman sent to lead them, throwing sacred sheaves of dried seaweed towards her in thanks.

One after another the crawler hulks began to rumble, then to move. In truth the elders of the nomad tribes had needed little convincing. They had stood still for far too long. The horizon up ahead was haunted by thick clouds of Tyranid spores, but the real danger came from the other direction. The moon of Ixoi was peeking out from the clouds to the south, a sight the people of Lysios dreaded even more than the xenos fleet poised to kill them all.





Magda Grace swore under her breath as she waved another squadron of slime-splattered vehicles onwards. The crawler hulks were moving now, at least, but they were running out of time fast. Loose groups of grateful nomads had splashed towards her over and over again to kneel in the now ankle-deep water, calling her Saint Grace, or worse still, the Bane of Chameleos – named for some figure from their own heretical mythologies. For the best part of a year she had been re-educating the Lysite yokels at the muzzle of a bolter, and now this. She finally had her breakthrough, but now that it was here, she had no time for it at all.

The sight of Ixoi looming through the clouds had certainly got the nomads moving once more. They were all caught between hell and high water, as the ancient expression went. It was never more apt. The gloom cast by the unnatural clouds made it difficult to tell, but the Canoness could swear that the horizon was taller than it should be.

The timing of her plan was critical, for the evac ships she had requested from Dhrost's command would not linger planetside for long. Though she had outwardly maintained that the Great Corral had been formed purely as a defensible position, the real reason was to use the populace as bait. Their job done in attracting the ravenous Tyranids, the nomads were to flee whilst the Adepta Sororitas engaged the living tide that sought to pursue them, holding them in place and evacuating moments before the tsunami hit the infested war zone with killing force. The Tyranids, animalistic and fierce, would like as not fail to draw any distinction between the populace and the Orders under her command. They had already attacked the Battle Sisters once without hesitation, and she was banking on the fact they would do so again.

Sure enough, by the look of the gathering clouds the xenos were inbound on their position once more, too hungry or too stupid to look further than their prey. She knew hers was a desperate plan, but against the near-infinite numbers of the swarms she had little choice. In the end, it would not be the Lysite nomads that held the line until the critical moment – they would be heading off at full speed whilst the Battle Sisters bought them time to escape. If the Adepta Sororitas were lucky enough to reach Dhrost's evac ships as she had planned, it would be at the very last minute – though there was a very real possibility they would not make it at all.

Grace stared at the horizon once more, her bionic eye whirring as it compared pict-steals. The green-grey band atop the landscape was indeed growing in size. A matter of hours before the crushing, boiling impact that would either save this world or damn it altogether.

'Come on, come on,' she said under her breath. 'Come and get it, star-vermin... It's now or never...'

She glanced back to the caravan of crawler hulks stretching into the distance for a moment, and her breath caught for the second time in as many minutes.

Some of the vehicles were silhouetted side-on, grinding around and heading back to reinforce the Sororitas line.

'No...' she whispered. 'No, surely not... You're supposed to be fleeing...'

The Canoness slumped against a shattered statue and began to pray.



When the second wave of Tyranids attacked Lysios, it was not only from the skies, but also from below.

The caravan of crawler hulks had split into two distinct columns, one of which was peeling off to head back to the Sororitas' position. Grace's Sister Dialogus respectfully approached through the rising swell of water, informing her that they had established a shaky vox-contact with the nomad elders. After her latest sermon there had been a mass conversion to the Imperial Creed. The nomads were coming back to fight alongside their saviours or be martyred in the Emperor's sight.

The Canoness laughed, a bleak sound without humour. There was no way the millions-strong tribes that were returning to join her at the front line would fit into Dhrost's drop ships alongside the Sororitas that were to lure the Tyranids in close before escaping. By turning back to save their new allies, the nomads had likely doomed everybody. They would all go to their graves together.

It was then that explosions of brine erupted in a hundred different locations across the drowned city. Slithering bioforms rose like a plague of resurrected dead, slime-slick water cascading from their open jaws. Almost simultaneously the heavens opened, and thousands of fat-bodied spores splashed down into the unclean streets.

By the time the grotesque things had landed, the Adepta Sororitas had already mounted up in their Rhinos and Immolators. Exorcists shot volleys of deadly missiles into the skies, clearing a path through the city by preventing the Tyranids from landing in the streets ahead. The steaming remains of detonated spores pattered down once more as the mounted column began to roll out.

The hive fleet was not about to relinquish its prize so easily. Serpentine Ravens and Trygons wound through the streets, water spraying as they drove towards the Adepta Sororitas column. Hooked claws punched through the metal skins of the Rhinos leading the advance, the largest beasts physically hurling the transports aside even as the Sisters within fired mass-reactive volleys against their chitinous carapaces.

Emerging from the lead Rhino's cupola to commandeer its storm bolter, Canoness Grace fired shots into yawning gullets and yellow xenos eyes. All around her, bulldozer blades shunted through rubble and xenos alike, the multi-melta fire of her Retributors reducing everything in her path to clouds of foul-smelling ash. Despite the beasts bursting out from the ground every few dozen feet, the Sororitas were hanging grimly on to their escape plan. The column ground onwards towards the drop ships.

From their vantage point high above the armoured column, Grace's Seraphim squads saw not only a wall of water converging on her column from the south, but two living tides of Tyranids closing upon it from the east and west like the jaws of a vice. In the middle distance the caravan of crawler hulks was spreading out, many of its larger vehicles spewing smoke and flame from their upper decks. Some had even ground to a halt.

The vox filled with the din of screams and shouted imprecations, the occasional Cryptite blasphemy or Imperial psalm blurring out over the chaos as the nomad population was consumed by its first ever war of faith. Instead of making their escape as Grace had intended, a scattered flotilla of crawler hulks was grinding back towards the city, prow guns blazing.

Just as the streets ahead were swamped by a new influx of beasts, a series of artillery strikes flung geysers of water, rocks and Tyranid bodies high into the air. Taking advantage of this sudden turn of events, the Battle Sisters drove their rugged vehicles into each steaming crater, forcing their way further through the streets.

Seraphim swooped from the skies, bursts of fire from their hand flamers burning back the swarming broods attempting to block the armoured column's path. To the flanks, Immolators turned the incandescent beams of their melta weaponry on emerging Mawlocs and Trygons. Those that survived were hammered by bolter fire from chanting Battle Sisters that were leaning out of their transports' top hatches. The Imperial forces were keeping the foe at bay through faith and bloody-mindedness. As far as turning back the Tyranid swarms went, however, they might as well have been throwing rocks into the sea.

Hovering low through the clouds came the heavy evac ships of Dhrost's fleet, their hulls partially dissolved by the gauntlet of bio-weapons fire they had been forced to run. Hope flared in every Sororitas breast as the column fought its way towards the hovering vessels, many of which were already lowering their salvation ramps. Guns blazing, the nearest crawler hulks lowered drawbridges of their own with hisses of compressed air, crowds of refugees sprinting down to dive for the salvation of the Astra Militarum transports.

It was then that Shelse's wrath bore down upon the city with apocalyptic force.



Canoness Grace turned in the cupola to watch in awe as disaster claimed the battle. The tidal wave was stronger than the largest Mechanicus god-machine and more voracious than a horde of starving Tyranids. The immense tonnage of water and rubble was pulverising martyr and monster alike. Grace felt a pulse of triumph. Despite their giddy numbers, the Tyranid swarms infesting the sunken city were being consumed completely.

They were not alone. Grace's heart broke as she saw hundreds of her devout Sisters swallowed up by the thrashing, boiling waters, broken apart inside their power armour as tremendous forces ground them to pulp. One by one the Sororitas vehicles at the rear of the armoured column heading for the evac ships were snatched up, reduced to little more than detritus by the violence of their demise.

The Canoness forced herself to focus on salvation. Up ahead the evac ships had settled down next to a pair of weather-stained crawler hulks that were firing their autocannons into the swarm, their ramps open to allow the nomad populace to run inside. She ordered her armoured column to plough on as the tidal swell chasing them grew ever more fierce. Thank the Emperor for the rugged construction of Imperial vehicles, she thought, sending a volley of storm bolter shells into a snake-like alien bursting out of a nearby ruin. The orders might have a chance yet.

Suddenly Grace's Rhino was trundling up the great ramp of the nearest evac ship, Lysites scattering as the armoured column drove into their midst. A huddled knot of women and children were scurrying for the ramps, faces fraught with anguish. Snake-bodied xenos were closing in from all sides.

They were not going to make it.

Crawling out of the cupola, Canoness Grace leapt from the top of the Rhino to land with a clang upon the steel grille of the ramp. 'Get inside!' she bellowed, waving the citizens on and firing her bolt pistol into the slithering Tyranids chasing after them.

The civilians rushed past, moaning in fear as they scurried into the darkness of the evac ship's hold. The Adepta Sororitas had saved more of the planet's people than Grace had dared to hope, though it had cost them dearly.

The ramp began to close as the evac ship's captain decided enough was enough. Grace patched a vox from her helmet, angrily demanding for him to wait a few more seconds, to save a few more lives.

Something flickered in the corner of her vision. She turned to see a monstrous figure made of blades emerge from the darkness behind the ramp's pistons. Six eyes glimmered in the gloom, a sight that had haunted her nightmares for years. The hated thing even bore the detonation scars from the last time she had killed it.

'I'll slay you a dozen times if I have to,' she snarled, pointing her bolt pistol at its mass of feeder tendrils.

The pistol clicked dry.

The nest of tentacles shot out, wrapping around her helmet and yanking it free. She roared her defiance as the Lictor's mantis claws whipped down for her unprotected neck.

Then, in a double spray of blood, the Martyr Saint of Lysios finally found the redemption she craved.



THE SHIELD DESTROYED



From one end of the Cryptus System to the other, the tendrils of the Leviathan coiled around their prey. The invasion had adapted with shocking speed to the adverse conditions of each planet, identifying little difference between whether those circumstances were atmospheric, geological or humanocentric. Every facet of the prey worlds was merely an obstacle to be overcome. By the fierce hyperevolution of the Tyranid fleet, overcome they were – all in the space of less than three days.

The fact that such a populous and well-defended system should fall to the encroaching hive fleets was shocking enough in itself. More horrifying still, the Cryptus System had fallen to the Tyranids a good deal faster than those that had defied the Great Devourer's previous conquests, Thandros, Ichar IV, and Kiltor amongst them. The Tyranids were learning of the Imperium's ways just as the Imperium was doing its best to learn of them. The armies of Mankind, however, had been set in their ways for millennia; the opposite was true of the Tyranids. They were turning each lethal lesson into the impetus to create new and ever deadlier organisms.

In this galaxy-wide war of information, the single galactic intelligence of the Hive Mind absorbed the findings of each of its component fleets instantaneously. Every synapse beast had a direct link to the gestalt intelligence that governed it. By contrast the Imperium still had few solid truths on which to base its war doctrine. Its systems, worlds and even cities were all but isolated by the strange interference of the Hive Mind, and whenever the Tyranids descended from the skies, each had to face the horror of invasion anew.

Outmatched, outnumbered and with their strategies in tatters, the remnants of the Cryptus System's populace had fled their ruined planets as best they could. The Cadians could not cope with the lethal new strains of toxin beast and psyker-bioform that had descended upon them, foes that even the *Militarum Tempestus* were ill equipped to fight. Barely a million refugees had reached the safety of intact evac zones. Even then, the saviour ships and vessels that sought to bear them to safety were often intercepted and torn out of the skies by swooping Hive Crones.

When the drop ships left the surface of Lysios, the cursed planet was already being hailed as the site of a great Imperial victory. The Adepta Sororitas had enacted a costly

but extremely effective battle plan, luring the Tyranids into the shadow of the tidal swell that scoured the planet every lunar cycle. However, the mass religious conversion that Canoness Magda Grace had worked so hard to bring about had finally borne fruit at the most inopportune of times. A full half of those citizens she had hoped to evacuate had turned back to fight alongside her rearguard just as the crushing tsunami ground down upon defender and Tyranid invader alike. Barely a thousand Adepta Sororitas and Lysite nomads made it off-planet before grotesque feeder tubes descended to drink the heady broth of brine and dead bodies left in their wake. As for Magda Grace herself, she was cut down on the threshold of salvation by the Lictor that had hounded her since her first encounter with the Tyranids upon Desseran. She had thought the beast to be a devil, but it was just another creature that the hive fleets had created, expended, absorbed and reconstituted, just as it would a thousand times over.

Ixoi, the planetoid whose sheer bulk was responsible for the crushing devastation upon Lysios, was swathed with so much spore-fog its colouration had changed completely. Dotted across its landscape were the torn hulks of uncounted vehicles, from the industrial machinery of its miners to the once-proud tanks of the Vostroyan Firstborn. Each wreck had been stripped to bare metal by the virulence of the caustic toxin-clouds that swathed the planet. Those that had defended it were left as partial skeletons, dusty mulch clad in the film-thin remnants of flak armour. The hive ships lowered their mouthparts to the planet nonetheless, drinking in the cocktail of rot and poison with which the Tyranids had pre-digested the world.

The urban sprawl of Asphodex was overrun completely – by the swarms disgorged on the first day of invasion, by the Genestealers that infested the undercity, and by the strange new bioforms unleashed in its final days. Hive Fleet Leviathan, when wounded by the combined power of the Cadian Shock Troops and the Flaxian Dynasty, had evolved new weapon-beasts possessed of unprecedented psychic might. Against them, conventional defences were meaningless. In the confusion of the planet's last few hours, Augustus Flax had fled back to his underground lair, and Dhrost had disappeared. Not even his command squad knew where he was. If the general still lived, he must have carried a heavy burden of rage and guilt indeed, for over ninety-eight percent of his command had perished.

The jade orb Aeros, once a realm of shifting, ethereal mists, had been transformed into a planet-sized miasma of poison. Spores of all kinds seeded each of the gaseous strata, their size ranging from the microscopic to the enormous. At first, the Valkyries of the Cadian Airborne had taken a heavy toll on the Tyranid skyswarms that were poured from hovering bio-ships into the outer strata of the planet. On the second day, however, the atmosphere had become so choked with spores that visibility reached untenable levels. Jenst's Imperial squadrons were forced to disengage, conceding the planet's loss in the hope of making a difference elsewhere.

Tartoros was already lost, its void generators reduced to rubble and its defenders either boiled alive by radiation or hunted by wrecker-beasts the size of the buildings. No reinforcements dared the solar storms to aid them, no drop ships stood by to salvage what they could from the planet's arid surface. The Magnovitrium, source of the solar energy that formed the system's lifeblood, drifted useless in the skies. Its giant lens reflected only a scattering of Tyranid monstrosities gorging on Cadian corpses far below.

From the shattered domes of Tartoros to the corpse-strewn guns of the Castellan Belt, the Tyranids had begun to feast on the rich fodder of their victory. The mighty Imperium had met its match and more besides, its armies humbled and one of its richest systems conquered in the space of a few dreadful nights. Around this tendril, the Shadow in the Warp was thicker and more cloying than ever before, and nearly every mayday signal or quarantine request was swallowed up unheard.

Only one telepathic distress cry echoed through the Warp. Perhaps it was the fact that the signal was alone that gave it such psychic potency. Perhaps it was the sad irony that it was as much a death knell as it was a call for salvation. For though that most desperate of signals did indeed reach an Imperial fleet, and though that fleet had not only the will but also the might to answer it, it was arguably already too late. By the time the would-be saviours arrived in-system, they would only be dooming themselves.

But this was the Imperium of Mankind, and its defenders have never shirked from damnation.







A terrible dragon shall come,
coiling from the void below,
through deadly cold and
through stone it shall pass

and yet live.

across the heavens it shall uncoil,
there it shall battle the giant,
under light of blood-hued stars,

it shall devour

=all=

