

WARP RIFT

THE BATTLEFLEET GOTHIC NETZINE



ISSUE 24

HORIZON

FROM THE NEXUS PUBLISHING HOUSE

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All types of article are desperately needed, to keep this publication alive. In some cases, submission includes inclusion on the web site at: www.epic40k.co.uk, or through www.tacticalwargames.net. Please include a note with your submission if you would like this clarified. Submission via e-mail implies approval for publication.

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EDITORIAL

+ OPENING A TOMB +

Welcome,

And finally I can announce the new location of Specialist Games:

<http://www.sg.tacticalwargames.net/>

And the forum:

<http://www.sg.tacticalwargames.net/forum/>

Hopefully we will see an access to the old data very soon but that seems to be a real problem.

With Warp Rift I can bring you another host of great articles. The High Admiralty gives us a view on torpedoes while Reg Steiner tries to clarify some points on his simultaneous movement and combat system.

Warp Rift staff members Reg and Ray are responsible for the Encyclopedia section, talking about Necrons, WoT and escorts.

In the Void Stalker section we have the hidden scenario from the Project Distant Darkness - revival - ruleset. I felt it a good time to publish as the first supplement to the Project, called 'The Art of Command' is being geared towards a late summer release.

And a special thanks to Rodrigo Barbera (GothiComp 2005 conversion winner) for making the wonderful markers in the Forge available. Next issue even more markers!

at your service,
Horizon

+++ WARP RIFT BLOG +++

You can check out our blog at the following location:

http://www.players.tacticalwargames.net/tiki-view_blog.php?blogId=10

+++ WARP RIFT FORUM +++

Check out the Warp Rift forum at:

<http://www.tacticalwargames.net/forums/index.cgi?act=SF;f=89>

+++ GOTHICOMP 2009 +++

GothiComp 2009 is up an running. You have until july 31 to enter your submissions to this online painting competition.

Here is the email adress for your submissions:

comps@tacticalwargames.net

Looking forward to see all the glorious entries! For a full article on GothiComp check out Warp Rift 23.

Horizon

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NECRONS IN BFG

BY REG STEINER

Answering the question: “What do you think about ...” is a walk in a minefield for everybody. However, having been asked, I will try to eventually make a point. First, some background, as I build around my ideas.

Starting with the Battle Fleet Gothic magazine #2, everyone including myself wanted to try this alien fleet for size. Everyone wants a tough as nails force to game with, whatever game. The Necrons looked nasty, as introduced. But our group was unable to get our hands on models. Local stores had no interest in an unknown product to attempt to sell, having been ‘stuck’ with unpopular new releases before this. We decided to build our own. I had written some fiction, describing rather more simplistic ship designs, that our gang wanted to use as a ‘test medium’ for Necron fleets. The ‘same as’ rule can cover a lot of options we had to consider.

The Necron fleets were speedily built of balsa wood and Styrofoam, with an eye toward making cruiser sized vessels near the size of Imperial cruisers, and battleships nearly the same as Imperial battleships, and so on. The ‘battle stations’ we created were unlike anything in any source material from GW. They did help to amplify the resulting situation, however.

Very shortly, no one wished to contend against Necron ships or fleets. Even without the too-powerful battle stations included. The combination of weapons, defense, and speed could not be overcome. Psychic attacks, cutting Necron opponent’s chances of return attacks, coupled

with ‘layers’ of critical hit damage from swarms of hit and run attacks, added a most unwelcome dimension to the games. Who wants to take part in games where one player has no chance at all? We were all back to our Eldar, Ork, Imperial, and Chaos fleets very soon. The Necron models we built never left the box.

When the Armada book came out, we quickly found where some weapons had been dropped from Necron ships, and a couple of other minor changes. Speed, of escorts, was unchanged. At 50cm move each phase, they had no fear of Imperial ordinance, which plods along at a mere 30cm per phase. Necron Escorts just ‘buzz around’ any assault boats that might eliminate them. So layers of critical hits still pile on any Necron opponents. With all the debate about “too powerful” Nova Cannon, and the resulting attempts to restrict Nova cannon use, and other ordinance use as well, what means is there to counter Necron abilities? A Necron escort that conducts hit and run attacks has a clear field. The Necron vessels in the Armada book still ‘turned off’ players in our group. You could bring Necrons to a game session, and everyone would admire the paint work, but nobody is going to give a Necron player a game.

Too many negatives added up. Alternating turns amplified the disparity, with no way to respond to the damage heaped onto one’s forces, because it isn’t your turn yet.

I did talk two fellows into a game or two, using unmodified rules. That is, no Imperial restrictions

on Nova cannon numbers, and the ‘official’ alternative to guessing ranges. Also, no restrictions on ‘carriers’ in play. Arguments about ‘arms races’ lost out to the idea that empires adapt or die. Meaning that whatever was necessary would be sent to battle such a dangerous enemy as the Necron proved to be.

After several games between those two (I had to referee - my ‘luck’ with Nova cannons cursed me.), the results were as predicted. A lot more Imperial firepower had to be brought in, for the Imperial player to gain a victory over the Necron. The ability to pile on the critical hits with impunity, from hit and run attacks, remained a game spoiler.

In another essay, I told of this group’s piratical desire to board and take possession of enemy ships. The boarding actions versus hit and run rules, I drew up, grew out of collective dissatisfaction with the very concept of hit and run attacks, as outlined in BFG.

The last straw was the disengagement rules. Everyone else faces destruction. The Necron merely sail away, unimpeded.

The final judgment of our group was that the Necron fleet was not worth purchasing. Too powerful, as written. We did not wish to waste hard to come by cash for a fleet other players refuse to compete against.

So there is the problem. Even I see no use in playing against a Necron fleet. The chance of success is too slim for any enjoyment.



All this leads to the question: “How would I bring the Necron vessels into the game?”

Assuming that the original rules are used, without house rules governing Nova guns and ordinance, some re-design of the Necron fleet is needed. I hesitate to get into re-design, but to get the Necron ships ‘out of the box’ and into games, things can’t be left as is.

First, top speed for Necron escorts should be 40cm. Personally, I feel this is too fast still, but making a race ‘distinct’, and not just re-hashed, reworded Imperial weapon types and ship types, requires stretching playability just a little.

Second, drop the ‘Hit-and-Run’ ability for an escort class ship. If fighting for possession of the ship is beyond BFG gamer’s willingness, then give this escort a nasty torpedo style mass-driver attack. Or drop this type altogether.

The “portal” attack from the largest Necron ship should remain, but make a “Boarding Action”, not a whole series of ‘hit-and-run’ attacks (5 !?). This “Boarding Action” would still be restricted to attacks on enemy ships with less than 6 points

remaining.

Third, ‘Psychic’ attacks. With all the ‘psychic’ attacks and defenses all over the 40k gaming landscape, why is this one indefensible? The command check part is insufficient. The reference to all ordinance being destroyed is interpreted to be all the time, even if the sepulcher is in use against another ship. I would drop the reference to the sepulcher, altogether. Or design a defense ships can bring to the battle. Every race has psychic attack ability. Some attempts to use Ork weird boys in BFG failed the test of playability, as well. Easier to drop the whole ‘psychic attack’ idea from BFG, says I.

Fourth, make ‘Disengaging’ more costly for Necron players. If it is a ‘last resort’ because of penalties, careful planning and escape at just the right moment will not win games for the Necron gamer. A real battle with real losses from destruction must be risked. A careful study of the victory points and conditions will show how current players of Necron fleets can get in the first turn of damage on the enemy, and ‘fade out’ before any opponent can

return fire, and still have a Necron ‘victory’. The scenario conditions need be met, not just victory points from an early hit, and disengagement to win games. Of course not all scenarios can be won this way, but an interesting number of Necron players know which ones to play. Make the disengagement rule costlier for the sake of the over-all game community.

With these changes, the nuts and bolts of using the Necron fleet will be easier for everyone to digest and use. And game against.

I have to re-state again that the Nova cannon and carriers of ordinance need to have the artificial restrictions removed altogether. If a Necron fleet player wants to actually achieve some goal other than shooting up the enemy fleet, then the gauntlet of some early hits must be run, and without ‘disengaging’ with the first damage suffered.

Eldar and Dark Eldar players already have the means to give a good fight, and with the above changes, even a better chance of crushing some Necron pyramids. With firepower repaired and restored to the Imperial players, and so a greater chance in most scenarios, hesitation to take on Necron fleets should fade. Ork players may even refrain from ram attacks only, and try other ways to ‘lay the guns on’ Necron ships. Could happen.

I stayed away from tinkering with the ‘weapons attacks’ parts of the Necron fleets, because the above changes should remove the most irritants from Necron games, and dealing with a lot of deadly firepower is supposed to be part of the challenge.

Or let the Necron fade back to sleep for another million years.

Reg.

WOT'S THIS GOTTA TO DO WITH...

BY RAY BELL

Hello, it's been a while since I've graced these pdf pages, mainly due to my quite healthy gaming activities taking up my 'invention' time.

I would consider myself quite experienced in the world of table top gaming whilst owning a staggering amount of different games. Over the last couple years I've actually been playing said games in the hopes of inspiration for my ever distant Warrant of Trade (WoT) side project. WoT is a more complicated version of BFG primarily designed for small engagements of only a hand full of ships in an RPG style similar to Inquisitor or Warhammer Quest. Sadly my tinkering hasn't presented itself as a fully fleshed out rule set yet as the rules became far too cluttered and took far too long to play with. However many house rules can be stolen from the WoT formulae to be used in standard BFG, including an additional shooting and ordnance phase and embarrassingly complex boarding rules.

Right introduction out of the way, onto the good stuff! (Rules are in italics).

Additional Shooting Phase

At the end of each shooting phase the other player has an additional shooting phase. All weapon strengths are halved rounding up in your turn and rounding down in your opponents.

This house rule basically takes the edge off the person who took the first turn. This does unbalance

scenarios where the first turn gives a designed advantage and so may not be suitable for use in this circumstance. Also ships that have Locked-on become really tempting targets to force a brace. The queerness of no penalty to shooting for a ship that is boarded is solved. The Eldar Move Shoot Move rules actually become bearable with these rules but they are too fragile (or just plain hard to use).

Extended Ordnance Phase

In addition to the normal rules you may launch your ordnance in your part of the enemies ordnance phase. Note: you may still only reload in the beginning of your turn.

This is just a simple extension of the additional shooting phase rule set. This works well when saving your torpedoes or attack craft for a close range shot, hopefully after your opponent has expended his fighters (or just hasn't launched any). Sneaking in a bomber wave then reloading and doing it again before the ship has even moved might seem broken but it's still very similar to how you can play your ordnance now, so in terms of point value I wouldn't fret over it.

Although extremely unlikely it is possible to fly through torpedoes you've just launched, for instance some cobras went on AAF after launching in the last ordnance phase, in this circumstance allow the torpedoes to miss you.

Boarding (for use with the additional shooting phase)

Declaring a Boarding Action

Either player may declare boarding at the end of the movement phase with a target in base contact. To use boarding dice you must have declared boarding. No ships that have declared boarding may fire in the shooting phase but they may launch ordnance. It is possible not to use boarding dice while being boarded by not declaring a retaliatory boarding action so that you may still shoot in the shooting phase. The Boarding action takes place at the beginning of the End Phase before any other actions.

Turrets

Before you have rolled any offensive boarding dice a defending player can use his turrets. Roll a D6 for each turret committed to the boarding action, each 4+ removes an enemy boarding dice (before it's rolled). Note: you can only use massed turrets if the ship offering this bonus is also in this boarding action and has at least one of his turrets dedicated to the boarding action.

Boarding Dice

Both players may attack with boarding dice of up to half their remaining hits rounding up. Simply roll these dice, each 4+ you have rolled causes damage which may be saved by defensive boarding dice. For each successful roll, even if saved, roll a D6 on a roll of a 6 you have caused a Hit and Run attack.

You may use your boarding dice defensively to save

against damage. Roll for each of your defensive boarding dice, on a 4+ a hit is saved. The player who initiated the boarding action declares how many boarding dice he is using offensively first and in the case of a multiple boarding action which ships to attack.

Boarding modifiers

Double boarding value only allows you to re-roll your boarding dice. Also half boarding value means you must re-roll successful boarding dice.

Fleet specific boarding modifiers are still applicable, e.g. +1 modifier for being chaos will mean you attack or defend on a 3+.

As a reminder these are the Fleet specific boarding modifiers:

Chaos: +1

Chaos Space Marines: +2

Dark Eldar: +1

Orks: +1

Space Marines: +2

Tau must re-roll successful boarding dice because of their half boarding value.

*Tyranids get a +2 Boarding modifier and re-rolls because of their double boarding value.

All special orders except Brace for Impact cause a -1 modifier.

Brace for impact offers no save in boarding but no modifier, so it can be advantageous to switch to BFI if already on another special order. You may attempt this at the beginning of a boarding action.

If a ship has blast markers in contact it suffers from a -1 modifier.

If a ship is crippled it suffers from a -1 modifier.

These rules are basically a translation from WoT except that in WoT there are no fleet based modifiers you simply get a different number of boarding dice

per hit e.g. Chaos get 1 boarding dice for every 3 hits and Imperial get 1 for every 4 hits.

Additional Boarding Rules

Shooting

Shooting at ships in a boarding action is only possible after a successful leadership test on 3D6. Treat the target as ordnance for purposes of gunnery weapons (far right column) and lances (hitting on a 6+). This may seem almost pointless but the addition of a Blast Marker changes the effectiveness of a boarding action and may destroy ordnance. The firing player may choose where on the base the blast marker is placed so it doesn't have to be contact with both ships.

Ordnance

Ordnance may attack any ship or ordnance marker in a boarding action as normal, or may be used to assist in the boarding action as follows:

Fighters can be used to suppress turrets when boarding. Simply reduce the turret value by as many fighter markers the boarding player has committed, removing them after the action. The defender can remove one enemy boarding dice for each of his fighter markers in the boarding action. Roll a D6 as usual to see if the defeated boarding attempt results in a loss of a hit on a 6.

Bombers may attack as normal and may not be shot at by turrets unless the defending player wishes to forgo using them in the boarding action. Note: the bombers attack runs will still be affected by the turrets.

Assault Boats may be used as normal and just like bombers may not be shot at by turrets unless the defending player wishes to forgo using them in the boarding action. Assault boats may instead be used in a more meaningful way by adding 1 to any boarding dice roll after they have been rolled

including defensive rolls. You may use more than one assault boat on one dice. Note: If you didn't need to use assault boats in the boarding action they will still be removed from play after the boarding action is resolved.

Torpedoes (Including boarding torpedoes) act as normal and may not be shot at by turrets unless the defending player wishes to forgo using them in the boarding action. The Boarding player may of course shoot at the torpedoes if he wishes.

Teleporter attacks

Teleporter attacks may be used as normal, or against the vessel being boarded even if it has more hits and even if its' shields are up! Just like assault boats you can use a teleporter attack to add 1 to any boarding dice roll after they have been rolled. You can use a teleporter attack and an assault boat on the same dice.

I've separated these rules from the 'basic' boarding rules as although not complicated they really clutter the rules for casual players.



RULES FOR HEAVY ESCORTS

BY REG STEINER

Introduction:

During gaming, our group found that those races that could have large numbers of assault boats forced everyone else away from using escorts. Why bother? Every assault boat launched could “take out” a much more expensive escort, during its attack, except when a “1” was rolled. Any critical hit destroys an escort, remember. Adding another turret to an escort tilted game balance the other way, we felt, after a couple of tries.

Enter the Smotherman Formula. I calculated that the real reason a ship designer would want a bigger vessel, would be because more guns were wanted. So. I calculated that eight (8) points, added to an escort’s cost, would add one point of hull (Hit Points now = 2), and two more weapons batteries. (Example: Sword Escort now = 6 WB’s).

A 40 point escort now costing 48 points, as an example, also makes for more careful force selections.

Our game group discovered that an escort could now be attacked by assault boats, and only damaged, not destroyed automatically. Bombers were suddenly useful again. To use Heavy Escorts, we made these rules.

Rule One: All escorts of a given type, must be the same. Example: Sword class escorts are made Heavy Escorts. All Sword class escorts on the table, or in the game, can only be of the heavy type, and paid for as such. Firestorm class escorts were not made heavy, and so remain as given in the rulebook.

Our group decided that this option was easier

then making every model in a game “Heavy” automatically. Players still have options for normal or heavy, or a mix, with different classes. We also know how easy confusion sets in during a “hot” game. Even the owner of the forces could/would get confused, if some Sword class are “Heavy” and others on the table were not.

Rule Two: All types of frigates can be so modified, but not destroyer types. These remain one point of damage vessels. A bigger destroyer would just be a frigate, still with one hull point. We feel that the destroyer type vessel is just too small to add two WB’s, even with more structure added. Several races have types that do not lend themselves to becoming Heavy Escorts. However, all races have one or more types of escort that benefit greatly.

Rule Three: Heavy Escorts are not cruisers! Heavy Escorts reduced to zero hit points merely leave two blast markers behind. Explosive Critical Hits only remove the Heavy Escort, again placing two blast markers, with the only effects being normal blast marker effects. Other Critical Hits play the same, except: Frigate type vessels normally have “all around” Weapons Batteries, even Heavy Escorts. So. Any critical hit that affects Weapons Batteries - Front, Side, or Dorsal - affects all Heavy Escort WB’s.

Players could, by common agreement, try using cruiser explosive criticals, but we find the games get bogged down too much, with no real benefit to anyone.

Rule Four: Players must discuss using Heavy Escort rules, before choosing ships for a scenario. All Escort types made Heavy, must be identified to opponents before ship placement begins, at the start of a game. They have bigger energy signatures, after all.

Rule Five: Heavy Escorts are treated in every other way, like every other escort. Moves, turns, squadrons, combat, and etc. are not changed.

Conclusion: Our gaming group liked this option, for Heavy Escorts, right from the start. Assault boats full of suicide minded warriors were only annoying again, and not so powerful that a “...city sized warship...” could be destroyed so easily. Also, we have found that a screen of escorts is useful again. Each heavy escort firing on a wave of incoming ordinance, increases the chances of a whole wave, or waves, being destroyed. Our group likes gunnery games, not ordinance dominated games of waves of bombers and assault boats, deciding every game outcome. We all still employ Carriers, but as just one more tool in the box of tactics, not as the only tactic. We have all played in other groups where house rules limited the number of Carriers. But we decided that self-limiting, because Carrier effectiveness was reduced, not eliminated, is a better way to go.

Try this idea of “Heavy Escorts” in some games. You will find that escorts don’t have to be left in the box, anymore. Have Fun !! May the molten fragments of your enemies fill the sky !!

Reg

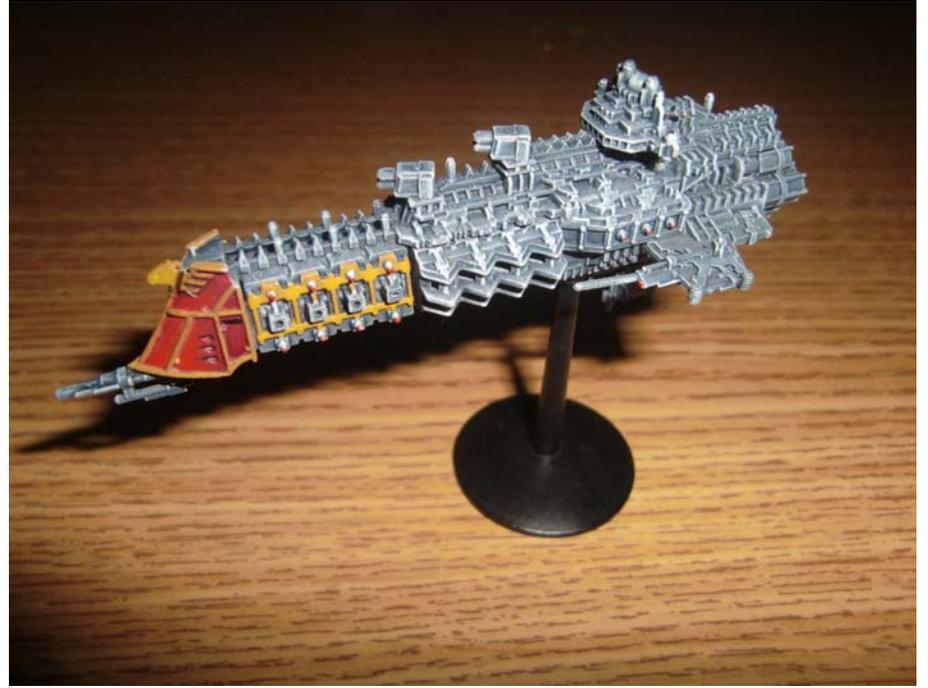
BATTLEFLEET LIMANTE

SOME VESSELS OF THE IMPERIAL NAVY IN THE LIMANTE SECTOR BY BRYAN MCMAHON

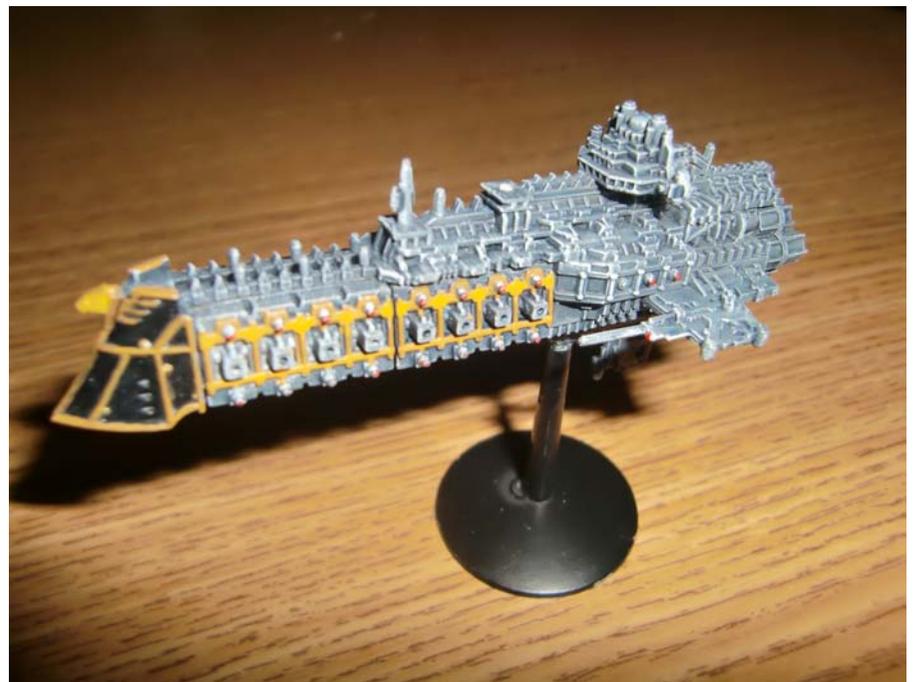
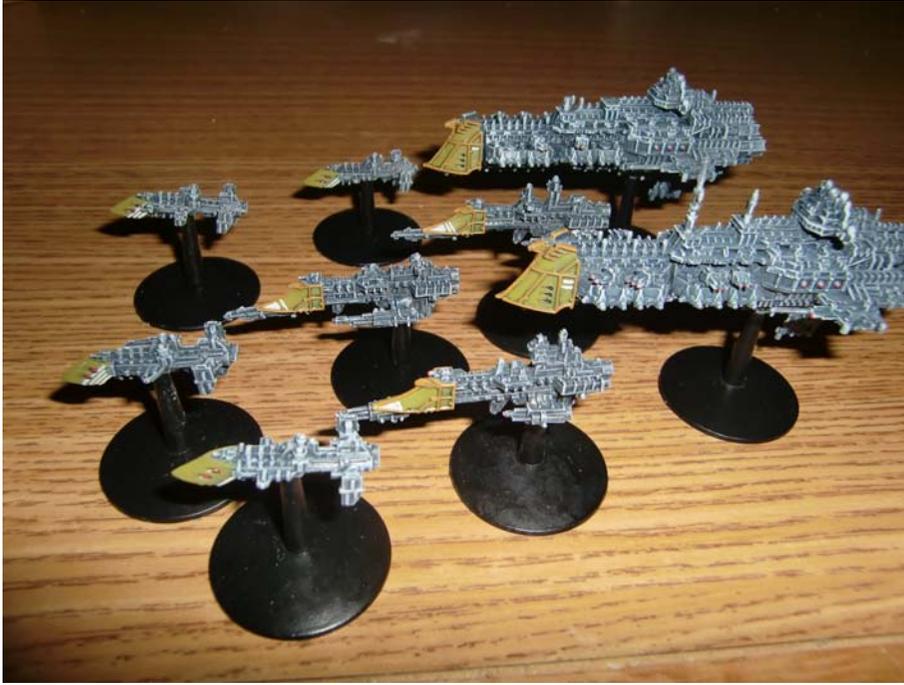


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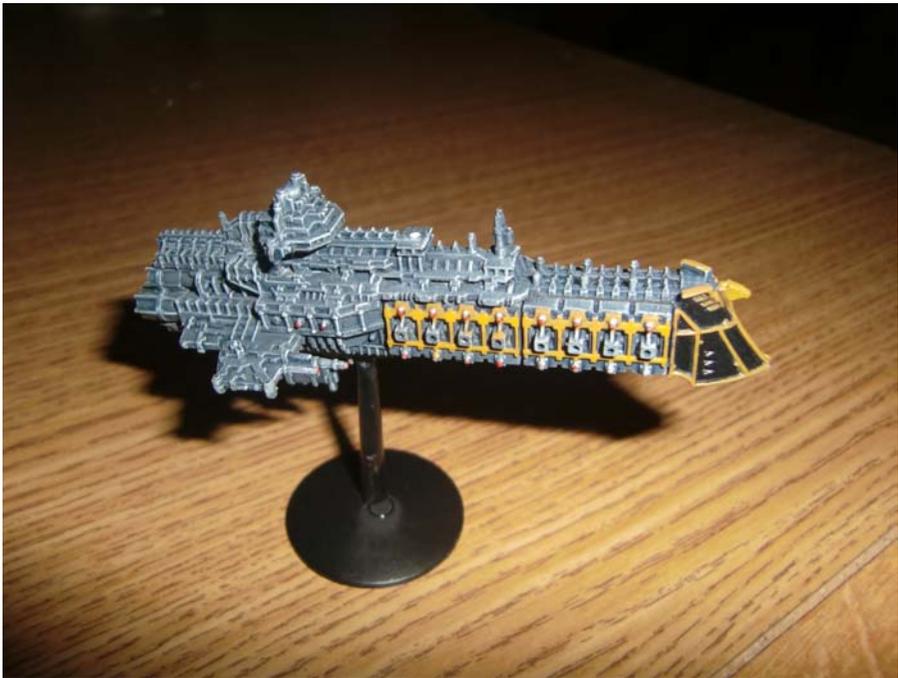
SHOWCASE



SHOWCASE



SHOWCASE



HIGH ADMIRALITY : TORPEDOES

In the forums some questions arose about torpedoes. Mainly about some things which are not adressed in the rulebook. Here is the view from Ray Bell and Bob Hendrson.

Launching torpedoes can be quite a clumsy affair and embarrassingly is not covered in enough detail in the rule book. So in the absence of printed rules let me give you a quick rule addendum.

When launching torpedoes the marker must end its movement in which ever arc it was launched from and its furthestmost edge at the limit of its speed from the ships stem.

For ease of play I would move the marker its full distance to begin with to ensure its final position and then use an identical marker to confirm its targets. It is possible to attack targets out of arc due to ordnance attacking when it hits a base rather than a stem and the fact that some of the marker may be overlapping for some of its move which canny players will exploit. There is also a weird moment where the torpedo marker could touch an enemy in base contact but in the opposite arc, in the spirit of the game you shouldn't allow this attack.

Here are some more torpedo related clarifications:

- When reducing a torpedo marker the centre must always be in the same point.
- When turning torpedoes turn from the centre of the marker.
- You cannot split torpedoes.
- When launching a combined salvo from a squadron the salvo must be in ALL of the ships appropriate firing arcs and its furthestmost edge at the limit of its speed from the furthest ships stem.



I would also like to advise the use of str4 wide markers with dice marking the strength. This makes the use of torpedoes far less hassle.

- Ray Bell

I agree with Ray on most of his torpedo ideas save the use of a strength 4 marker. I distinctly remember Andy Chambers saying that if he had it all to do over, he'd use a strength 2 marker and simply indicate the strength with dice. Given the relative scale and the distortion the markers create, I think strength 2 (or 3 at the most) is the way to go.

I would also stress the measurement is from stem outwards, not base edge. That old chestnut keeps popping up and it makes large base ships essentially have longer range torps.

- Bob Henderson

On the smaller torpedo marker idea: a while ago I tried using the two small infantry bases from warhammer, these work pretty well (having a square base also helps when turning). But I guess if it were up to Bob only the smaller 2cm base would be a worthwhile prospect...? I would definitely encourage others to use the infantry bases as torp markers even if just the 2cm one.

- Ray Bell

If you notice a bugging rule issue which cannot be clarified or players simply not agree upon the explanation of a rule you can mail Warp Rift at Horizon@epic40k.co.uk and we will try to catch you an almost official answer.

SOME ANSWERS ON SIMULTANEOUS MOVEMENT

BY REG STEINER

In *Warp Rift 19* we presented you some alternative rules to play *Battlefleet Gothic: Simultaneous Movement and Combat*.

In the community various players adapted these changes to the rules and appreciating them very much. The rules are intended to take away the effect of who goes first and/or who shoots first. Making movement happening at the same time and combat resolved at the same time, creating a more fluid, intuitive and realistic game flow.

Ofcourse, sincre these rules where new some questions sprang forth. Reg Steiner hopes to deal with them in the following article. In the near future we hope to present an article on how the Eldar work within these rules.



1. Moving Ordinance.

The goal of the rules was to have two moves, making ordinance a separate and unique weapon system. Move once, but 60cm, in a turn just made the ordinance another kind of gun, in reality. So the

goal is to split the move in two, and importantly, also give the attacked vessels a chance at defending themselves with main gun systems. With that goal in mind, the Simultaneous Move/Combat Rules were meant to incorporate all forms of weapons systems as near to the original rules as possible.

The problem in the current version of the Simultaneous Rules (in *Warp Rift 19*) is the placement of the second move of ordinance on the order of play. An extremely abbreviated turn step outline should clear this up.

Each Player:

- A. Place orders, roll for special orders.
- B. Move ships as per orders
- C. Combat
 1. Fire at any ordinance in range (Launched in previous turns) with any main weapons chosen to do so. Apply damage now.
 2. Fire on any enemy ships with any remaining unfired main weapons. Apply damage.
 3. Launch any new ordinance. Resolve any resulting attacks new ordinance moves into. Apply damage.
 4. Move any ordinance still in play, launched previously (second and subsequent moves), and resolve any attacks, and damage is applied now.
- D. End Phase

*** Remember, both players fire guns and resolve ordinance attacks together, and both players apply

damage after each combat step is completed.

The placement of the fire order is to allow capitol ships to fire on incoming torpedoes and other attackers, as well as still allow the newly launched ordinance a chance at interception. In alternating turns, this is what occurs when new ordinance is launched, and then previously launched ordinance was allowed to move after.

My initial attempts at organizing the steps in the *Warp Rift* article caused the confusion. For which I apologize. Our actual play was far enough removed from my writing the article, that I mixed up the sequence. This should take care of what is intended, and actual play.

Thanks to everyone for writing, and trying the Simultaneous Rules.

Reg.



A TYRANID WAR
CHAPTER 10 - PART 1 OF 2

OLD AND NEW ENEMIES

BY REG STEINER

I. _____

Pen leaned over to see better. Her seat in the engineer's position, behind the pilot's seat, didn't have as good a view out the shuttle's front view port, as did the pilot, but Pen was only a passenger on this Imperial shuttle. She had been summoned from her work with the Misfits, as the Empire called the brotherhood of warriors, in this remote Northern section of the galaxy.

It had been thirteen years since Pen had last seen one of the enormous dreadnaughts of Earth's First Fleet. Pen reflected that a lot had happened in thirteen years. Pen had risen to a position of leadership in the hierarchy of Misfit military affairs. Not just because of her connections with a powerful family, through Althor and Ulthor, but because the Misfits are, by necessity, a warrior people, and hold the highest esteem for proven capable fighters and leaders. After so many years, Pen had thought that the Empire had forgotten her, and to some degree, the Misfit legions. Not so. The shuttle was just now entering the cavernous landing bay of the dreadnaught, to deliver Pen to an Imperial First Fleet Admiral.

Years ago, Pen would have been frightened at the prospect. Now she was curious, a little concerned, and even a little annoyed. No one knew what this meeting was all about. They only knew that the admiral wanted Imperial agent Pendragon brought to his ship right now!

Pen followed the agitated crewman down the ramp to the waiting squad of marine escorts. The entire squad fell in behind Pen, and her two bodyguards, and the crewman messenger who clearly desired to run the whole way. While in the lift to the upper levels, Pen felt the familiar vibrations. The vessel was getting under way. Pen set her jaw. Was she to be torn from the life she had built over the last thirteen years so callously? As the assembly quick stepped down the broad hall, behind the hurrying crewman, Pen felt the ire rise and build with each step.

A great blast door at last blocked their way. Decorated with a depiction

of some long ago battle against ship designs Pen did not recognize. The door split along an invisible seam, and parted to either side soundlessly.

The way was lined on the right with marines in mottled green armor, and on the left with more of the white and platinum armored marines like those escorting Pen. There must be a hundred of each, Pen thought. As Pen walked between the rows of marines, she saw to either side groups and little knots of quite a few people. Naval officers, marine officers, Imperial infantry officers, and a mix of government big shots from different administrative offices. Nearly all stopped whatever they were doing and stared at Pen pass by. Ahead, a dark blue curtain hung just beyond the end of the rows of marines. It appeared to wall in a fairly large box shaped space in the middle of this anteroom full of dignitaries. The same dark blue material formed a pyramidal canopy that made the structure over twenty feet high.

The crewman escort reached the curtain and began to motion for Pen to enter here. There was a gap where two curtains overlapped, just wide enough to make a passage one person wide between the walls of blue. Pen turned into the narrow lane between walls of blue, and after a few paces, turned into the muted light of the enclosure. And stopped in her tracks.

Lynx? Lynx! Standing in the middle of the enclosure, with her hands on her hips, frowning right at Pen!

"I seem to recall you were frequently tardy returning from a planet." Lynx stated in a mildly severe tone of voice.

"Lynx? What is this? I thought we had been banished. Now here you are, acting as if I just returned from one of your errands." Pen managed to blurt out, with not too much of a frown of her own.

"Ah. Yes. That." Lynx began. "We have been recalled. Or more accurately, you have been."

Lynx turned a little to one side and drew Pen's attention to the assembly flanking Lynx.

"These people desire very much to meet with you, on a matter of great urgency."

Lynx almost sounded amused. “Should I brief my former associate, or would you prefer to begin the proceedings?”

A short, rather round, older man stepped between two of the people who had been in front of him.

“I wish to get right to the matter that has gathered us all together, therefore I shall begin. Additional background information can be brought to light after that.” The older man’s voice was strong and deep, his appearance notwithstanding. Pen noticed the older man’s eyes were gray with flecks of gold, and made Pen feel as if there was iron of will behind those eyes.

“Inquisitor Foss, this is my former aide and agent, whom I called Pen.” Lynx added formally. “Pen, these Inquisitors, staff and military leaders require your help. No one else will do. Please note that you cannot be ordered to take on this mission, whatever they may wish to say to the contrary.”

“Yes, yes. We know your feelings on this matter Lynx.” Foss said, the same semi-severe, all business tone in his voice as Lynx nearly always had. “Agent ... Pen, is it? Please take note of this recording.” Foss gestured toward an aide by the comm console Pen recognized so well.

Above everyone’s head, an enormous ball of light appeared, as the holo was full of static. Followed by a moment of utter black, then a swirl of light as the image at last stabilized on the frequency.

Pen gasped. There was Longtooth. Frowning and growling as he obviously struggled with the controls for the communication gear. Behind him were several humans in naval jumpers, and a man in a Captain’s uniform, all on their knees, and watched over by more Orks holding big axes with sparks on the edges. Longtooth suddenly peered straight out of the holo at the assembly, his large, ugly, green face showing more scars, and his chin has metal plates riveted around it, but it is no doubt Longtooth.

“Arr - Huh! Got you!” Longtooth barked out of the holo projection. “Now you human things gotta listen Longtooth. Longtooth git lotsa tired ask’en. Now I tell ya. Human she. Agent for Em-per. Made deal with Longtooth lotsa twisting moons ago. Longtooth help. Kill redbugs and blue-teeth buggers. Longtooth make war. Lotsa twisting moons of war. Ho-Kay! Har! Now Longtooth Bloodfang take many battles, many stars now Orky! Redbugs and friends see Orky Longtooth, see Redbugs run! Good war! Har! Har! Not good part now. Orky find old stars, old planets, old walls and high pillars blinking like stars. Strange dark’n ships from nowhere. Not funny toys blink urr.. Orky burnt. Ships burnt. Strong Orky towers burnt. All Orks burnt! Arr.. Huh! Now human she meet Longtooth. Come soon, ur Longtooth go look-en and smash-en till human she agent see Longtooth. You know Longtooth keep word before, now keep what say now! Git she. Git now!” Longtooth turned his back, and pointed

a finger at the humans on their knees. “You! Pushy human with purty buttons! What now?” The captain raised his head and said “Push the one that’s glowing red to end the message” With a growl, Longtooth made a motion and the holo vanished.

Lynx had edged her way closer to Pen while Longtooth ranted at the room full of people.

“How about I pick up on the trail so far?” Lynx asked, looking at Foss. Foss responded with a nod, and folded his arms over his middle. The look of impatience on all the other faces was unmistakable.

Lynx turned to Pen. “It is widely known through out the sectors of the galaxy, where the Ork called Longtooth Bloodfang operated, humans were to give Ork forces a wide margin. Most commanders knew why. That an Inquisitor Lynx had goaded these Orks into war with the Tyranid invaders. Human fleets encountered by these Orks were even ignored, to the surprise of all concerned. Longtooth’s fleets grew ever larger, as more and more greenskins from all corners of the galaxy converged, to swell Longtooth’s armies beyond anything seen by humans before. Longtooth went looking for trouble. Any Ork spy that encountered Tyranid bio-constructs, or spies, or major Tyranid elements, called to Longtooth. Longtooth found plenty of trouble. Since these huge armies and fleets were moving below the galactic core, and ever deeper into the galactic core, Imperial interest was marginal. Imperial interests in the lower galactic core have long been lost to the rampages of barbarians, corsairs, pirates, and maniacal armies of Orks. And, of course, the Tyranid invaders. Imperial monitoring of the deep galactic core is nearly nonexistent. Longtooth went beyond Imperial abilities to track him, lost in the energy swept galactic center. Most of humanity said good riddance. But. A short while ago, Ork fleets came boiling out of those regions, scattered, and acting fearful of some pursuit. Intercepts of Ork messages were more garbled than ever. Then Longtooth burst out of non-space with a very large fleet, but many were damaged badly enough that they became a second fleet, following Longtooth, but unable to keep up. That’s when Longtooth began calling for “human she”, which was thought to be me. I was brought out of retirement. We tried to contact Longtooth, but he took one look at me and howled, growled, and finally made it understood that I was not the human he wanted.” Lynx stopped speaking long enough to scan the faces of the assembled important people. “None of these people know what you went through, years ago, while dealing with those green mad things we call Orks.”

“Even so, agent ... Pen, is the person for the job” Foss said, impatiently. “Whatever unpleasantness may have been necessary then, is not required now. We...”

Pen suddenly stepped up to Inquisitor Foss, her complexion dark, her

angry eyes narrowed.

“Unpleasantness?” Pen snapped. “Orks deal from treachery, lies, insults, and attempted murder of their hosts and other negotiators attempting to deal with them. This is how they deal with each other, and any other race that attempts to treat with them. The Empire has had fewer successful negotiations with Orks than I have fingers on one hand, in centuries!” Pen’s voice had lowered in register and volume until she was nearly growling. “Because I was successful once, you think you can just snap your fingers and I’ll just jump in again?” Everyone could see Pen was tight as a coiled spring. The hair on the neck of Foss stood up, as he leaned slightly back, instinctively tensing against the expected blow.

“Listen to me Pen,” Lynx said, lightly placing a hand on Pen’s right wrist. “No one is snapping their fingers. I said you cannot be made to take up this task, but we have to ask.”

“Excuse the interruption, Inquisitor Foss,” An aide from near a console said, “but this message is very important about agent Pendragon.”

Foss made a motion, and the aide came forward and handed a small display unit to Foss.

“Hmm..” Foss said after a moment. “It seems that the Misfit military is mobilizing in its entirety. Would seem that our agent here is also a very important person in the military and government for those people we have been calling Misfits. They are saying that we are kidnapping this important person, since we are trying to leave this system without any attempt to announce our intentions. And a total military response is how kidnappings have always been dealt with.” Foss stopped, and added his stare to everyone else’s looking at Pen. A wicked look was on Pen’s face, as was the look on the faces of the two bodyguards now closely flanking Pen. Anyone would think a firefight would erupt any second.

“Let me have a word or two with the Misfit leadership.” Lynx said a little too loudly. “I think they’ll remember dealing with me in the past. They should be favorable memories.”

“I should join you,” Pen said, coldly. “there may be some question as to my safety.”

“We can’t stop or turn back now,” Foss said firmly, “half the galaxy is in danger of widespread war because of this Ork Longtooth.”

“Longtooth is only making demonstrations, at the moment,” Lynx answered just as firmly, “he has not sacked any human worlds yet. He even let that cruiser and its crew go after he got off that message. The last thing I told Longtooth was that I would bring Pen, or at least get her on a comm set with him.”

Pen turned to Lynx. “We need to get word to the Misfit leadership, and then I need the details on what is going on.”

“Agreed.” Lynx answered.

Foss turned to the leaders of humanity’s military forces gathered around him. “I think we should plan for the worst. Assemble the fleets we discussed, at the place we decided. Something tells me none of this is going to be easy.”

Almost immediately, it became quite noisy, as a dozen people pulled out small comm sets, or stepped up to one of the larger sending units, and voiced instructions to his or her subordinates to get their forces moving.

Foss stood a little back from the row of equipment and busy people. He was watching Lynx and Pen talk to a flat monitor screen he could not see. After a few minutes, Pen and Lynx walked up to Inquisitor Foss, followed by the others who had also finished relaying instructions.

Pen started in first. “I have assured the leadership of the brotherhood that I am in no immediate danger, and that I will be in frequent contact to allay any concerns about my status.”

“It would seem,” Lynx added, “that my former aide has proven to be a warrior and leader among those people. And so won a role in their government. It would be well if we all would remember my former aide is now the equivalent of a Fleet Admiral, and a Sector Governor, simultaneously.”

Foss looked unimpressed, but others looked at each other and back at Pen, startled at having so misjudged the little human female in plain space armor.

“I don’t want to be bothered with titles,” Pen said firmly, “only address me as Pen.” Pen stopped to turn her head and look at the people around her, then continued. “It is time to come out of the dark, put this whole matter in the open for all to understand what the situation really is. I suggest we continue this over a meal, I have missed two meals already, because of this summons. Let’s all be clear headed and not distracted by missed meals.”

“That is a most worthy suggestion.” Lynx broke in, while Foss’s mouth hung open. “There is a lot to catch up on. And if I know anything about Inquisitor Foss, he always has a well stocked larder, as well as a cabinet full of strong drink that rivals an Imperial palace.”

“Yes, let’s calm things down a bit over a meal.” Foss added, his fists on his hips.

The collection of people began to exit the enclosure, and make their way toward a large blast door in the direction of the ship’s bow.

“What’s the idea of the tent?” Pen asked Lynx, in low tones, while following the rest of the people following Foss.

“Well, Inquisitor Foss had a different idea of how the proceedings would go.” Lynx replied, also in low tones. “He was expecting an Imperial Navy ensign. Not a hard fighting warrior leader that would back him up a step in front of everyone assembled. Foss is not known for thorough homework, and of course,

the Empire has a very small file concerning the inner workings of the Misfits.”

“Small wonder.” Pen nodded, “The Imperial bureaucracy elitism has everyone believing that those poor misguided, lost, miss-fit, human souls in these sectors of the galaxy are beneath notice. The barbarous outer reaches hold more interest.” Pen paused a moment, put a hand on Lynx’s lower arm. “Lynx, what of you? I have a lot of questions about how you have fared, as well as how you came to be here.”

“We’re almost to the banquet hall,” Lynx replied, still speaking in low volume. “A more full story will have to come later. So I’ll finish your first question. Foss likes the muted effects from being surrounded by thick tapestries, and likes his comforts. He also likes to use only portable vid gear. He can set up and tear down very quickly, and be somewhere else with all his communication gear, while some people would still be packing up their kit. Foss prefers to let his agents do the front line stuff, but when urgent, dangerous matters threaten worlds, or even the greater Empire, he is an Inquisitor. To underestimate him would be most unwise.”

“I would never judge any Inquisitor to be anything but an Inquisitor” Pen said, seriously.

The group around inquisitor Foss entered and spread out around a half circle of tables, facing yet more comm gear and holographic display equipment. The rest of the dining facilities had all been cleared back to make room. Pen noted as she sat next to Lynx, that marines followed them in, and sets of four went to each exit. Two marines went through, and two more turned and stood with their back to the now closed exits. No one will be coming in or going out, it seems.

Foss stood at the center of the half circle of tables.

“I have ordered foodstuffs brought in,” Foss said, loudly enough to be heard over the commotion of people seating themselves. “and we have wasted enough time. I will require you all to pay close attention. In particular, agent Pen and Inquisitor Lynx.”

A huge holograph of the galaxy, seen edge on, winked into existence above everyone’s head. “I got called into an investigation of strange happenings near the galactic center.” Foss began, his voice being amplified with a strange resonance, “I was to take the place of Inquisitor Mayamoto, who had been reported killed, along with everyone else, at his base. The attacker was an unidentified ship, of a configuration never reported before. When I arrived, the investigation of the destroyed base had been completed. The conclusions that resulted from that investigation were that the Eldar race had been responsible. The fact that the moon the observation base had been sited upon was nearly cut in two, made that conclusion obvious.” Foss stopped speaking as the holo of the

galaxy suddenly shifted, and the observation point rapidly flew into the galactic center, causing the clouds of stars to fly out of the view, until a single binary star, and attendant planets were centered in the view. “In the Yamaguchi star cluster, is Suragao three. The stars in this cluster, and in Suragao three, are very old. The planets around that binary system have long since stopped being geologically active. Almost dead stars surrounded by dead planets. Yet Mayamoto was here to investigate strange happenings. Things like trade ships, warships, and scout ships from several different races disappearing, or being found reduced to scrap around this place. One of the planets with a breathable atmosphere has enormous, blockish neoliths and pillars so old that any other sign of civilization has long decayed into oblivion. If ever any civilization was present.” A view of a planet’s surface suddenly filled the air over everyone’s head. Large, dark shapes filled a gray sky. “Mayamoto made a series of recordings that weren’t destroyed. On one of these, a ship appeared of unfamiliar design.” Foss stopped speaking as a view of a planet’s rim filled the bottom of the holo projection. Everyone watched as ragged edged streaks of energy rose from the planet, intersected, creating a fantastic glare that filled the projection, and made Pen hold her hand in front of her eyes for a moment. The glare vanished, and there was a ship. Big, even without other craft around to measure against. Angular, chunky, an elongated dark shape like nothing ever reported to the Empire. Suddenly, the rear fourth of the vessel glowed blue and quickly spread over the entire silhouette, becoming a pale hue of green, but remaining blue on the back portion. This served to highlight the angles and shapes of the blocky thing as it began to move. Pen saw that this seemed to be how the enormous black thing was propelled. The ship turned toward, and rocketed at, the monitor probe taking the video. In only a moment, the black shape grew huge until it blotted out the view, then.. Bzzt! No more video.

“That ship purposefully ‘stepped on’ the probe,” Foss began again, “but Mayamoto had the presence of mind to have dormant backup probes nearby. Watch.”

The video was back, above everyone’s head, filling the room this time. The black shape became a moving streak of pale blue-green hurtling toward the twin red suns. Pen guessed that the video was being played back at a high speed, because the ship arrived over one of the suns in only moments. The view switched to a different perspective, and then zoomed closer. Pen and Lynx both gasped in unison with a sudden rumble of confused voices. The ugly black thing was now wreathed in swirls of flame. The pale green energy around the ship had become a green hollow tube of energy extending to the red sun close below, and filled with flame from the sun, was being pulled to the black vessel. The swirls of flame around the ship appeared to be drawn into the blackness that was the

vessel's outer shell, as if the thing was crafted out of a black hole, swallowing even the light. A bright streak of green suddenly swung toward the view, and the holo went black.

"Please!" Foss called over the rising voices, "This is only the first part, and the rest is every bit as important as what has shocked you! Please hold your comments and questions!"

A new view appeared, and the room fell quiet. Once again the room was filled with the galaxy of stars, and rapidly zoomed toward the center of the galactic cluster. This time a large number of moving specs of light filled the center of the view, and for a while that's all they were, as the source of the view kept pace with the moving lights.

Pen noticed shadows moving among the shadows that made up the lower half of the room. A shadow moved toward her, and a large platter of seasoned rice appeared on the table in front of Pen. Followed by a shallow urn of steaming gravy. Standard Navy fare. Rice grew well in the water tanks. A supplement of vegetable and animal protein in a sauce was the normal fare aboard ships. Pen discovered that her mouth was watering in anticipation. Pen glanced up to see that there was little change in the view, and quickly spooned a lump of rice and a ladle of gravy into the bowl in front of her, and looked up again just in time to see the view was changing rapidly. The sudden onset of many voices in an unintelligible murmur coincided with the view focusing on an enhanced tactical display. Pen quickly glanced at Lynx, who merely sat, cross-armed and steely-eyed, and then back up at the tactical view. Not more of sickly green tinted, black ships, but an Ork war fleet!

"Yes, that's right," Foss's enhanced voice cut above the noise, "these matters are related, as you will soon see. Because of the non-violent contact between certain Ork vessels and Imperial agents, we have managed to get spy probes attached to some Ork ships. I sometimes think the Orks know the probes are there, but don't care. Some of the data views will go by quickly, having been edited, but if you watch closely, much of why we are here will be made clear."

Pen watched as the war fleet moved faster than it should have into orbit around a rather large, dead looking world. Sure enough, the spy probe sensors displayed on the view that the world was an old dead rock. Except. An energy source on the planet. The harmonics emanating from that source were confusing. Even a star did not generate those kinds of radiation. The video blinked to a new perspective as Ork landing craft gouged blazing trails toward the surface below. In moments the holo blinked again, so that now all could see groups of Ork warriors pouring out of their vessels and toward distant dark shapes of gargantuan pillars and angular ziggurats. Pen sensed Lynx moving, and yes, Lynx was leaning forward, and whispering, "They're gaining entrance?

But how?" Pen did not hazard an answer, but looked back at the holo. Orks were descending ramped openings, at the base of a couple of the largest stepped pyramids, to disappear wholesale. The holo must be coming from one of the landing craft, because the view did not follow the green skinned host down. The whole room suddenly became much brighter as the holo skewed over and up to a view of a giant pillar, the top of which had started glowing. The brightness increased until a pale green crack of lightning split off into space. The holo view skewed yet again back to watching the large openings that had swallowed up the Ork warriors a little before. The view settled and focused just in time to see Orks spilling back out of the dark openings, to run at frantic pace back toward the waiting landing craft. Now everyone in the room leaned forward, and even Pen muttered, "What in hell..?" Silvery metallic forms, carrying rods that glowed sickly green, followed the last of the Orks fleeing the pyramids. Whoever was operating the spy probe, zoomed in on the still emerging silvery forms. Pen thought they looked like some parody of Eldar warriors. Like a metal skeleton of Eldar. The skull shaped heads of the things particularly made Pen think so. There was even a faintly human look to the skeleton forms of the advancing things. As they advanced rapidly after the Orks, all the people in the room could see that these newcomers were holding formation, and even point and fire the rod things, in unison. The streaks of green light that struck an Ork caused that Ork to evaporate in a cloud of steam or smoke. Even the armor on the Ork dissolved into a swirl of vapor. The advancing lines of metal things seldom missed when they pointed their rods. Some Orks turned and fired different kinds of weapons back at their tormentors. Most just caused faint green sparks to appear where lasers and projectiles struck the shiny devils. Pen did notice that if several lasers or projectiles struck one of the things at the same time, it fell, only to evaporate into a wisp of smoke and sparks.

The mad dash for the landing craft carried many of the Orks into the presumed safety of armored hulls. Landing craft, and smaller warships, lifted off. Pen noted that not all the surviving Orks had made it aboard a vessel, before all the vessels bolted up toward space. In only moments, every last greenskin on the planet was 'evaporated'. The view in the holo was directed back toward the planet, as the Ork war craft fled. A pair of bolts of light flashed past the view. The holo blinked as another probe took over. Now a large part of the Ork fleet was in the view, with the planet along the bottom of the projection. A pair of bright, green tinted, streaks cut into the assembled Ork ships, and a pair of Ork cruisers flew apart, as if they had been glass and struck by a hammer. Pen heard Lynx mutter something about shields, but couldn't take her eyes away from the scene of carnage unfolding.

The Ork craft were plainly burning full engines, and trying to scatter, as

well as fire their own weapons back toward the planet. Pen could see the impacts on the planet's surface all around, as well as dead on, the source of the green beams. Only Ork battleships survived a hit from the surface, smaller craft simply flew apart. A hit on a battleship caused a spectacular light show, but did not seem to slow the mighty craft, or slow the weapons firing. Pen guessed that some kind of damage must be resulting, but the mighty size and armor of the big warships masked the real harm done.

Very rapidly the scene pulled away from the planet, as the scattering Ork war ships opened the distance. The view on the holo was still back toward the planet. The green bolts from the planet below ceased, only to be replaced by three steady pillars of light that suddenly fanned apart and somehow created a swirling maelstrom of gray light and sparks between them. After only a moment of waiting, a great black shape, edged with scintillating pale green energy, emerged from the maelstrom between the beams of light. Then another and another. While Pen and the other assembled leaders of humanity's war machine watched, stunned, ship after ship emerged until a fleet of almost thirty ships were pursuing the retreating Ork vessels. At least twenty were smaller vessels, but like the big ones, they were oddly angular and chunky looking. Not sleek, with curves pleasing to the eye, but more like flying ziggurats, assembled out of giant blocks, all angles and straight lines. The only other object of notice was the pillars. One, or two, or three of these pillars extended from the front of the smaller odd looking ships, at right angles, so that they looked like some kind of big antenna. Except that each had a globe of brightly polished metal at the end, which sparked with pale sickly green sparks. The largest vessels had rather more of these shafts sticking out at right angles along the length of the craft, but how many was hard to tell, since they were attached all around the ship, and so some were hidden from view.

The thirty black ships fanned out in a swath shaped like a scythe. New bolts of green energy streaked after the Ork ships trying to get away. Only now these were flashes of green energy coming from each of the globes of metal, from each ship. Very many more than two beams of destruction lashed out and splashed in a pyrotechnic display against the shields and hulls of Ork space vessels. Pen took note that these weapons must not be as powerful as the planet defenses had been. A single hit did not shatter a targeted ship. Rather, a single hit appeared to play havoc with a ship's power, or other systems. But since multiple hits were nearly always scored on a targeted Ork ship, Pen knew that best guesses were likely to be wrong.

Then, three large Ork battle cruisers turned as one and targeted the largest of the pursuing black ships. This black ship was not after them, but was chasing one of the largest Ork battleships, which also turned just enough to expose the great turrets down the length of the battleship. All four Ork ships fired as

one, the beams from the Ork battle cruisers cutting into the slab sides of the black ship. More beams from the battleship searing the bow sections. Impacts from invisible projectiles creating great flares along the entire black hull. The scintillating green energy that wrapped these strange vessels seemed to absorb all this punishment. And worse, to Pen's mind, where damage could be seen on the hull, it quickly appeared to be blending and smoothing away the damage until only smooth black slabs remained. Pen had seen Tyranid ships heal injuries, but not so fast. Tyranid ships were known to be living things, but Pen felt down in her bones that there was nothing alive about these things, they felt like great cold engines of destruction, in Pen's heart of hearts, and Pen had learned to trust her feelings. The Ork cruisers continued to accelerate at the black ship, which neither turned or changed speed. It did fire more of the green blasts at the Ork battleship, which caused pieces to fly off, and the atmosphere within to ignite, venting flames through the holes made, into space. The battleship was large enough that such damage was not critical, but much more of the same would be.

The Ork ships poured a continuous stream of shells into their enemy, who only fired at the battleship, until the Ork battle cruisers were very close to the black ship. Now the really huge, short range guns the Orks were famous for, volleyed and thundered point blank into the black bulk, wreathing it in gouts and swirls of fire and smoke. Not satisfied, the Ork cruisers continued to accelerate toward their opponent, and smashed full on into the black hulk, obscuring all in further great swirls of fire and smoke. Pen watched as the great black thing was the only thing to emerge from the destruction. Only now there were great gashes along the sides of the flying ziggurat, that radiated a bright pale green light from within. The gashes did not seem to be closing up. And the big black thing turned. Back toward the planet.

The holo view pulled back, to show a wider view of the happenings. Most Ork ships were either destroyed, or had hazarded the jump into non-space while still close to a gravity well. Pen could see that only the one black ship had been turned back. The Ork ship that had the spy probe must have initiated non-space, because the holo blurred and then vanished.

"There is still more information to bring to light," Foss stated into the quiet room, "but let us eat and drink, and let some of what we've seen sink in." The room became quite noisy as everyone began to talk at once. The lights around the room brightened.

"Pen, why aren't you eating?" Lynx asked, having noticed Pen staring down at the food in front of her. "I thought you were hungry."

"I waited too long," Pen replied sadly, "this has grown cold, and does not look very appetizing. Also, all this is stealing my appetite. Just like every other dealings I've had with Inquisitors, information is heaped on me very fast about

events I know nothing about. My first question is still unanswered. Lynx, can you tell me what is going on here? This video from spy probes did not help.”

“I’ll start with what I know,” Lynx started, sounding somewhat grim, “and I know that this is not the first time that those metal horrors have shown up. Elsewhere in the galaxy there have been encounters with them. Why Inquisitor Foss is making like these things are new to the Empire is a puzzle to me.”

“I have never seen or heard about these things.” Pen interjected. “Is all this for my benefit?”

“This meeting is for your benefit, but the briefing is not.” Lynx replied. “There is a lot of concern that the Orks may be about to explode across the galaxy, with humanity as the target.”

“I picked up on that early on,” Pen replied, motioning to a steward to bring more food. “I also picked up on the, uh, androids?, being behind a lot of the concern. Whatever those metal things are.”

“Those metal things are called by some; Necro’s, by planetary infantry; NecMecs, and Orks call them; Skinny Bits, along with the usual strings of unflattering insults. There is a rumor going around that the Necro’s weapons steal your soul, your life-force, life-energy, or whatever you want to call it, and imprison it within one of those android things. An unholy blending of machine spirit and the spirit from living things in a metal monstrosity. Yet one more nightmare the galaxy throws at us. Humph!”

“You do not sound as if you believe what you say.” Pen said into the moment of silence, “What am I to believe?”

“Years ago, a lot of years ago, an Imperial survey team found some huge monoliths.” Lynx began again, “What was different this time was that one of the team leaders remembered reviewing records of similar finds. Since no way could be found into the enormous ziggurats, and no energy emissions were detected, they gave up in frustration. All except one. That fellow went back and started to dig through mountains of ancient records. After years of work, his suspicions were turned to facts. There had been many of these findings, all over the galaxy. That decades and centuries passed between these findings helped to bury any interest from the Imperial administration. Oh, and the fact that all these findings were on remote, barren, dead worlds orbiting dying suns kept interest minimal as well. That excellent fellow that did all that research did one more excellent thing. He mapped all the findings from past centuries, as well as the present, onto a single map of the galaxy. Because humanity has had little interest in the galaxy’s core, all the best real estate being in the spiral arms, almost nothing is known about that vast region of eternal chaos. One or more worlds in the galaxy’s core having more of these megaliths is no surprise to me. Well..” Lynx paused as a steward passed by, leaving a small glass urn filled with a pale red liquid. Lynx poured herself

some, and continued. “Well, all these trivial encounters with dead megaliths on dead worlds did not stir any interest until about a hundred years ago. More encounters were reported with these black ziggurats, only now energy emissions were detected. Expeditions to known locations of other megaliths found that these too were generating energy emissions, where they had been totally lifeless and without a trace of energy output, before. Several research teams were sent out to try to determine what was going on. One team tried to force entry into one of the biggest ziggurats with weapons. The only survivors were the crew of a frigate that had been escorting the research ship. They only survived because they had been reconnoitering the outer edges of the star system. They did bring back a record of what happened. These metal apparitions suddenly appeared and vaporized every soul. A hole in space appeared, and flying ziggurats popped out and disintegrated the Imperial ships in orbit. The little frigate was either too far away or was too small, or both. The flying ziggurats turned and disappeared back into the hole in space. Incidentally, the hole did not read like our jumps into non-space, or warp space, or like anything anyone has seen before. Indications were of tremendous energy that was primordial in makeup.” Lynx paused and looked into Pen’s eyes. Pen had not eaten a bite or moved while Lynx spoke, only stared into Lynx’s face, with a blank expression on Pen’s face.

“I remember something,” Pen said weakly, “I was still a junior lieutenant, before I was called to your service. We found a black pyramid on a rogue moon near the galactic center. The moon was orbiting a ruined cinder of a planet, around a pale star. The astro-expert we had said the star had the characteristics of having had more planets, not just the one blackened chunk that remained. A mystery that was never answered. What had happened here? Why was the moon largely untouched by whatever had ruined the planets around that sun? I never thought about those things until now.” Pen looked at Lynx quizzically, “And you’ve known about these things for many years?”

“Almost since I became an emissary for the Emperor.” Lynx answered seriously, “These creatures have been regarded as living machines, even their ships are thought to have a living intelligence within the machinery. You should know that they were never regarded as a threat to the Empire, before. Those strange vessels would disappear faster than they appeared, and stay gone for long enough that they would be thought of as mythical.” Lynx stopped long enough to slowly turn her head each way and make sure they were not being scrutinized by anyone, then continued in a very low voice. “Only now they are not leaving. There are fleets of these dark star killers assembling at different parts of the galaxy. One such gathering, near the lower edge of the galaxy’s core, is our destination. I would say about nine ship day’s travel. The same area as your friend, Longtooth.”

“I heard Inquisitor Foss say that we were to meet other units.” Pen said,

leaning toward Lynx and speaking softly, "What kind of operation is this? Are we launching a military campaign, or a recon mission? Where do the Orks fit in, and where do I fit in for that matter?"

"You fit in with the Orks," Lynx responded, almost whispering, "and they are the first leg of this operation. The Empire is gathering for war against a new enemy. What with so many Tyranid forces fighting each other, they seem contained for now. Quite a few Imperial ships are being assembled at different places, to oppose any star killer fleets that may move against Imperial holdings. Your mission will be to turn the Orks away from raiding Imperial space. As for me, I believe I am to be returned to the care of the Centurion marines."

"Don't they know how much help you can be in this?" Pen asked quietly, "I have heard of some of the things you and those marines have done."

"Then you have kept better track of the Empire, then the Empire has of you." Lynx said, somewhat louder, "I had no idea that you had worked your way into a leadership position."

"Well, you already knew that the Misfit's society was built around war fighting, and the regard they held for warriors." Pen said, "My association with Althor and Ulthor didn't hurt, either. My successes against the enemies of the Empire, and the Misfits, vaulted me to near the top of the Misfit military hierarchy, and so, near the top of their government as well. I have you to thank for that. The training and experience I had as your servant made it all possible."

"Your abilities made it possible." Lynx said seriously, "I believe you would have been able to go far in any service you found yourself in. I just got to you first."

"In any case, thank you." Pen said.

Lynx just looked at Pen for a moment, then proceeded to eat, looking lost in thought. Pen followed Lynx's example and started in eating, but continued to watch all around her. There was quite a lot going on around Foss. Some of the military officers were speaking in rather heated and animated fashion to each other and Foss. Apparently there was still some debate as to what to do. Foss was just leaned back, not speaking, but listening to the debating officers. Pen decided to eat rather quickly, seeing that stewards were already clearing away the other tables. This ship had a schedule to keep. Pen put her full attention into her meal.

Pen had just finished, when she became aware of someone standing behind her. Pen turned to see a young lieutenant holding out a message pad. Pen took it and nodded. Without a word, the young woman turned and headed for an exit door. Pen clicked on the screen and read. Her eyes widened as she read.

"What in flaming galaxies is this?" Pen asked, none too softly. "Half the available Misfit fleet is assembled and en route to the coordinates? And half the

remainder is assembling to follow?" Pen stopped reading and looked at Lynx.

"That would be my fault." Lynx said, leaning back. "I think that those forces waiting for you will give you a stronger hand to play. I know how the Empire sometimes likes to bully people to get what it wants. I used to myself. The Empire will do more asking, less telling, if you have a navy backing you up. I have also seen to it that Nova Marines will bring all available forces to support the Centurion Marines."

"Those two brotherhoods, with their supporting fleets, make up quite a force," Pen said, looking hard at Lynx. "and I suppose the Misfit fleets are expected to help you?"

"Not me." Lynx answered, rather quietly again, "I am not an Inquisitor. I had the Misfit fleets sent to the meeting place to support you, Pen. I have no expectations beyond that. If you want to board a Misfit ship and leave as soon as we arrive, so be it. I might ask to go with you."

"You do not support this operation? Why?" Pen asked.

Just then Foss stood up, also holding a message pad. "We have to make a side trip." he announced, holding up the message pad, "The Emperor has ordered me to a near system, which is, according to my navigators, already behind us. We will all go from here to our assigned action stations. This ship will come about and fall back into normal space in less than an hour." Foss motioned to Lynx and Pen, "You two will please follow me." Inquisitor Foss turned and started to leave.

"I will tell you more, Pen. But later." Lynx said, barely above a whisper.

Pen only nodded. The two women were having to scramble to catch Foss. He was definitely in a hurry, so much so that the two had not caught up with Foss when he took a lift. Lynx led the way to another lift car, apparently knowing where Foss was headed. Not to his comm gear station, was all that Pen knew. Shortly the two women were again within sight of Foss, as he rounded a half open blast door. Pen knew where she was now. Imperial ship designs were pretty much the same, when it came to designing a fighting bridge from which to command a fighting ship. Pen entered to see that Foss had a separate room, to the rear of the main bridge, and slightly above the command deck, but open enough to see and hear all that went on throughout the bridge section. Pen and Lynx joined Foss just as he was seating himself and strapping in. Pen and Lynx hurried to take a pair of otherwise unused seats, and followed Foss's lead by strapping in.

None to soon. The entire ship groaned, as the ship twisted around inside non-space. Energy fields around the ship tried to compensate for the momentum and resulting "G" forces the change in direction created, however, some of those forces always leaked through. Pen felt the weight increase as the momentum pulled at her, while the ship's engines strained to change the direction of travel.

Foss announced that everyone should stay strapped in, this ship would be decelerating back to normal space velocities very soon.

Pen felt as if she was once again an observer. She had no status aboard this ship, whatever she may have been among the brotherhood of survivors called "Misfits". Pen could see that Lynx was fully absorbed with watching and listening, since she had no apparent status either.

Big tactical holo projections began clicking on, normal space was only moments away it seemed. Pen felt a small anger growing in her again. Anytime an Inquisitor was involved, things happen in a hurry. Deceleration pulled at Pen, even as each of the previously empty displays came to life with data and displays. Pen noted that they were back in normal space in far less than an hour.

Inquisitor Foss put up a gigantic display. Pen felt as if she were standing in front of a great window, looking out into space. Pen also felt as if she were a new lieutenant again, in awe of everything she sees. There, in the window onto space, was a great fleet of ships. Many of them seemed giant copies of the toy sized vessels surrounding them. Pen knew what Eldar ships looked like, these were indeed Eldar vessels, but never had Pen seen the great battleships now filling the view. Or so many of any kind. There were dozens of every type assembled here. A lot of firepower. Aimed at who? Pen wondered. Pen did notice that several of the smaller warships turned toward, and moved to intercept, the big human warship that had so suddenly appeared among them.

Now something bothered Pen. The big view continued to hold on a view of the Eldar fleet, but many of the smaller displays around the bridge showed Eldar faces. Pen could only hear faint pieces of whatever was being said, back and forth. As if in answer, text began scrolling across the bottom of the big display above Pen. Pen leaned back. How very different Foss was from Lynx. Lynx would be right in the forefront of any negotiations, or any matter needing attention with other races. But, here was Foss, leaning back, watching and listening, and apparently speaking into a small voice transmitter only rarely. The text on the screen told Pen that a very important Eldar was coming aboard to speak with the human Inquisitor on matters of grave urgency. Pen did hear Foss say that this important person was to join Foss on the bridge of this ship. Pen knew that Foss continued to look at Lynx and Pen from time to time, but otherwise the two women might just as well be invisible, no one else even took notice of the two women.

Pen decided now was the time to look over the Eldar vessels a little more closely. The graceful lines of each curve were quite pleasing to the eye, even when those curves were interrupted by the many bulges that contained weapons mounts. The great wings that gathered the energy of the sun, even at great distances, made the vessels look as if they should be some great swimming thing, or flying thing,

within a planet's atmosphere, not out among the stars. Pen caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and looked up at the edge of the projection. More Eldar ships arriving! They still had an Eldar look about them, but they were of different configurations. This could only mean that another segment of the Eldar race had joined whatever operation was brewing. The Eldar race had divided itself into many segments, some were family or clan oriented, others based on what world or worlds they came from, and some were loose associations that barely fit the description of buccaneer. And of course, there were the rigidly defined paths of the warriors. Pen's eyes narrowed as she realized that in the distance there were already two other groups represented, on top of the one just arriving, and the one that surrounded the human warship. Pen had no doubt in her mind now. The entire Eldar race was mustering for war. Pen found herself remembering when Eldar had fought Tyranid those many years ago, and the terrible weapons Pen had seen used then. A cold chill suddenly raced through Pen.

"I think you must be thinking the same as I." Lynx said, in a voice so low that Pen barely heard her.

"I was just wondering," Pen replied, equally softly, "how many facets this new war has."

"Maybe you are thinking something else. Go on." Lynx asked.

"A lot of pieces of this puzzle are fitting together already." Pen near whispered, "Humans, Orks, and now various factions of the Eldar are gathering their war-fleets. Those horrid Tyranid creatures did not generate so much force mobilization, this quickly. An intelligence briefing I had some days ago spelled out how large Ork forces were gathering out here, as well as Imperial naval forces gathering opposite them. Now I find most of the Misfit fleets are being assembled, and very nearby there are Eldar forces gathering, the like of which humanity has never seen." Pen leaned closer to Lynx, "I haven't seen the enemy forces all of this is to battle, have I?"

"Yes. You have." Lynx really was whispering now, "Those star killers are what has set things in motion. You, and maybe I, are just a side matter. You, because some in the Empire believe you can once again turn the Ork called Longtooth away from attacking human worlds. I, because of my association with you, and the Centurion marines."

"You said 'star killers' again when you spoke of the enemy." Pen said, "Why?"

"Because they are the killer of stars." Lynx replied. "Their ships somehow park very near a star and siphon off the energy and charged particles that make up the surface of a star, somehow."

"A star is a very big place," Pen said, still in a guarded whisper, "it loses a lot of energy and charged particles into space every moment it exists. How does

losing a little more kill a star?”

“They take away a lot of energy,” Lynx sounded very serious, “and, some think, they have been doing it for millions of years.”

“Oh.” Pen whispered, as she turned her head to see what was causing the sudden activity on the command bridge. Even Foss was up and walking across the bridge toward an entrance Pen could not see.

Foss was not quite out of sight, when he was met. A very old looking Eldar male came into view, and held up both hands, palms out at mid-chest, in the traditional greeting for humans, Pen knew. Pen also knew that there was a separate greeting for others of their own race, and some races were not greeted at all. The long war between Orks and Eldar was well known, to even low rank servitors among the human worlds.

Pen also saw that there were four more Eldar, quietly keeping back. None were wearing any kind of warrior gear. Pen tried to look the five visitors over more closely, she had never seen any Eldar dressed in flowing, loose fitting, multicolored robes before.

“I have only seen Eldar of this art once before.” Lynx said quietly. Once again answering Pen’s question before it could be asked. “They are the most treasured of all their race.”

The old one turned suddenly, and stared up at the women.

“Ah! Here you are!” The old one’s voice was carefully modulated, as he approached the two women in their side room. Foss did not follow, but did look vexed. “I was just telling Mister Foss there that I was looking for a particular human representative. And here you are! The very two I have heard so much about.” Two paces from the women, he stopped and bowed with a flourish of his right hand. “I am known, to the few humans who know me, as Yamul. And I have been looking for you.”

The two women looked at each other, and back to Yamul. “Whom do you seek?” Lynx asked.

“Why both of you.” Yamul replied. “Very many of our people are very much in your debt, and so I was sent to find you both, if possible, and repay some of that debt.”

“If you are referring to the help the Empire brought to your people a dozen years ago,” Lynx stood as she spoke, “there is no debt. Your people’s warriors have assisted the Imperium many times these past years, against several of our enemies. Many of our people owe their lives to the help of the Eldar.”

“What you say is partly true.” Yamul said very seriously, “However, the books of the Eldar are not yet balanced, and may never be.”

“How will one of your art repay a debt of warriors?” Foss broke in, “Those two women have been given tasks by the Emperor, himself. I don’t have

the power to set them on another path.”

Yamul turned to Foss. “Inquisitor Foss. Forgive me. I am not excluding you from what I have brought. But we need to see my gifts, there is much I would have these two women be part of.”

“Please forgive the intrusion,” Pen said in a small voice, “I have never seen, or heard of your art. Is there time for me to learn of this?” Pen had stood, and was just behind Lynx’s right shoulder.

Lynx turned to Pen with a smile. But before she could answer, Yamul’s voice rose. “My heart is wounded, that you have been kept from the knowledge of my skills.” Yamul was smiling. “I must demonstrate my art in answer to your missing knowledge.”

Foss groaned out loud, then spoke, “I must wonder if we have so much time, that so many questions can be answered.”

“The universe is moving.” Yamul replied, “And soon we must all be caught in the tide and currents of those movements. Across this galaxy the various peoples gather their might for war. Both against each other and to oppose the threat that these ‘star killers’ have brought.” As Yamul said ‘star killers’, he gestured an open hand toward Lynx. “My apology also, but your mind is so vivid that we couldn’t help but know the name you have given this ancient enemy.” Yamul said. “But please. We must away. Your Emperor diverted you here so that my journey to find you would be less.” With a sweep of his arm and slight bow, Yamul left no choice, the women stepped down and made for the exit door.

The four other Eldar, that had remained stoic the whole time, came forward to make an avenue for the women, and Foss, to follow. Pen caught a glimpse, through the swirl of cloaks, that these others did indeed wear armor. The metal mesh that both emitted a powerful field and would deflect a metal blade became visible for only an instant, but long enough for Pen to recognize it.

Pen and Lynx were met as the door opened by four more Eldar, who wore their armor and fighting masks. These led the little procession down the hallway.

“Yamul is a Bard.” Lynx whispered to Pen. “More than a Bard as well, he is a living history of his people. Yamul is also known to be the leader of the Harlequins, the Wardancers, as well as leader of the all those that make information, and entertainment their art. He is also one of a very few that can command any faction of the Eldar, at any time.”

Yamul’s voice came from behind the two women. “How succinctly you overstate my importance. I am not a leader of my people, like your Emperor. But knowledge is power, and I have much knowledge.”

Lynx only turned her head and smiled a little smile back at Yamul.

“Here we are,” Yamul said simply, as the group rounded a corner, “this is set for us to travel to my ship.” A gray shimmer, bordered with little sparks, exactly filled the corridor. The Eldar at the lead stepped to one side, and turned to flank the ‘entrance’.

“A beamer?” Pen asked, not moving toward the strange portal.

“A gateway.” Yamul replied. “Nothing like what the green ones use. It is quite safe.”

Lynx sighed, sounding almost impatient, and stepped into the grayness, and disappeared. Pen hesitated a moment, turning to look at Foss and Yamul, then walked between the flanking Eldar and into the gray nothing.

II._____

The cold darkness of space. Home. The Hive mind of the Tyranids had long memories of the endless dark. The bottomless cold. Long slumber between clusters of star systems, or between galaxies. All the little parts that make up the Hive Mind are sensory input for the Mind. All the mindless little creatures, the big Tyranid warriors, and even the great vessels that ply the ways between stars, carrying the lesser creatures, all are parts of the Mind.

But now.

All the sensory inputs are too much. The great fleet of living vessels, that make up the greater part of the oldest Hive Mind, large and small, are being staggered by this new part of the galaxy.

The Hive Mind walked many pathways of reflection, all the while analyzing the here and now, seeking the best route to new conquests, and methods needed for the hive to feed.

This part of the Tyranid race was the original invader. This part of the Tyranid invasion was not so large, as when it first arrived in this part of the galaxy. But, the memories of long, long ago were still intact. The Mind recalled as far back as its awakening, but it was not there. There were no memories of encountering the center bulge of a galaxy before. Rival Tyranid nests had kept this particular swarm of Tyranids away. This Hive mind remembered being driven farther and farther out toward the edge of the old galaxy of its birth, and finally out altogether, out into the emptiness between galaxies where the hive was supposed to die. But it lived. And remembered.

But this was very strange. A very strong psychic presence would briefly originate somewhere near this central bulge of this galaxy. And, with no rival Tyranid nests guarding this place, this time, this swarm of Tyranids wanted to find that presence. This strong psychic source might be one of, or the one, strong force of will organizing enemy forces. Enemy forces that are trying to push the Tyranids back into the empty deepness between galaxies. The Hive mind knew it

must find this source of trouble, and eliminate it. This galaxy is populated with many creatures, races of thinking things. If all the creatures took to hunting Tyranids, instead of fighting, and weakening, each other, then the many little parts that had once been the great Tyranid invasion fleet, would be driven out, or destroyed. The Hive Mind sensed there was a guiding presence out here, somewhere.

But how could that strong psychic guiding presence be here?

The further into the galactic bulge the Hive fleet traveled, the more perplexing.

Chaos. Too much chaos. The hive encountered worlds that had been cast off, with no life giving sun to orbit. Creatures from the hive fleet tried to find frozen life under ice, preserved from when this world had a sun. But no. These planets had been scorched, seared, and blasted before hurled into its destiny as a rogue. If ever there had been life at all. The Hive Mind watched, through the sensory facilities of the millions of minions that made up the Mind. Chaos.

Worlds were smashed. Worlds still being born were torn asunder by rogue suns tearing through the planetary systems. The flotsam and jetsam left behind unerringly found any worlds still orbiting the sun system, and obliterated any chance for life on the young worlds not first torn apart.

Suns were smashed. Rogue suns would streak into a system and be drawn into that star. Bigger or smaller made no difference. Any planets that might have orbited at the right distance for life to take hold, did not survive, even if the parent sun did.

And here also suns died. Some exploded into great clouds. And with so much chaos, those remnants were soon gathered up by other suns. Some of the stars here did not blow up, but should have. Here the Hive found where suns had withered in a strange way. These dark suns were the worst rogues. There were very many, apparently. And many of these were the ones to cause so much harm to surrounding star systems. Their gravity spoke of having been once huge stars, but the nuclear reactions that are a star had all but stopped. And now this great heavy mass would tear through star systems, yanking planets out of orbit. Or crash into star systems, gobbling up planets on its dark journey to crash into the young star. All these things, and other forms of destruction, were happening all around the hive as it tried to journey toward the galactic core.

To learn of these terrible events, the hive was paying a price. Hive ships were dying. Radiation bursts, collisions with objects too fast to avoid, and sacrificing the small slaves to investigate if life was on any worlds, was all adding up to a risk greater than the hive could afford. Especially the background radiation. This part of the galaxy was thick, compared to the rest of the galaxy, with gas and dust and rocky bits of destroyed, or partially formed, worlds. And

light. It was never dark here. Even on the darkest side of some rock of a planet, it was as if a bright moon was reflecting light brightly, there are so many stars, so close.

The Hive mind had learned enough. This was no place for any living biomass to survive for long. And things only became worse as the center of the galactic bulge came nearer. Whatever strong force of psychic will emanated from here, it had found a way to survive where nothing else could.

The Hive Mind turned its many minions around, toward the shortest distance away from all this radiation and chaos.

All the creatures that make up the hive fleet turned, and hurried toward the feeding grounds known to be waiting out beyond. That was when the psychic beacon again hit the myriad creatures who could sense it.

This time the Hive Mind was able to precisely fix on a course to follow. Not closer to the center, but back the way they were now heading. The Hive Mind knew it had only to follow this new heading and they would surely find this beacon of psychic power, no matter that it switched on and off. The Hive would be there when next that power showed itself.

III._____

Pen looked around in disbelief. She was standing on a planet's surface, not on the deck of an Eldar ship. Then she noticed the shadows. Lynx was standing in front of Pen, but only as a shadow, somehow merging as a shadow within a tall Eldar in ornate battle armor. Pen looked down toward her middle, and yes she was a shadow too.

"Please forgive my incomplete description of our destination." Yamul said from behind Pen. "We are inside the events that I wish to narrate for you."

Pen scanned her surroundings more thoroughly. Blue sky. Clouds. Great tall, twisted green and brown trunks that merged together and twisted away again as they reached into the sky, ending in a green and yellow canopy. Those 'trees' looked very much like the bean plants grown in ship's gardens for food. But. Three hundred foot tall stalks. Then there was the flowers. Everywhere. And Pen could smell them.

"How is this done?" Pen said, barely above a whisper. "How can a holo smell?"

"An artist cannot give away trade secrets." Yamul said simply.

Pen's mind began to focus, now that shock was wearing off. Details and impressions flooded her mind. They were on some kind of carefully tended lawn, surrounded by the low domes and tall spires of the Eldar town. And. A lot of Eldar. All of which were looking up, up toward the sun. Pen noted that Lynx was also looking up at this planet's star. Pen looked up, and was not blinded by the

sun, as she was sure she should have been. As Pen stared, it occurred to Pen that the star seemed to be getting dimmer, but of course, that is impossible.

"This is the first record of my people, and their first meeting with those you called 'star killers' a moment ago." Yamul said solemnly. "This was a prosperous world where our people had been at peace for many years."

A strange, piercing note carried on the air from the largest collection of spires. All the Eldar visible, warriors and not, ran headlong toward the sound. An alarm Pen guessed. Even though Pen had not moved a step, the shadow of herself stayed with the armored Eldar she had appeared within. Pen would see through an Eldar's eyes, whatever it was that Yamul wanted to show them.

"My art is storyteller, entertainer, dancer, historian, and keeper of knowledge possessed by my race over the ages." Yamul began again, "The population of this world has just learned there is a danger. Most believe it must be some sort of attack on their world."

The eyes through which Pen was seeing rapidly crossed the open ground. Descended a spiral ramp into a vast cavern, supported by high columns shaped like Eldar heroes. There before Pen's eyes was a row of Eldar vessels. Warships. Pen had never seen the energy collecting sails folded before. Even so. Pen had never seen such large warships below ground before, either. The Eldar Pen was with stepped on a white disc, brought up his (her?) wrist, and with a few deft finger movements on the wrist control, the disc flew toward the largest ship, carrying the warrior. In moments, Pen was high above the largest ship, and zipping down toward the bow. The disc landed next to a large bulge on the upper bow. An opening appeared and the warrior entered. A weapons turret. An opaque image appeared above some controls, as other Eldar took positions around the control room. As Pen watched, the symbols around the controls blurred and became symbols that Pen understood. More magic, Pen thought.

"Each of you have been sharing the perspective of one of my people of long ago. I chose what perspective you would have based on what I knew of each of you." Yamul said. "These images are from a time before humans were among the stars, before the green ur-huh, Orks plagued the stars. Races gone and forgotten, vied with the Eldar for mastery of the stars. My people were at their greatest. Very many of my people on very many worlds. Our race feared nothing that could be found among the stars."

While Yamul talked, the elegant war vessel lifted, turned, and hurtled out of the cavern, out into the sky. By the time Yamul finished speaking, stars were filling Pen's view screen. Pen watched as the Eldar adjusted the view back toward the planet they were leaving in such a hurry. Little glowing specks were streaking away from the planet, following after the warship Pen was on. The view zoomed closer. A lot of Eldar war-craft of many descriptions were organizing

themselves, even as they chased after this lead ship. The view spun around.

The planet's sun.

"Perhaps all of you cannot see, as yet, where this ship of war is taking you." Yamul's voice sounded far away, echoing, as if from the cavern they had just left. "Ahead of us is the sun that nurtures the worlds around it. Look close, and you will see what awaits my people."

Pen looked hard at her view of the star Yamul wished them to see. Thankfully, the Eldar whose eyes Pen was sharing, wanted to see too, and the view suddenly filled with the rim of a sun. Of course. They were there. Little spirals of flame. More than a hundred in this view of about a tenth of the sun's surface. And there, black specs, undersides glowing redly. Pen knew what they were.

"You humans are about to dare the insane." Yamul sounded even further away. "You would do well to see how we fared, so long ago, when we dared to challenge those who would kill the light."

The projection Pen was watching shifted quickly, first left, then right. Hundreds of Eldar ships were on station on either side, all hurtling toward the sun.

"We called to them." Yamul's voice was positively weak. "We tried every form of energy transmission, every form of visible codes of flashing lights, we even tried to fire a star canon near one of the black vessels. All we got was this in reply."

Pen watched as one of the black ziggurats, for such they were, turned suddenly and rocketed toward the approaching Eldar. What looked like crimson lightning, arced toward one of the smaller Eldar ships. Pen again had the impression that the little ship in the displays was made of glass, and suddenly struck with a hammer. The Eldar ship exploded in jagged fragments and sparks.

"The remaining events will pass more quickly." Yamul was saying, his voice stronger now, "These events are one of many stories that we tell of long ago. Ah. Yet, Inquisitor Foss has no time for stories. So. You will not experience the hours, the days, passing with these events, so perhaps these things will transpire too quickly. We will see."

From her vantage point in a weapons mount on the bows of a big warship, Pen could see both the projection that the Eldar was using to guide their weapons, and watch the reality out a view port. And yes, things began to transpire very quickly.

The Eldar reacted very quickly to the loss of one of their number. A storm of energy weapons, particle weapons, and missiles smothered the lone ziggurat. Pen thought that the energy weapons seemed to do nothing at all, but even so,

it appeared chunks were broken off the black thing. Cracks appeared in it and leaked pale green light. A spider web of cracks appeared all over the ziggurat, and in a maelstrom of swirling pale green sparks of energy and black chunks, it came apart. It looked to Pen as if the green sparks ate the black chunks because in a moment there were no fragments to mark the destruction.

The Eldar ships swept on.

From around the noticeably dimmer star, hundreds, maybe thousands of the blocky shaped black things gathered. Between the sun and the approaching fleet of elegant Eldar vessels, the ziggurats formed into lines, each new line behind and above the line of vessels ahead. Until a rectangular column was formed. Then the black things rapidly closed the distance, and tore into the Eldar fleet.

Pen felt the breath catch in her throat. The Eldar fired first. But, since each fired at its opposite ship, there was no concentration of weapons against one enemy, as against the first black ship. Pen saw no result. Eldar weapons were still skipping off the polished black things. When each of the squared and blocky things sent green beams, or crimson bolts at the Eldar, small Eldar ships exploded, and smoke poured out of holes made in large Eldar vessels. Line after line of the black ships sent crimson lightning at the Eldar fleet, and then the column of ziggurats plowed through what was left of the Eldar ships.

The few Eldar ships to survive, did so by not being targeted. The ship that held Pen's shadow self had not been hit. Pen was momentarily curious why this weapon mount Pen was with had never fired. Other weapons from this ship had fired. No matter, very much was happening. Pen saw the view was now a panoramic that took in the column of dark ships, as well as many of the scattered Eldar. Already, many of the survivors were reforming, but some Eldar ships pursued the dark ones. Pen's ship was one of the pursuers. In a short time it was plain to Pen that the black ships were pulling away, that the Eldar were unable to catch their enemy. Pen looked around. There was no way the few Eldar ships in pursuit could hope to even damage their enemy, much less destroy them.

The dark vessels went straight to the world that the Eldar had come from.

Imagery came very quick now.

The column of black ships began to fan out. Somehow, a pale green incandescence appeared in front of, and below, the fan of black ziggurats, rapidly surrounding the planet. A black shape, bigger than the biggest of the enemy fleet appeared out of the green glow. While Pen watched, the thing changed shape. Becoming, what was later described to Pen as a stepped pyramid, and descending to the planet's surface. The remaining black ships made Pen think she was seeing things that only mad people see in their dreams. A number of the largest ships also change shape into stepped pyramids, while others changed into

what should be a black tower, or actual ziggurat building, while still in space, and not attached to the ground. As if in answer to Pen's disbelief, these 'buildings' began to descend through the atmosphere, 'foundation' first. The many glows and streaks of descending black things left no doubt that every part of the planet was to be visited by these things.

Pen's view was suddenly narrowed. The Eldar warrior figure her 'shadow' had become part of, suddenly departed the weapons control room Pen had been using, to watch unfolding events. In almost a blur, the Eldar warrior passed through halls, rooms, and passages. Ending up in a launch bay. Obviously so because of the small fighter and fighter-bomber craft Pen recognized as similar to those she's seen before. Pen wondered for a moment at the fact that she recognized designs that must be thousands of years old, and still in use by the Eldar.

The warrior, followed by another, quickly entered a fighter craft, and seated within the control module.

Pen's view of outside events was restored. The fighter quickly entered the planet's atmosphere, along with more than thirty other craft launched from the battleship.

As the surface of the planet came into view, the familiar face of war that Pen knew so well, was spreading across the land.

From each of the now landed black pyramids and ziggurats, a pale green glow marked an opening in the base, from which an unending stream of silvery forms emerged. The view magnified until Pen could make out individual figures better. Pen thought they looked like machines. Some had two arms and legs, with a death mask for a head. Others looked like impossible bugs. Still others looked like a blending of the first two. All types had a single commonality - they destroyed every living thing. Grass. Flowers. Small winged things in the air. And every Eldar, whether fleeing or fighting. Targeted and destroyed so thoroughly that not even ashes were left. Only blasted and blackened ground. Where these machine creatures stepped, everything withered and was gone. Whatever the pale green incandescent blasts struck, even earth and stone flew into fragments, and disappeared in a green spray of sparks. Living things were shredded in obvious agony, not leaving even ashes to mark their passing.

The horror had Pen mesmerized, as the little fighter she was seeing from, flew closer. The silvery death things were spreading out from the bases of the black pyramids and ziggurats. But not in any kind of military formation. Just spreading out. To pursue individual things to kill.

Some Eldar fought back. Not all the warriors had gone into space. Sometimes the weapons the Eldar used made a telling hit on the machine things. It would fall, and in a moment, evaporate in a gray mist. Pen could see that as the silvery things advanced, there was none of the flotsam and jetsam usual to a

battle. No bodies. No discarded weapons. No broken things. Only a scorched emptiness. Barren.

Now something else came into view, as the fighter craft flew on. Military looking formations. Tanks. Atmosphere flyers. Weapons platforms hovering just off the ground. And rank after rank of infantry. Elegant Eldar armor shone in the light of the wan and pale sun. Pendants and banners fluttered from a forest of lances that sparked with gold sparks. Pen recalled those lances. When the Tyranids had attacked Eldar strong points, they ran up against these lances. One touch to a limb and the Tyranid warrior, or other slave creature, would jerk violently away. Thrust into the middle of a warrior, and it would twitch and shudder, and be suddenly flung backward into the faces of other advancing Tyranids. The energy coursing through those lances was powerful and deadly. Pen thought that the whole population of the town behind them must be formed up into ranks, out here.

Pen's view once again swung around as the space fighter circled over the Eldar regiments below. The metal abominations were forming into squares and rectangles of military formations now as well. Pen recognized the signs of a single will, a single malevolent mind, in the way these things suddenly bent themselves to the new task. Pen could see other Eldar flying craft gathering about the fighter craft she was watching from. Some of the metal insect looking things appeared to be quite able to fly, but were ignoring the Eldar flyers that passed. Pen's fighter hovered over the Eldar formations, somewhat behind the leading formations. A good view.

Shells and missiles, pulses and streaks, of heavy artillery, and heavy energy canon, flew from the Eldar toward the invader of their world. The formations of dull silvery forms stood, not advancing. Then, the air over the enemy formations filled with a crisscrossing web of pale green streaks of weapons fire. Almost all the shells and missiles were intercepted over the enemy's ranks. The few that got through were nearly insignificant, the damage was so small to the enemy. Many of the energy blasts seemed to skip off the metal things, impotent.

The Eldar were arrayed in a long, shallow 'U' line, with the various types of infantry, tanks, and war-walkers alternating down the line. The outer ends of the battle line were forward of the center formation, and made up of those light, fast warriors most keen to grapple their enemies. On some signal, the entire Eldar mass of war machines and warriors advanced, still firing every weapon that could.

The Necro warriors were formed up into a great, long, 'H' shape. The long sides being made up of the silvery mockeries of the Eldar infantry, all facing the advancing Eldar host. The short bar in the center of the 'H', Pen could see that it was entirely a column of what could only be called tanks, all facing the

incoming storm of weapons fire. Pen noted that this column divided the long lines of infantry into four segments, and that each of these segments had a small ziggurat at the end, just barely suspended above the ground.

Pen had no time to wonder at the usefulness of the enemy's formation, the Eldar were advancing rapidly, firing steadily. The Necro enemy were unmoving, stoically taking hits and not firing in return. Holes in the front formation showed were a few of the metal abominations had evaporated. The Eldar formation stretched as the two outer ends curved around to take their enemies in the flanks.

Pen felt her hand cover her mouth. Just before the now charging mass of Eldar crashed into the Necro ranks, a web of pale green bursts crisscrossed the space between them, the metal things at last opened fire. Pen saw that the Necros fired their weapons to left or right, rather than straight ahead, taking their opponents from the sides. This had the effect of negating whatever armor, or other protection, the Eldar warriors had. And, the charging Eldar warriors did not see what was being fired at them. Many Eldar fell, thrashing and screaming, as green flames consumed them, leaving not even empty armor or discarded weapons behind. War-walkers and hover-tanks shattered like broken glass, with more green fire eating at the fragment's edges.

Pen tried to blink the tears from her eyes, and fought the urge to look away. Pen had never experienced a holo projection where she could hear, see, feel, and smell before. The awfulness of what she was experiencing was squeezing at her chest like a vice.

More horror appeared to torment Pen.

Hidden behind the Necro lines, flyers like insects rose up, then fell in among the Eldar. The Necro ranks advanced firing steadily. The Eldar charge had stopped just short of their enemies, as warriors fought for their lives. Scintillating blades appeared on the tips of the Necro rifles, just as the horrible metal things reached the Eldar, still fighting the metal insect things. Attacked from all sides by stabbing energy weapons, metal insect proboscis, and bursts of green destructive energy, the Eldar formations disappeared, as if swallowed by the very earth. Red lightning flashed from the smallish ziggurats to smash the armored fighting machines of the Eldar, and ignite whatever grew on the plains into yet more sickening green flames. Pen saw one of the last of the Eldar infantry fall, wounded. As the armored figure tried to crawl away from the battle, it was surrounded by three of the silvery Necro things, who promptly shot the struggling Eldar in the back. Green flames ate away even the brightly colored armor.

Armored tanks, and fast flyers, were each, one after another, likewise consumed by sickly green flames. Even the smashed wreckage. Until only the

silvery death faced infantry and their black ziggurats remained on scorched, barren ground, advancing toward the city in the distance.

A truly huge black ziggurat appeared, slowly lowering through the pallid smoke and gloom. Before Pen's eyes, the enormous blocky shaped thing stopped in mid-air, and changed. Great rectangular sections slid inwards, as the monstrous thing hovered. Large segments changed shape, becoming larger, as the whole thing twisted, until the now much larger base was parallel to the ground. The incredible thing settled to the ground, even as it settled into its final shape. There, before the eyes of all, a great stepped pyramid sat. A long opening, flooded with green light, disgorged hundreds more silvery death machines from the base of the thing. It looked to Pen as if the thing was pulling in the very air, the way the mists and smokes seemed drawn into the peak. Where the metal things advanced, in a growing circle, there were more green flames keeping pace, and leaving only dead rock and sand behind. Nothing organic remained.

Pen was momentarily struck by vertigo, as the surrounding view suddenly retreated back and up into a view of the planet from space. From up in space the blues, and greens, and browns that were the planet's biosphere could be seen to be replaced by the gray and black of dead rock, in rapidly expanding patches all around the planet.

Again, the holo changed, now into a swirling mist of colors.

"And so our racial agony began," Yamul was speaking again, "and continued for many, many of what humans call years."

A montage of images appeared, to be replaced after only moments by more images, to bombard Pen's senses. Even smells of acrid smoke, or ionized air, or even fresh, hot blood, accompanied each of the terrible images.

Burning cities, blasts still raining down from space. Close views of horrible metal faces of death. Twisted and shattered hulks of smashed space vessels, spiraling away, lifeless. All distinctly Eldar. And still more horrors flashed around Pen's shadowy form. As Pen turned to follow a scene, she saw that the shadowy forms of Foss and Lynx were just behind Pen, the three back to back, in a little circle.

"As accomplished as we were," Yamul continued, "as advanced in sciences, space travel and more, we discovered we were unready for such an enemy. These deadly machines set about sterilizing every world upon which the Eldar had even the smallest presence. Nothing. Nothing remained, however small a grain of life, was spared destruction. Until only a dead rock of a world remained, with perhaps a black pyramid or two jutting from the ashen ruin of that world."

The scenes came faster and faster, horror on horror, fire and death, until each scene was replaced by another scene, in only a blink. Then utter blackness. From which Yamul's voice echoed once more.

“We were very advanced, back then.” Yamul’s voice had a sad timber, along with the slow pace of his words now. “But our intelligence, our guile, and our desperate search for escape, if not victory, failed us. We did not learn for many years, many defeats, a simple truth. You see,” Yamul’s voice sounded as if it was getting further away, as he spoke, “the enemy never quite killed us all, never quite destroyed every space vessel. Some survivors always escaped to tell of the death of another world. What we could not, would not, believe was that our ships could be tracked through the void of the energy dimension. But, somehow we could be tracked. And more of those dread black ships would appear over another world, and suck the life from even the sun, while sterilizing another world.”

The black void around Pen became a scene of space, again as seen through someone’s eyes. A wedge of black ships approaching a string of elegant Eldar warships. Pen was again in some kind of weapons control blister, looking out from a view screen. This time, however, a weapon was fired from this control center. Pen had seen this only once before. Years ago. During the desperate defense against the Tyranid invader.

A thread of brilliant white reached out. All around this thread, space twisted sickeningly. Even through the vertigo and headache Pen felt yet again, Pen could see that the black enemy vessels were torn asunder in a flare and burst of destruction. Again and again, the thread of white light reached out. And when space stopped wrenching and twisting around, and no more threads yanked at reality, the last black form of a ship had vanished, sucked into that tear in reality, that appeared as a thread of brilliant white light. All that remained was nebulous swirls of red, where the very fabric of space and been heated red hot. And then even that faded.

“A terrible weapon.” Yamul again. “Even the ships from whence this weapon is fired, are in peril of being ripped to atoms, and drawn into the tear in space an atom at a time.”

For the first time, the silhouette of Yamul appeared next to the other three shadowy shapes, all four suspended in the middle of slowly wheeling fields of stars.

“Before we met those terrible machines,” Yamul sounded sad again, “we numbered ourselves more than the uncounted stars above. With those terrible weapons, the war ended. We discovered that our enemies no longer pursued us, because we no longer fled to, and led our enemies to, other worlds. The surviving Eldar only inhabited a quarter of the galaxy, where once we called all the galaxy home. Our race never recovered.”

The wheeling stars around the four shadow forms quickly expanded into great blurs of light, which merged with other growing starlight blurs, until only

white light glared into Pen’s eyes. And in a blink, Pen, Lynx, and Foss found themselves suspended in the middle of a silvery sphere, with Yamul looking up at them from the polished floor below. A wave of Yamul’s hand, and the floor came up to meet them. Another gesture of Yamul’s other hand, and a round opening beckoned opposite Yamul.

“We are not like other races,” Yamul’s voice echoed off the polished sphere, no longer sad. “we each felt the loss of each soul. As we had each been great, before the war, so were we each diminished from the loss of so many of our brethren. The survivors turned inward, became so self absorbed that we lost the connection to our kindred. As such, many of us believe that there are undiscovered Eldar populations scattered among the stars, somewhere. This idea is why the Eldar slowly, tentatively went back out to the stars. The fear that those hated machines would discover us again, so haunted many of my race, that a kind of madness infected my people. The Eldar race is splintered now, some groups are so different that we barely recognize our own kin. As the Seers say, we are on different paths, to different destinations.”

Yamul motioned them toward the opening, and Pen saw that it was another portal, not a door. Foss went through first, followed by Lynx. Pen stopped in front of Yamul.

“To bare your soul like this,” Pen said, barely above a whisper, “I mean, to someone not of your people, must be a hard thing.”

“To relive the harm done my race is far harder.” Yamul replied. “And I fear a very hard thing awaits us.”

Pen followed Yamul’s outstretched arm, and stepped into the brilliance of the portal.

Pen turned completely around, her jaw hanging open. She was in Lynx’s quarters, with Lynx, surrounded by Lynx’s rows of communication gear. From a screen in the middle, Yamul’s voice, and face.

“The ancient enemy has returned to the hunt.” Yamul was saying, “Although at present the enemy only hunts the green ones, beware. Any race that the machine of death finds, will be hunted to extinction. Beware. Our forces gather for war. We have other ancient engines of destruction, but we fear that this time they will not be enough. If you must fight these forces of darkness, remember, let not one of the enemy live, or let not one of your people live to flee. They will follow. The very stars will die, where those machines of death follow.” The comm screen with Yamul’s face went dark.

Pen turned to look at Lynx, where she stood, her fists on her hips.

“This is all too much, too fast.” Pen said to Lynx “Where is Inquisitor Foss? And for that matter, what ship am I on now?”

“Yamul, along with a lot of the other Eldar leadership, and along with

most everyone in any leadership position in the Imperial administration, wants to pair up the two women that were responsible for so many successes so long ago.” Lynx said. Pen saw that Lynx was not smiling. Lynx went on, “You are on my fast attack cruiser, a Centurion Marine fleet asset. And this ship is part of a fleet of Centurion warships just arrived outside the star system the Eldar have chosen as an assembly point. Further, we are all about to jump into non-space, to join a lot of other Imperial Fleet and Marine Fleet ships assembling nearer to the galactic center.” Lynx turned to point up at an orbital display above her. “Inquisitor Foss is on a big battlewagon, um, just there.” Lynx turned back toward Pen. “And you, Special Representative of the people we have called Misfits, you are invited to join me. Or, you can board that little fast frigate waiting close aboard, and leave us. I have heard that you now have a family. I wouldn’t be surprised if you wished to go back to them.”

“I wish it very much.” Pen said slowly, “But you and the others have succeeded in impressing me with the dangerous matters at hand. I will stay.”

Pen looked to her left and right.

“You will find private quarters waiting just where you remember them to be.” Lynx said, a small smile on her face. “I can get you lodgings more fitting your station, a little later. You look as though you could use some rest.”

“You have read my mind again,” Pen replied, a weary little smile on her own face, “and don’t bother with other quarters for me, I think I want to stay near so much equipment that will bring me information.” Pen started to walk toward the entrance to the rooms Lynx had alluded to. “I am tired. My mind is numb, and my limbs feel like lead. After I rest there will be many things for us to do, I fear.”

Lynx smiled a bigger smile toward the entrance Pen had just disappeared into. Lynx said quietly into an empty room, “Yes Pen, I’m pleased to see you again, as well.” Lynx then went through the other door, to her own quarters. The chance to rest might not come again for some time.

...to be continued



FALLING DOWN

BY ZHAI MORENN

In the vast depths of an Imperium star system, four ships approached their targets. Their quarry was to be a lightly defended convoy. It would seem that the Gue'la Empire's resources were stretched thin in this area and defenses were lacking. Upon learning this, Tau fleet command had ordered that the Commerce Protection Fleet conduct a series of raids against lightly defended targets to help disrupt and weaken Gue'la holdings in the area. Upon the bridge of one of the new Il'Porrui class light cruisers, Kor'vre Nua'ta sat at his command station and conveyed the final aspects of his plan to the three Kir'shasvre commanders that accompanied his vessel.

'You know your role then. Await my signal to begin your attack runs.' Nua'ta concluded. 'Affirmative, for the Tau'va!' came the response from both of the commanders before Nua'ta terminated the hololithic communication link.

The plan was relatively simple. The Gue'la convoy was bound for a so called 'warp gate' and the most efficient route from their point of origin would take them past an asteroid field and a gas giant. While this was not the swiftest route, it was the one most likely to shield them from hostile sensors. Unfortunately for them, one of the commerce ship captains in the convoy was a well trusted Gue'vesa in service of the Tau

Empire. He had given very precise coordinates to a Demiurg tradesman who in turn delivered the message to Tau command. The Tau force would subdue the convoy escorts and force the surrender of any Gue'la merchant ships that would willingly accompany them back to Tau space. The rest were to be destroyed. The three smaller Tau ships would enter the asteroid field and maintain their position within the gravity well of the planet. After the convoy had passed, Nua'ta would approach them directly, presenting his prow deflectors and firepower to the convoy escorts and when they moved to engage, the Kir'shasvres would attack from behind and cut off any retreat for the merchant ships themselves.

'You have devised a most cunning plan, Kor'vre.' Came the calming voice of the Ethereal, Aun'el Sha'kires. Nua'ta had found himself growing quite fond of the Aun, for her wisdom and reassuring presence.

'Only cunning if it works el'Kires. Otherwise it will be a foolish plan.' He replied in the familiar shortened name form. 'It will work if we are up to the task of acting and moving as one.'

'Your humility does you credit, vre'Nua'ta, but you and I both know that you and our comrades are easily up to the task. You have always been a cunning hunter.' she replied.

Nua'ta for his part hid his growing sense of pride well. It was a satisfying personal indulgence but had no place on this ship when actively serving the Tau'va, the Greater Good. After a few moments he turned to his bridge crew.

'Time to targets?' He asked. The ship's AI responded in it's mellow but mechanical voice. 'Targets approaching sensor range. Two decs to intercept.'

'And our comrades?'

'Our escorts will be in position in .5 decs.'

'Excellent.' Nua'ta replied before turning to his various officers. 'Status?'

'Weapons charged and ready, missiles loaded and awaiting targeting data. Defenses online.' came the response from his tactical officer.

'Communications silence is being maintained. No Gue'la comm signals detected.' came the response from his communications officer.

By the time the rest of his bridge crew had finished reporting their respective statuses, Nua'ta knew they were ready for battle. With a nod from the Aun, he gave the order to engage.

SCENARIO

Prior to being a member of the Distant Darkness Revival project, Nua'ta had served as the commander of a light cruiser. His final mission before his disappearance was a strike against an Imperial convoy as part of a series of raids aimed at unbalancing Imperial forces in the region.

FORCES

Tau:

1x Emissary Class Light Cruiser (Taros Pattern), commanded by Nua'ta, Ld8.
3x Castellans Class Escorts (Taros Pattern)

Imperial:

1x Heavy Transport
3x transports
2x Swords Class Escorts

SET UP

Battlefield: Set up a large gas giant with a 30cm long asteroid field in its gravity well. The convoy must pass between the asteroid field and the planet. Nua'ta will deploy from the opposite side of the table as the convoy and must be in position by the time they arrive at the field. The 3 Castellans Nua'ta has are to attack from the asteroid field after the convoy has passed. The Imperial escorts may not break formation or take offensive action until the convoy reaches the asteroid field.

SPECIAL RULES

Upon reaching the asteroid field, the Imperial convoy is revealed to be a Dark Eldar trap.

Replace the swords and a single transport with Corsair class escorts. The heavy transport is replaced by a light cruiser with a profile as follows:

Hits: 4 / Speed: 40cm / Turns: 90 ° / Shields: Shadofield / Armour: 5+ / Turrets: 0

Weaponry:

Prow Weapon Batteries - 30cm - strength 6 - F
Prow Phantom Lance - 30cm - strength 2 - F

VICTORY CONDITIONS

Conduct the battle as a skirmish. VPs as normal, except that Nua'tas Emissary counts for double vps if it is hulked in a boarding action. This represents the DE boarding and capturing or slaughtering everyone they encounter. No ships are allowed to disengage except by moving off of a table edge.

The two transports which do not turn out to be Corsairs do not have a victory point value and are not an objective of any form once the Dark Eldar are revealed. This is to show that they have already been plundered of crew and cargo and are merely on autopilot.

HISTORICAL

Kor'vre Nua'ta frowned as the Gue'la engine signatures became unstable and began to distort. He could not believe they would rather self-destruct than be captured by a race as benevolent as the Tau. Quite suddenly the signatures stabilized, but resembled nothing like he had ever seen before. Sleek, predatory,

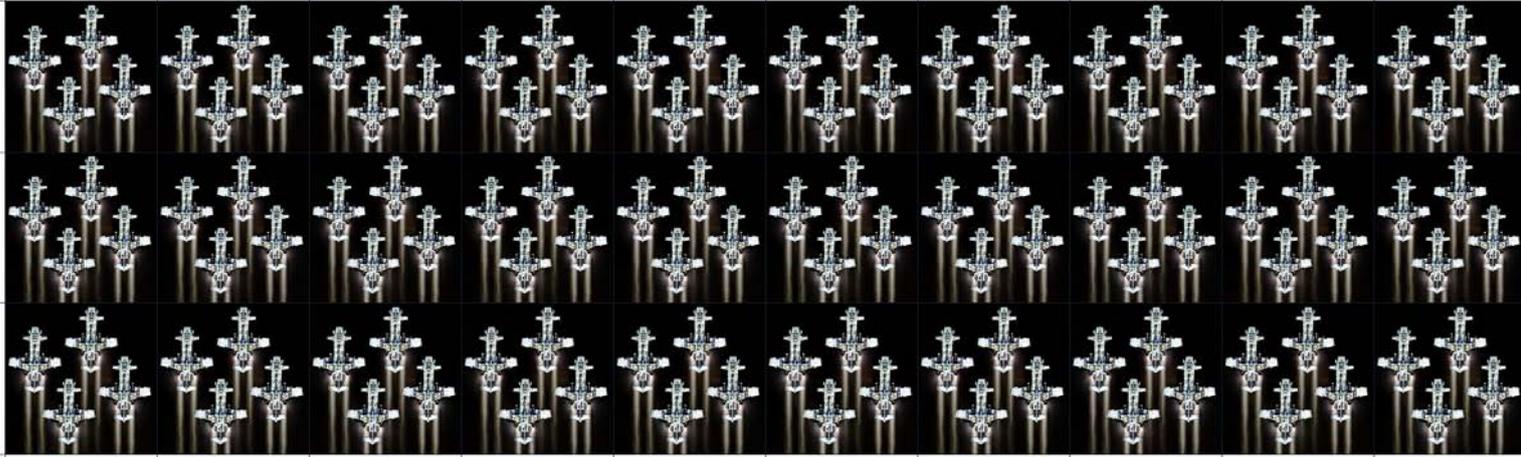
and fast ships were now bearing down upon his forces.

The Dark Eldar successfully executed their ambush against the Tau. No Tau ships escaped and only one Corsair was destroyed. It was presumed that all hands were lost with the Tau vessels. The horrifying truth was that many of the crew of Nua'tas Emissary, including Kor'vre Nua'ta and Aun'el Sha'Kires were captured and taken to a place beyond logical description where the only constants were pain, fear, and anguish. By unknown means, Nua'ta was either released or managed to escape after 3 years and was eventually returned to the Tau by a Demiurg tradesman who found him.

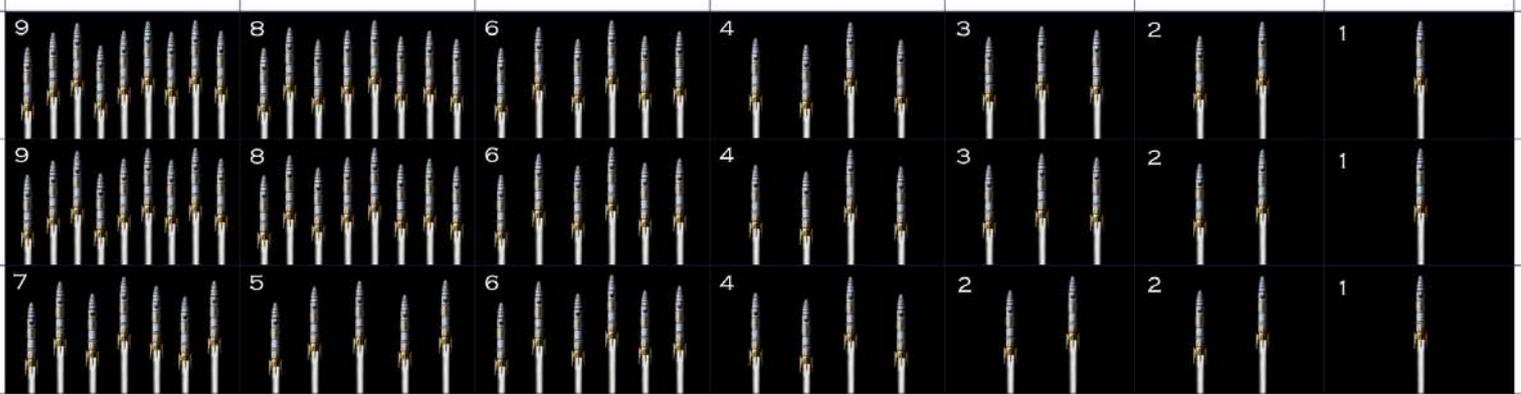


THE FORGE - SPACE WOLVES

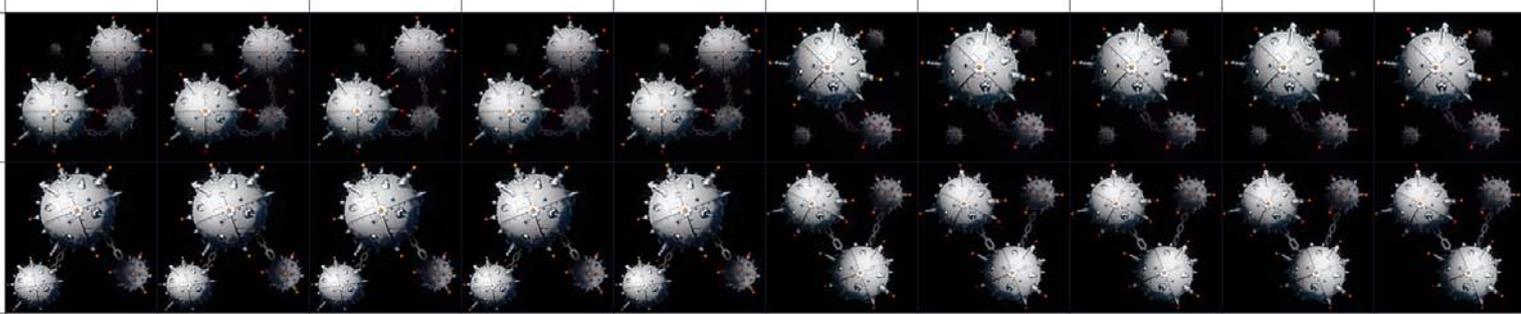
Thunderhawks



Torpedos

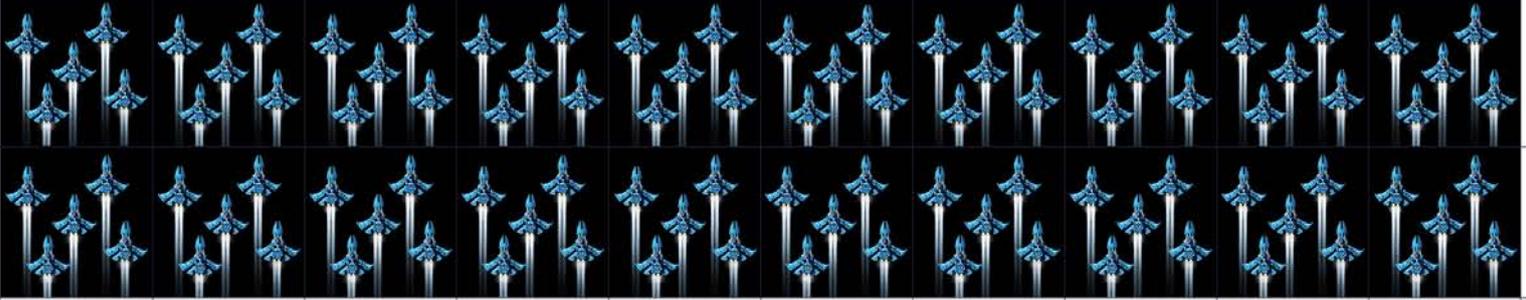


Minas

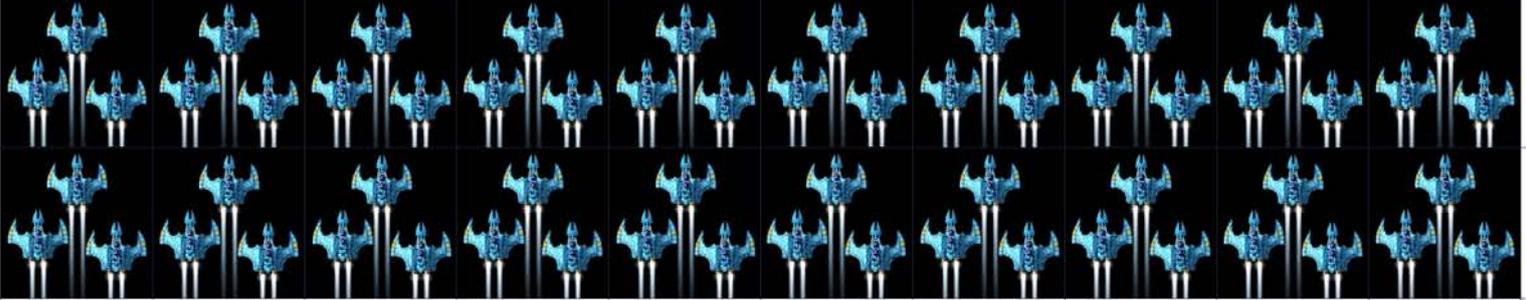


THE FORGE - CRAFTWORLD ELДАР

Interceptores Nightwing



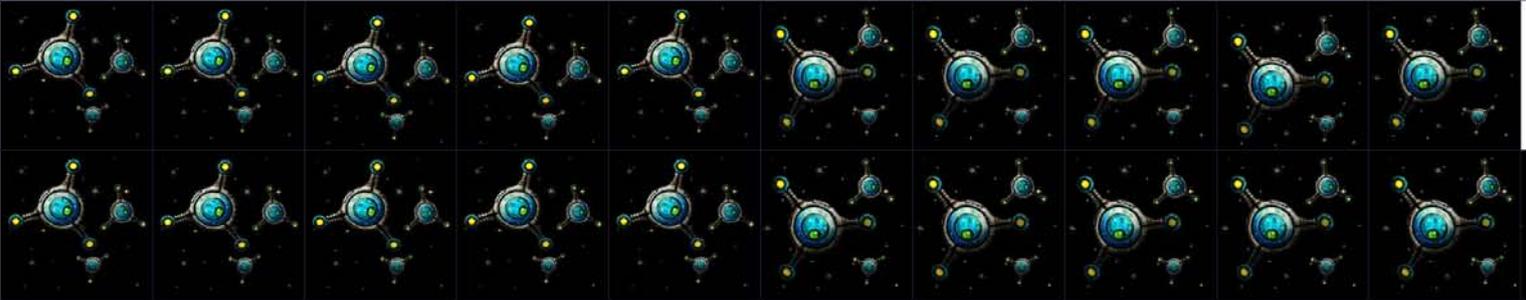
Bombarderos Fenix



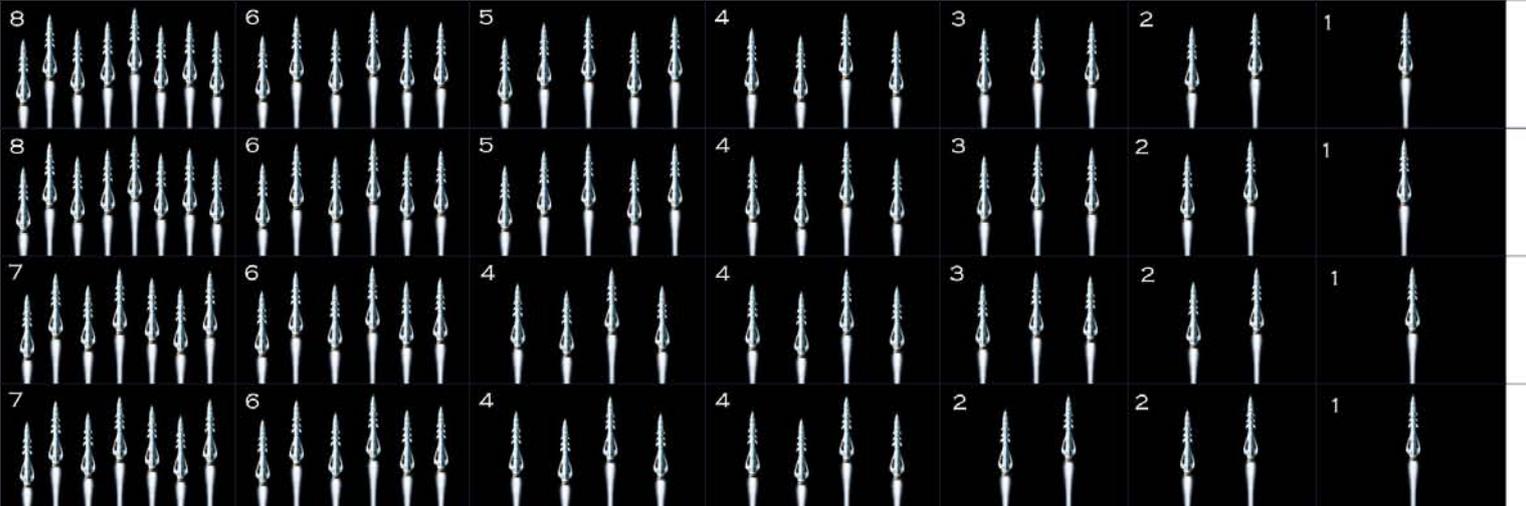
Torpederos Vampire



Minas



Torpedos





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