

WARP RIFT

THE BATTLEFLEET GOTHIC NETZINE



ISSUE 25

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

+++ GREEN AND MEAN +++

Hello,

Maybe a little late this time but when you move further towards the Showcase section you will see why. A picture of all 23 entries into the fleet category of GothiComp 2009. I hope you'll enjoy them!

The submissions for the single ship category can soon/already be seen at the hosting site.

More information about GothiComp you can read on this very page.

Surrounding the Showcase this Warp Rift, issue 25, features another essay by Reg Steiner, this time focussing on Orks. Reg has also written the rules and a scenario for his Darkening Technology. Very interesting I must say, On top of it all Reg has also found some time to give his view on the Eldar for his designed Simultaneous movement & combat system.

Davide wrote some upgrade for the Imperial Navy after seeing the Hunt for the Red October. At the back of this issue we have another set of markers by Rodrigo Barbera.

Within the Officer's Mess chapter 10 of the long running series A Tyranid War will come to an end. In the future we will also be lured into chapters 11 and 12.

To round it all we have an exclusive interview with Maverick about his project: Battlefleet Gothic: Chronicles.

enjoy,
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 +++

The deadline for submissions has passed. We are immensely pleased to see all the great entries this year. The gallery for 2009 will soon/already be available at the following page:

<http://www.epic40k.co.uk/pics/gothic01.html>

The voting heats will soon/already be available in the following subforum:

<http://www.tacticalwargames.net/forums/index.cgi?act=SF;f=38>

Remember: you must be a member of Tactical Command to vote.

The voting for round one will end on august 31.

Horizon

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ORKS! TERROR OF THE SPACELANES!

BY REG STEINER

Introduction:

I have been asked to write about the Ork fleets in Battle Fleet Gothic. I started with them as soon as the game was released, so I certainly have an opinion or two. Most people who contend with me think the Ork fleet is too tough, in most games. I do not agree. I see other gamers with Ork fleets get swept away. I even hear that the Ork fleet is too weak to bother with. Both views are wrong.

Battle Fleet Gothic was designed with very different races in mind. A lot of games have cool looking ship designs for each race. But Battle Fleet Gothic designers wanted each race to have distinct abilities. They managed it. No one will tell me that Chaos fleets play the same as Imperial fleets, and certainly not Dark Eldar or Eldar can be viewed as just more copies of each other, or any other race. Where we have to look, is how each gamer uses each fleet. Orks have obvious weaknesses. But some interesting strengths, too. We just have to play into those strengths.

First: In the 40k universe, Orks fight in groups. Ork fleets must do the same. Put ships in squadrons - always. I don't mean that all Kill Kroozers must be paired with more Killz. Tack on a Terror ship, if that will better serve the goal in that game. Just Terror ships and Ram ships for a fleet may sound killer, but huge numbers of options are lost, when the other types of vessels are ignored. If you only want to play tournaments, fine. But you'll miss a lot of really wild games.

I usually glue escorts into squadrons of like types, Savages with Savages, and Ram with Ram ships.

But that is just at first. Concentrating the abilities of each type is what makes each type of Ork escort dangerous. Just one Ravager with a Ram ship and a Savage in a squadron is only good as a target. Each one just can't hit hard enough, and worse, each attack is countered differently. Likely reducing the attack to a single hit on an enemy, if that. But put four Savages in squadron, and hold them back until the whole damn Ork fleet is in among the enemy, and look out! All those short-ranged double-hit guns ruin someone's day!

The point is: Squadrons. Two Battleships or Cruisers in each squadron. Three or four usually means the ships on one end of the line lose gun strength to range. But three, four, or even six - escort class Ork ships in a squadron, all the same design to concentrate power - strike fear in whoever they are pointed at! But that is just half the tactic. Also keep as much of an Ork fleet together as possible. Some scenarios start players off scattered all over, and even off the table for several turns. Whoever manages to recombine their force first, nearly always wins the scenario. Remember: Keep ships in squadrons, and keep squadrons together in a mutually supporting fleet. Detaching a squadron of cruisers to swing around a flank is still desirable at times. But trying to send some ships left, some more right, and splitting the middle attack into two separate thrusts - wrong! Don't try to do everything at once, or dominate the whole battlefield at once. Your opponent will concentrate superior firepower on all your little pieces of a fleet, and bye-bye Orks!

Second: Know each ship. Not just how many guns and shields. A player must know how each combination can work, at best and worst. When Ork Ram ships made the scene, and proved very damaging to enemy capitol ships, my opponents would strive to wipe out Ram ships as soon as could be. I used this fear. Ram ships have a front armor of 6, so each is hard to hit with weapons batteries, and if lances are used - well, most fleets have far fewer lances than weapons batteries. Waste some on the Ram ships, please! My other ships get less attention, and then my Ork ships are next to yours, blasting away with those short range double damage cannons again! I use the ramming tactic rarely. Even with Ram ships. Even though Orks can ram enemies easier than enemies can ram Orks. With Ram ships leading my fleet in, a lot get burned away. Leaving my Ork capitol ships with far less damage when I get next to the enemy. Kill Kroozers and Terror ships are at their worst (for the enemy!), next to the enemy. Even launching ordinance from 15cm or closer has a magnified effect. Since launching comes after main guns, often the extra hits from ordinance launched so close, finishes what the main guns started: The destruction of the enemy.

Onslaughts and Ravager escorts proved less useful for most of my purposes. Too often the variable torpedo strength came up a 'one' or 'two'. And the rules do not let Ravagers combine torpedoes when in a squadron. Well, I still use Ravagers, but most often as enemy escort killers. Get to less than 30cm and launch, and the ordinance hit's the moment

it is fired. Since escorts only have one turret (usually), then half the attacked escorts should not save themselves with turret defenses. When we introduced two point escorts, suddenly both the Onslaught and Ravager escorts became very valuable indeed. Two more weapons batteries on each heavy escort meant that a squadron of these could do some damage! The extra eight points cost for the extra hit point, and two extra weapons batteries is barely noticed. I never have only heavy escorts. Instead, I have a squadron or two of heavy escorts, all others being normal escorts. Savages would not profit unless more Big Gunz could be added, and that would just unbalance the game excessively. Ram ships do not need extra hull points, but the extra batteries would prove useful. Still, Ram ships are left at one hit point. They do their job fine as is.

I won't give away all my tactics, but Ork fleet gamers need to try things out. So what if the flank attack did not work - this time. Maybe a squadron or two of escorts with the two cruisers would have tipped the balance, so try a flank attack again, with escorts. The Ravagers just don't seem to ever hit anything. Then let them lead the fleet into the jaws of the enemy guns - with the Ram ships coming up behind them. Your enemy will not make every attempt to redirect fire from the closest enemy ship, and Ravagers have armor 6 bows, as well. If any do survive, well fire those torpedoes close in, and your enemy will not make every turret defense against the fighter-bombers and torpedoes - some will get through. That kind of adaptability is what the Ork fleet is good for. If something does not work, try something else, you have the abilities in your ships.

Third: A gamer has to be adaptable, and with Ork ships, a lot of adaptations are open to the Warlord

in charge. An example: I had a real nemesis in the form of a very capable player, and his Chaos fleet. Luck at choosing scenarios and set up positions favored my nemesis in game after game. He even suggested that Ork ships just were not tough enough to get at Chaos ships, and win. Well, I tell you, that comment will not go unchallenged.



I made a plan. The next fleet engagement - full sized battle, not a raid - I would have a major surprise for my nemesis. Sure enough, two weeks later, I got my chance. A stand up fleet battle that came up at 3250 points (we had a sliding points scale where the bigger games we preferred were more likely, up to 5000 points.). Now at this time we all were allowed to use ships that had survived previous battles, and had added upgrades to crew and ships. Even though we were not engaged in a formal campaign. Those upgrades still added extra points cost a ship upgraded, so some cruisers rivaled battleships for cost! This time I left off all upgrades, took not one. Took the cheapest Warlord. I wanted numbers of ships. Nice cheep Kill and Terror Kroozers, and a

Hammer or two. Used the last points on escorts, and since the cheapest is the Ram ship, I had extra of those to go with the Savages.

Without recounting the whole battle, this time my ships got up next to his, with my Kroozers firing port, starboard, and bow weapons all at once. Each of his cruisers and battleship was hit on all sides, repeatedly. In one turn of close combat, followed by boarding actions that took possession of several of his crippled ships, I had eliminated enough of my enemy's firepower, that he had no hope of hitting back with anywhere near the power he once had. The survivors disengaged and fled. After that I said that those Chaos ships could not stand up to determined Ork attacks. Seems that Chaos and Ork fleets began a period of cooperation against the Eldar and Imperial fleets. There were still smaller contests between Chaos and Ork fleets, over some minor goal, but a healthy respect showed for Ork ships was apparent.

Again to the point: Adapt. Change the whole concept of your force size and attack plan. With Ork ships having so many different possible combinations of weapons and means of attack, I just have to try them all!

You may hear people in your group mutter about those Orks being too cheap and numerous, and/or just plain too tough. Like me, you may also discover that some of those tactics you tried first with Ork fleets, also work with your Imperial fleet. Your Ork fleet will likely still lose some games, trying out new ideas for force make-up and attack methods. But when it really matters, you will have a ready plan that will work for you, having refined how each ship will best work for you.

Fourth: The heavy ships in your Ork fleet need

some attention too. Battleships, as presented by the rules, left us all cold. The only type available for the longest time could only be used “one deep”. That is, only one to a fleet, because of the “uniqueness” of each battleship. What!?! Well, no such restrictions were forced on us about Hammer class battle-cruisers, thankfully. And “Gorbag’s Revenge” battleship has those nice big ‘organ pipes’ out front. Perfect for the Hammer class, since no model (other than my scratch built) was available. You may find that three or four Hammer class battle-kroozers work just fine, without battleships at all. We all had the understanding that which ever was the class used for a game, was declared at the start. And no mixing. If two models were present, both were Hammers, or battleships. Because battleships are just built up Kill or Terror ships, anyway, we made some little additions, and still used battleships in squadrons, too.

A lot of your enemies will think they need to go after your battleship(s) first thing. Well let them. I have won far more games with Terror and Kill Kroozers getting in the telling hits, than with battleships. Those big bruisers absorb a lot of hits, and coming in right behind Ram ships, opponents can seem rather panicked. Wonder why?

Some Last Bits: I have to add a little about the Simultaneous Move/Combat rules. Ramming with the Simultaneous rules in effect is downright tough. Ram ships spread out at 10cm or even 15cm abeam each other have a probability of one, or two, hitting the target ship. Not like with alternating moves. I can keep Rams closer together and cause more damage to the enemy ship. What to do? Ah. Before we even thought of trying simultaneous play, we had determined that flying a straight course did not mean measured with a

straight edge and calipers. We were all unhappy with excessive harping on the rule and what is straight.

I set out a rule that if a ship is within a lateral distance of 10% of the total distance moved, consider the ship as not making a turn.

Example: My escort moved 25cm. If, at the end of the move, my ship was within 2.5cm of where a straight course would have ended, say to the left of that spot, and with the nose of the ship in the same direction - that is a legal “straight” move. And we did not measure that with a micrometer either. Now any ship of any race can ‘slip’ a little, and not just to attempt to ram. Not everyone likes ramming attacks, but to make boarding attempts a player has to have a way to ‘make contact’ with the enemy. Bending the idea of ‘straight’ a little, helps make boarding attacks possible.

Gamers using Orks need to be able to take losses.

Ship losses. I have seen players ‘give up’ when a prized cruiser or battleship is trashed from a pair of Nova cannon hits. Take the losses and press on. Orks are cheaper ships because they do not have a Nova cannon, or Lances. Even the one Ork ship with Lances only has two, and it is not a cheap ship, either. Take advantage of superior numbers. If the enemy is unable to smash any of your ships, then he is in big trouble! I rarely retreat a crippled ship. Yes, a few more hits and: Boom! But the more the enemy divides his fire, the more survivors you have to hammer him. I consider shooting at a cripple wasted shots. Yet even a crippled ship can add fire to an attack from his squadron, maybe just that little bit extra is enough to make that enemy ship go: Boom! Keep your wounded ships in the battle, you complicate your enemy’s decision making. Hell, you just might win the game.

Ork players need to be real tough. Brace for impact only when so much main armaments is targeted on a ship, just the ranging lasers are melting armor! Really.

Don’t Brace for Impact. It was a common tactic to bring fire on all the opponent’s ships, just enough to make the timid player Brace, with the idea of forcing all the ships to have only half their gun power on their turn. Barely any damage, yet half the weapons work. Lose game. Simple tactic - for the other guy. Our guys all stopped Bracing, shortly after contact with my Ork fleets. Some games I did not brace once. A couple of times it could have helped save a ship. But too seldom to make a difference. Having all my weapons because the enemy failed to cripple my ship(s) meant my Ork ships hit back hard. And if the enemy Braced everything to cut damage - fine. Now he can only hit back with half the weapons, or not at all with some weapons. And I am closer with all my weapons firing. Some fellows swear by Bracing. Saved their butts. I find otherwise. Even Braced, ships take damage. And my Orks are here for the long haul. Fail to Brace when those double damned double damage Ork cannons can hit, and someone’s luck has run out. Be an Ork! Save the Bracing markers for the other guy to use.

Even tough Orks cannot win every game. I played the Ambush scenario four times in a row, as the defender all four times. (We were using random scenario selection - Truth!) Only won the scenario once. That win was because the enemy could not get at my ships until I had all my boys fired up, and sending a hot welcome! The point is that some scenarios are going to be extra tough to win. But losing a game, or four, does not make your fleet invalid. Take new approaches to the problem. Add some new ships to your fleet make-up. Or both. If charging straight at the enemy didn’t work, hang back a little while. Consolidate. Concentrate. Build up some circling swarms of fighter-bombers. The enemy may think you are timid, and charge you, guns blazing. Now. Get in close and hammer away with heavy Gunz from your squadrons, and everything else as well.

Reg

NAVAL UPGRADES

BY DAVIDE FERRARI

Watching “The hunt of Red October”, I’ve always been fascinated from the devices they use to evade/purse/attack the enemy fleets.

Playing BFG, I noticed that the command phase is too much simplified and I started writing about some enhancements that ships can buy to help with orders.

Rules:

Only cruiser can have these upgrades. No escorts can use them because too much power/resources are needed to gain this upgrades. A single ship can have no more then 3 upgrades.

Naval Upgrades:

- Evading Dispositives _____ +5 Points
- Electronic Counter Measures _____ +5 Points
- Deep Scanning Probe _____ +5 Points
- Fast Response Teams _____ +5 Points
- Proximity Sensors _____ +5 Points
- Silenced Motors _____ +10 Points
- Advanced Targeting Matrix _____ +15 Points
- Improved Impact Procedures _____ +20 Points



Description:

Evading Dispositives

Magnetic shrapnel and heat disposals are threw out as extreme solution to bypass torpedo’s tracking systems. When your ship is hit by torpedo salvos ,roll a Leadership test. On a successful roll, you can try to evade the salvo. You can roll a 6+ for every torpedo and eliminate it .turrets and other standard countermeasures will work as usual.

Electronic Counter Measures

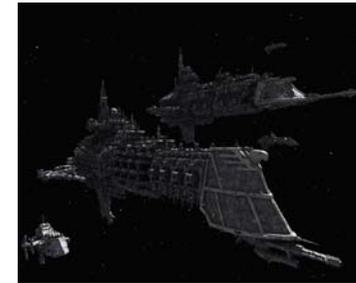
ECM is used to avoid enemy intelligence capturing the radio transmission.Roll a dice at the start of every enemy turn. On a roll of 5+,you deny the bonus for +1 Command check to the enemy.For Every ECM you got,you increase the Roll of 1.

Deep Scanning Probe

When chasing an enemy fleet,commanders can use DSP to increase they’re possibility to capture enemy transmittions.Every ship that declare using DSP ,can’t fire,board or ram and gain a +1 to the Command Checks until his next turn.

Proximity Sensors

Every ship can install on it’s turrets a proximity sensor.Every sensor increase the turrets range to 20cm.Even if the range is increased , the accuracy isn’t enhanced . While firing in this method ,turrets hits only on a 5+.Turrets follow normal rules when supports attack the ship with Proximity Sensors.



Fast Response Teams

Trained teams are ready to eliminate enemy invaders during assaults. While defending your ship, you can add a +1 to your board bonuses.

Silenced Motors

Silenced motors can be used to reach a better position before battle without warning the enemy vessels. Before the game start , a vessel with silenced motors can move 4D6cm.

Advanced Targeting Matrix

Only few ships got the opportunity to use these advanced targeting systems, but the effectiveness is undiscussed when applied of the artillery batteries. Only a ship every 750 fleet points can have an ATM.

That ship can ignore one shift column per turn.

Improved Impact Procedures

Crew is trained to impact procedures above standard level. Doors are sealed, firemen are ready to extinguish fires and everyone know exactly what to do.If the vessel pass the command check to “prepare for Impact”, you can re-roll failed saves, but this time at 5+.

BATTLEFLEET GOTHIC: CHRONICLES

BY MAVERICK / WARP RIFT



WHERE TO NOW?

Since Games-Workshop announced that they were no longer developing specialist games, fans have since wondered how long Battlefleet Gothic can last. Will people get bored without anything new, without any new models and without story development? The answer, much to our relief is, no. The Battlefleet Gothic community have kept the game alive by releasing their own publications and updates like this magazine and like The Book of Nemesis. Projects like this are what ultimately keep the game going so, when we heard of a new project in the pipeline, we were anxious to get an insight into what this project will bring to the game.

We interviewed Aaron Heaps, the Project Director of Battlefleet Gothic: Chronicles to learn exactly what he and his team are up to. The project started in December 2008 and has been hosted on the site BFGproject.informe.com. Though there is a public area to the forum and a workshop, the majority

of the project is behind closed doors so when the opportunity to really find out what Chronicles is all about came up, we leapt on it.

WARP RIFT: So Aaron, to start with the basics, what is Battlefleet Gothic: Chronicles?

AARON: *Battlefleet Gothic: Chronicles is an all new fan created supplement for Battlefleet Gothic aimed at revitalising interest in the game, will be released in English, French, German and Spanish versions and will be free for players to download.*

WARP RIFT: When can we expect the supplement to be unveiled/released?

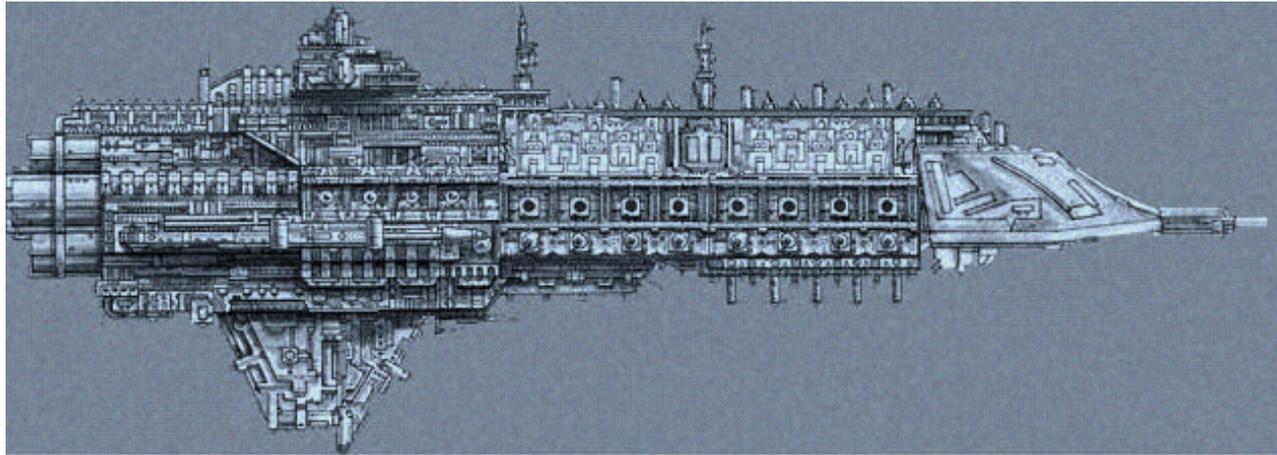
AARON: *The supplement will be released in three editions, each edition covering a different era. The first edition, 'Dark Millennium', will cover events of the 41st millennium and will be released in late 2010. Subsequent editions cover the Age of Imperium and the Horus Heresy respectively and will be released some time after Dark Millennium, but obviously we can't give any dates on that.*

WARP RIFT: What makes Battlefleet Gothic: Chronicles unique?

AARON: *Battlefleet Gothic: Chronicles follows in the same spirit as Battlefleet Gothic and Battlefleet Gothic Armada. Just as Armada raised the bar so too will Chronicles. We aim to radically broaden the scope of the game, thus allowing players to play almost any fleet, anywhere in the galaxy - not just the Gothic or Armageddon sectors. We will also introduce an all new rules platform allowing players to link games of Battlefleet Gothic to Warhammer 40,000, which is great considering the recent release of Planet-Strike and the up-coming release of Planetary Empires.*

WARP RIFT: Can we expect any new species or fleets in Chronicles?

AARON: *We will be introducing a new species called the Kleyr. There will be a lot of goodies in store for Imperial and Chaos players and a surprise or two for Ork and Dark Eldar players. I won't even mention what we have in store for the Necron'tyr...*

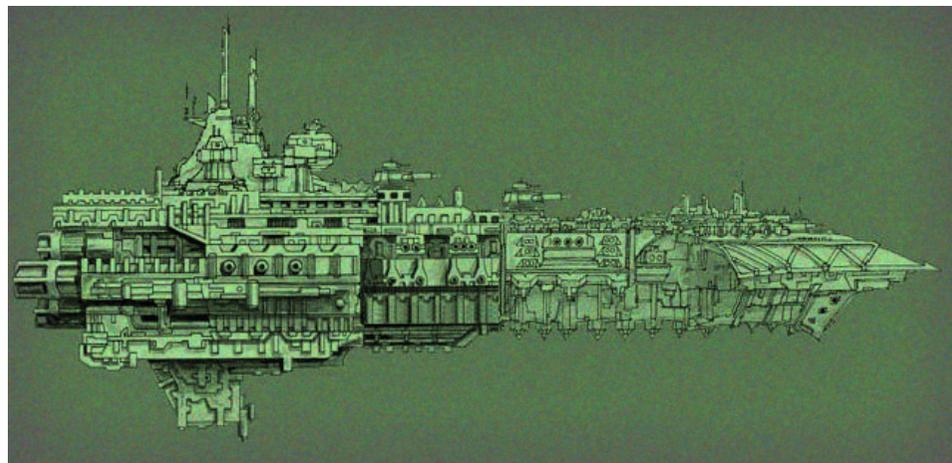


WARP RIFT: What are the Kleyr?

AARON: *The Kleyr (pronounced "clear") are a felinoid species allied to the Tau Empire. They are quite aggressive and adaptable warriors. Until the later stages of the Tau's Fourth Sphere Expansion, the Kleyr were considered a minor threat to the Imperium but attempts to locate and quell them were always unsuccessful. When a number of planets in the Kleyr Consortium were invaded or destroyed by the Imperium of Man, the Kleyr formed a powerful covenant with the Tau Empire.*

WARP RIFT: Does the supplement have any official ties or capacity?

AARON: *The supplement is completely unofficial and is not endorsed by Games Workshop. That said however, the supplement will very closely follow the canon of Games Workshop's own publications, so fans have no fear of disappointment there. Also, because the supplement is unofficial, it allows us to source new ships from non-Games Workshop suppliers, which is necessary as Games Workshop is no longer producing new ships for Battlefleet Gothic.*



WARP RIFT: Games Workshop has always kept to desperation and doom and gloom thematically. Recently, we have seen supplements taking a different look on things like Project Distant Darkness. Will Chronicles be keeping to the old school or is there a twist in the story?

AARON: *Battlefleet Gothic: Chronicles will really take a step back and allow players to decide*

for themselves. There is bound to be a bit of the old Doom and Gloom side but there will be a lot of new stuff too, especially as it will cover current and some future events. We hope to give new direction to the different factions, not just inevitable growth or slow demise.

Well, that all sounds pretty action packed and I don't know about you but I can't wait for its release. Just be careful with these new ships, if you make the fleets too good, my bank balance will hate you. Thank you very much for taking the time to share with us some of the secrets of Battlefleet Gothic: Chronicles, we hope to hear more from you in the future.

Battlefleet: Chronicles
2010.



DARKENING TECHNOLOGY

BY REG STEINER

Introduction: *In fiction I have written, I introduced certain weapons systems and defense systems. I have likewise knitted together a few house rules for the same things. Here is another one from my fiction.*

In the storyline, space vessels moving through space gave off certain energy emissions and harmonics of radiated energy. Sensors pick these up, and plot where the vessel should be, as it moves. Even at the speed of light, if what you are watching is several hundred thousand kilometers away, or millions, several seconds or minutes pass while the energy reaches sensors. So the target vessel is several seconds, or minutes, further along its course than a sensor would show. During a battle where only a few kilometers separate antagonists, the delay is unnoticeable to any except computers. So. We can track ships in space by visible, and other, means. Now military minds want some way to disappear from enemy tracking devices.

Darkening Technology. To hide all a space vessel's emissions and visible reflected light, a lot of different technologies would be needed. Special shielding to stop all radiated energies, and special coatings to stop reflected light, all over the ship. A different type of shielding for each type of energy. What blocks or absorbs visible light has little or no effect on infrared or x-rays, for example. Or a Science Fiction leap: A radiated field that cancels out other forms of radiation, as well as itself, would mask approaching ships from passive sensors, and even radar.

Now to make it fit into games.

Using Darkening as Stealth: First, only Battleships, Grand Cruisers, and Heavy/Battle Cruiser sized ships may have Darkening Technology, ordinary cruisers are too small for the power needs. However, the shield extends far enough away from the owning vessel, that others may use it by 'flying close formation' with the battleship. There is another limit. The field 'cancels out' other forms of radiation, as well as its own energy, but it is not perfect.

Defense shields cannot be used at all, while using Darkening, as the energy from the shields is many times that of the Darkening energy.

Additionally, "hiding" another vessel or vessels close by increases the amount of energy emissions needing to be canceled. Therefore, only one other capitol ship, smaller than a Battleship or Grand Cruiser, or a maximum of 4 escorts, can 'fly close'.

To put this on the game table, the ten triangular markers are used. The marker represents "energy leakage" and other observable signs, as well as false readings. So a player with eight ships to deploy wants to try bringing in the whole fleet under Darkening. Four markers would be needed. A maximum of one false counter can be used for every two actual markers. All these markers **must** be 10cm apart, or more. Smaller vessels accompanying Darkening ships can be no further than 7cm away from the Darkening equipped ship. Markers move at 15cm per turn.

The player using the Darkening must draw a map to show not only where each marker is to be placed, but also where each ship(s) is actually located

around the numbered markers.

Example:

The four markers represent a battleship, and three Heavy/Battle Cruisers using Darkening fields. Near each is a light cruiser, just 7cm 'dead ahead'. Or each light cruiser could be 45 degrees ahead and to port at 7cm. The numbers on the markers are to identify each mini-fleet, and if it is a false marker.

All ships under Darkening fields are at minimum energy signature. To engage shields, and power up energy weapons, etc, or even to make a change of direction, (order a turn) removes the Darkening protection. Models are placed on the table immediately. Other nearby markers are only affected if they too return to full operating power.

Detecting Darkened Ships: Only the markers enter the table from the opponent's table edge. Once the markers are 60cm away from an enemy capitol ship, that ship can roll against its leadership, but at a -2. That is, a leadership 9 would need a 7 or less to detect something. One attempt per turn is made to detect darkened ships. The attempt at detecting uses the combat phase of that detecting ship, so no weapons fire is possible. The scanning ship can be the closest, and the best Leadership, within 60cm, for purposes of detecting Darkened ships. If successful, randomly roll for which counter is detected (1 - 4 on a D6, using the above example.) If not a false marker, the Darkened ship and any accompanying ships with it are revealed. The other markers can just carry on, or elect to "power up".

Any active defender's ship, not the scanning ship, can make normal combat attacks with any and all weapons. Any ships not active can become active with a successful Leadership roll.

Darkened ships are automatically detected within 30cm, by any escort or capitol ship that is active. Ships 'at rest' like in the ambush scenario, cannot detect at all. Fighters and bombers need to get to within 10cm, because the small craft cannot carry the sensors needed to detect through the Darkening fields.

Darkened Ships and Combat: All ships that were running under minimum energy, including escorts, can 'power up' on any of their turns. But Combat is limited to launching ordinance and weapons batteries only. No Nova cannon or lance type weapons fire possible, until the following combat phase. On the next turn all weapons are used normally, no restrictions.

If alternating player turns is in use, the successful detecting of Darkened ships allows all defending ships to attack, if active, and to become active with successful Leadership checks. The attacking player (the one using Darkening) had already completed his turn, and must wait until his next turn to fire weapons, with the above restrictions. (No energy weapons yet) If Simultaneous Move/Combat rules are in use, all attacking ships can fire, as well as active defender vessels, but the attacker's ships are restricted to the weapons above, until the next combat turn. Then all weaponry is used normally.

Eldar uses of Darkening: Eldar ships also have Darkening, but have a different method of use. Specialized escort class vessels actually transmit the field, not capitol ships. Every above description of use is also used here, except that the capitol ships are escorted by the specially designed frigate class

ship. Once the Darkening has served its purpose, the escorts so equipped turn away and escape. They are too rare and valuable to use in combat. There is a limit of six such Darkening equipped frigates allowed in a game.

So a maximum of six capitol ships, or a mix including other types of escort class ships, is possible. Any more than that and the small energy leaks become too great, and discovery is automatic. The limit is one capitol ship per escorting Darkening escort, or a maximum of 4 escorts within the field of an escorting Darkening equipped frigate.



*** To prevent confusion, use a frigate class escort that is unused in the upcoming operation. Example: Aconite class frigates escort a fleet into battle, using Darkening fields. Once the Eldar fleet "powers up", or the Eldar are detected, the Aconite frigates with Darkening field equipment break off and speed away. No Aconite frigates are part of the Eldar fleet remaining on the table. All other escort types are allowed.

Next game a different frigate type, such as Hemlock, can be chosen as the Darkening escort type, allowing Aconite frigates to remain in play.

Don't forget: Even Holofields cancel Darkening attempts!

Ork warships using Darkening: Orks steal any technology, and muck about until they get it working the way the Orks want. This translates to Orks also using Darkening, but attempts at detecting are only at a -1 from the leadership of a scanning ship, instead of the usual -2.

Design uses: The purpose behind these rule's design, was to attempt duplicating submarines ability to infiltrate harbors, and lie in wait for enemy ships to pass near.

This idea was then expanded to include how fleets would manage to close on enemy ships and installations so closely before combat occurred in Battle Fleet Gothic games. The evolution of the idea became the rules above. This method of attacks is not meant to be the normal course of events, for an attacker to approach an enemy held star system.

These rules are meant as an alternative means of attempting an ambush, or sneak attack. Also as a way to keep introducing new and interesting twists on scenarios we already know well. If both players do not agree to use Darkening technology in an upcoming game, then the technology is not used. There are several ways to adapt this Darkening idea to scenarios. Try some ideas out and see if a little twist on those scenarios makes for new challenges.

On the following page we have a scenario for two players or solo play using this Darkening Technology.

Reg

Introduction: *This idea was set out as an example of a game using Darkening technology to cover the attack force. The situation for this scenario is an attack on a rear staging area. Star Systems “outside” of the immediate war-zone tend to be more relaxed concerning security. A trait all sentient races share. Some terms hint of two player use, should that option be chosen.*

Attacker Mission: Destroy enemy supply and re-enforcement vessels. Cause as much damage to enemy installations as possible without excessive risk to own ships.

Defending Force: Roll random Leadership values to assign each warship.

1 *Light Cruiser*, or if unavailable, a unit of 3 Destroyer class escorts.

4 *Frigate class escorts*, ‘parked’ 20cm from the planet, 15cm from the ‘parked’ cargo ships.

4 *Cargo ships*, in orbit around the planet, spaced fairly evenly 10cm from the planet. All have Ld.6.

4 *Cargo ships*, in “station keeping” 20cm from the planet, midway between the planet and the moon, formed up in a ‘box’ formation, 5cm apart. All have Ld.6.

2 *Airfields on the planet*, for a total of 4 units (markers) maximum per turn, of either bombers or fighters, or a mix. No assault boats. Units launched from the planet airfields are placed on the planet center, ending the first ordinance phase. Next phase, the ordinance markers are placed on the planet’s edge, and on following ordinance phases the markers move away from the planet moving normally. In other words, it takes 2 ordinance phases to leave the planet. The airfields can only launch 3 times (12 total markers/units), then are out of warcraft to launch, for the rest of the game. No ‘reloading ordinance’ needed for the airfields.

Attacking Force: Roll random Leadership values to assign each vessel.

1 Battle Cruiser, or equivalent, with fighter and bomber launch ability (no assault boats).

1 Light Cruiser, or 4 Frigate class escorts if a Lt. Cruiser is unavailable.

Setup: Place a medium planet directly in the center of a 4 x 6 table, with a small moon 40cm from the planet, directly between the planet and the center of a long table edge. (Which edge is unimportant) No other table ‘dressing’ is needed, or desirable. Place the ships for the defender as listed above.

The attacker force is placed 60cm from the planet edge, with the Lt. Cruiser within 7cm of the Battle Cruiser, but not closer than 60cm to the planet. This should position the attacker force midway between the planet, and one short table edge. The attacker chooses which table edge. No ordinance is yet launched, both ships are “running silent” with no turns possible, no shields, no energy weapons charged; to prevent discovery.

The defending Lt Cruiser is patrolling 30cm from the planet. Because the rear areas are more relaxed about security, the orbit of the Light Cruiser is predictable. Meaning that the defending Light Cruiser is placed directly opposite the attacker force, on the other side of the planet, with its bow facing one long table edge. It is in a 30cm out orbit, and is moving at 15cm per turn. Until combat begins, this patrolling vessel ends each movement at 30cm from the planet edge.

Begin the game: The attempt to locate the approaching attacker is made once per turn. The planet is the only close enough ‘installation’ to be able to make the attempt. Use Leadership value “8” for the planet. This is still modified by the Darkening rules, don’t forget. Success means that the patrolling Lt. cruiser breaks orbit, and heads

directly at the attacker force. Other warships can immediately roll against their Leadership value to “activate”, and will move and fight normally starting the turn after they activate. The attacker force will know they are detected, once successful, and can speed up to maximum, if desired, and begin combat, if desired. If the turn the attacker is discovered does not begin combat, the next attacker turn all weapons are at full strength. The restriction on energy weapons is only for the first combat phase after “stealth” is dropped.

Scoring: The attacker force must exit the battle along the short table edge, opposite of the short edge used to enter the battle. 50 points for each destroyed cargo class ship, and normal points for destroyed enemy warships. Any lost attacker vessels subtract their points cost from the total. Being a raid, any number of destroyed enemy ships is a victory. It is only a larger, or smaller, victory judged against attacker losses and enemy losses.

Two Player Version: If another player wishes to try this scenario, remember a marker us used for the attacker force, until detected. Also, the ‘blip’ marker should start on a short table edge, rather than 60cm from the planet, to give another player a better chance at detection. The scenario plays out normally once the Darkening technology is pierced, with the marker replaced with the proper ships, at the distances laid out in the Darkening Tech. rules. If an enemy fleet is substituted for transports and cargo craft, adapting one of the ambush scenarios from the rulebooks should prove a better choice for force choices and layout. Feel free to adapt this scenario for larger raids, with larger attacker forces. Just remember the limit on the technology. The weak energy ‘bleed-through’ prevents large forces from attempting this stealth approach.

Have Fun! Reg. Steiner

GOTHICOMP 2009 - FLEETS

THE 2009 SUBMISSIONS INTO THE NEW FLEET CATEGORY

SHOWCASE



SHOWCASE



SHOWCASE



So, there you have them all. The 2009 submissions into the fleet category for the GothiComp painting competition.

As soon as the heats for voting are opened you will read the announcement on one of the various forums.

The fleets are shown in order of alphabetical order, they give no indication in which heat they are placed.

Good luck to all who participated and success with voting!

Warp Rift / Tactical Command

SIMULTANEOUS MOVEMENT & COMBAT: ELДАР

BY REG STEINER

Introduction: *The merits of the Simultaneous method of play really show themselves in the more 'standard' fleets.*

The Eldar have been a problem, because of the special move ability they have. Summarizing, the Eldar ship moves into range, fires weapons, then moves some distance - all before the opponent has his turn. Then the opponent attempts to get close enough to hope to hurt the Eldar during the opponent's turn.

In the Simultaneous system, the Eldar lose that ability. Combat occurs together, after both parties have moved ships - Oops! Now the Eldar are really close to an enemy ship, and without shields and weaker hull designs - equals smoking wreckage.

Not what is intended. After exploring several ideas, this solution seems best, for both Eldar and the opponent's perspective.

Special Eldar Rule:

- 1. Placing orders and special orders is unchanged.
- 2. First Eldar move is unchanged - position of the Sun still governing movement speeds.
- 3. Combat.

A. Special Initiative:

The whole point of Eldar holofields is stealth. Before any combat is begun, the Eldar opponent rolls against his ship's Leadership score -1.

This represents the attempt at getting a "targeting solution" with which to fire at the Eldar.

Failure to pass the test means that the Eldar will fire all weapons able to do so - Then make the second move at the appropriate speed.

Any damage from Eldar weapons is applied, then the opponent may fire at the Eldar ship, at the new distance, if able.

Should the Leadership test be passed, the Eldar opponent fires weapons at the same time as the Eldar ship, and applies damage.

In other words, like any other combat using the Simultaneous system rules. After all damage is recorded to both player's vessels, the Eldar ship(s) now make their second move. After Eldar second move is complete, launch new ordinance, and make the second move for previously launched ordinance after that.

- 4. End Phase tasks are now completed.

Applying the Rule:

Eldar fleet owners can see that there is a risk of the enemy penetrating their 'stealth' and doing more damage, than if Eldar ships were further away. A risk is not the same as 'always' getting hurt. The holofield saves will only be negated if the Eldar make a major miscalculation, and end up less than 15cm away and the opponent vessel passes a test. Otherwise holofield saves still reduce damage probabilities considerably.

Because any Eldar gamer tries to just get inside weapon's range to fire, then move away, this rule allows for the possibility of getting out of enemy range before enemy weapons can find their target. Even if the enemy does acquire and fire - the ship's defensive design is intact.

In actual play, the ability of the enemy to 'get past' the

stealth, based on how high the leadership value of the enemy ship actually is (Experience!), makes for some player excitement.

Should an enemy succeed frequently, and so damage the Eldar vessels more often - that will be an occasion long held up as 'superior gamesmanship' in bragging sessions to come.

In game play terms, the Eldar ships are still tough customers, with this ability to open the range - at least some of the time.

With Simultaneous Movement and Combat rules, the Eldar design just cannot stand up to close in punishment every turn, which is what happens with Simultaneous rules, without this Special Eldar Rule. Yet the Eldar are still vulnerable to some damage, using this special rule.

To be balanced, the Eldar ships cannot always get hammered, and cannot always escape all damage. I believe this rule restores the challenge for both players, while using Simultaneous Move and Combat Rules.

Just remember: Both sides moving together means ships get close fast!

Reg

A small Horizon note:

when using the simultaneous rules another option is to use the Eldar MMS fanmade rules. These will take away issues the original Eldar have under simultaneous move and combat rules.

A TYRANID WAR
CHAPTER 10 - PART 2 OF 2

OLD AND NEW ENEMIES

BY REG STEINER

IV. _____

The great Hive Mind of the Tyranids counted the cost. A rogue cell of Tyranids had been ambushed. The fledgling Hive Mind had been re-absorbed into the parent hive. Not all the biomass had been retrieved, but the original hive was bigger now. The wandering fleet of living space vessels that was the Hive, and components of the Hive Mind, was stronger now. Now the Hive mind felt strong enough to head for that large cluster of stars near the core of this galaxy. The millions of creatures that was the Hive would feed. Their hunger was also the Mind's hunger. Yes. Time to make war on the creatures of this galaxy again. War. And more living mass to feed the starving Hive.

V. _____

Lynx and Pen exited the lift car together. Humans love to have halls or passages connect those purpose built segments called rooms, Pen reflected. How much time was wasted, having to traverse long passages, rather than have the lift open directly on the intended destination? Pen thought the Imperial bureaucracy might collapse, should that question ever be answered. Pen and Lynx turned a corner.

There, ahead, two figures in battle armor stood flanking a blast door.

"Both of you look rested." The lieutenant said to the two women. "You are cleared to go right in."

"I would say the same of you two." Pen replied. "I thought I was rid of you two bodyguards back on Inquisitor Foss's battleship."

"We were assigned to you by the Emperor." The Sergeant responded. "We have had to learn to be clever, these many years, after all the times you have felt the need to elude us."

"Me?" Pen asked, feigning surprise. "I would never expect to have any private moments, so would never feel the need to elude my close friends."

The Lieutenant looked at the Sergeant. "You had to get her started? Now she will not be happy until she..."

"Not this time." Lynx broke in, "A matter more pressing than reuniting friends must come first."

"I would like to hear how you found me so fast, later." Pen said, as she entered through the opening door.

The command center. Pen scanned the curved wall ahead. From here every part of the ship was monitored. From here came the decisions on how to fight the ship. Pen had been in the command center of fast cruisers before. Many times. But none were ever laid out like this. Lynx's influence, and insistence, had wrought obvious changes. This center had large tactical displays, not just of target data and friendly or foe identification, but also very large screens showing space all around. Each vessel around this cruiser was depicted in the display as a three dimensional scale version of itself, not just as a point of light surrounded by numbers and codes. Lynx had always before insisted on visual near perfection, but, at least so far, Pen had not been able to smell, and feel, what she could see. After what Pen had experienced with Yamul, she was thankful humanity had not advanced so far.

"Where are the others?" Lynx asked from the center of the room. She had not stopped to look around. Pen quickly came to her side.

"They jumped ahead of us." The Captain of the vessel replied. "And the Eldar went with them."

"And we are waiting for..?" Lynx asked, that note of impatience not missed by anyone.

"The last squadron should arrive any moment." The captain said, "The Fleet Admiral wants you to open a channel with him, the moment you arrived on the deck."

"Ah. Then let's begin." Lynx said more to the room than to anyone.

The center portion of the curved wall was suddenly all Admiral. Peering down at everyone from above with piercing bright eyes.

"Ah. You are ready?" The Admiral's voice was not as large as his visage, he sounded mild even.

“Yes. Please begin any and all operations not yet implemented.” Lynx said formally.

“The only force remaining is this one.” The Admiral did now sound as formal. “Allow me to bring you up to the current situation.” Lynx nodded, and the Admiral continued, but his face was replaced by tactical screens.

“There are now two Marine fleets, with Imperial fleet support, and two Misfit Marine fleets, with supporting vessels, all heading for this star cluster below, and North of the galactic center. We have also received conformation that a Mars Legion is in route to the same assembly area. Our fleet will jump one hour, or less if possible, after the arrival of the eight fast cruisers assigned to my fleet.”

Lynx nodded as each screen display highlighted the progress of the named units, and eventual destination star grouping. Then she spoke up. “Very good, Admiral. Did conformation come back yet concerning each ship’s stores and weapons loads?”

“Not yet. Only about half of the reports are back,” The Admiral replied, “but all reports so far confirm fully supplied stores and weapons.”

“What have we got on the convoys?” Lynx asked further.

“Four surrounding sectors are gathering re-supply convoys, which are expected to be assembled and ready at their assigned assembly points, before any action is begun by our forces.” The Fleet Admiral’s face was back, and looking slightly concerned. “There is a new report from destroyers scouting the target star systems.”

“Yes?” Lynx asked, suspicion in her voice. Pen felt odd, as if a cold draft had just brushed her from behind.

“They are reporting advance units of the Tyranid invader at three different systems in the target cluster.” The Admiral was looking down, reading, so that Pen could not read his face.

“Tyranids. Now.” Lynx said softly. Lynx appeared to be looking through the bulkhead. “So. As of now, there are upwards of five human fleets, at least two Eldar fleets, an unknown number of Ork fleets and remnants of fleets, all going to meet an unknown number of android, or whatever they are, enemy forces. Now add the Tyranids into the mix. Very well. Admiral.” Lynx sounded very firm, bordering on angry. “As the tactical advisor for this Task Group, I very strongly recommend that all human forces be redirected to the fleet base at Rook four. That’s the nearest base to the target star cluster, and a short jump from an Eldar orbiting base. We need more information, before we are forced to divide our resources against new threats.”

“There is more.” The Admiral appeared to have a bad taste in his mouth, “Large Ork forces have moved into half a dozen star systems, four of which have

rather important Imperial holdings. There is no report of fighting yet, but the greenskins have moved into asteroid belts, moved onto unoccupied moons and planets, and are rapidly fortifying these locations. Sector commanders and planetary governors are screaming for re-enforcements, and to set aside the ‘no shooting on sight’ command for Orks.”

“They are rightfully worried that those locations can be used against us, sooner or later” Pen said, from just behind Lynx.

“Well, the greenskin lunatics are, at this moment, engaged in a rather large fleet action with the Eldar, just now.” The Admiral was reading from a screen to one side, but the look of distaste was still evident.

“Admiral,” Lynx sounded as if she was in a hurry to go somewhere, “if you follow my recommendation, I think you should try to contact the Eldar, Yamul if possible, and strongly suggest they gather all they can at the Eldar orbital I mentioned earlier. I think our first job is to sort out the Ork problem, then we can see if we need to deal with those murderous machines, or the vileness of another bug infestation.”

“I concur with your evaluation.” The Admiral said, still looking to one side, “From that base, we can strike out in several directions, all at once, or one at a time. And as you say, we need time to organize and evaluate the new threats. And more time means I can pull in more Guard infantry divisions, as well as more fleet assets to help.”

“Not too much time,” Lynx added, “because every world the Tyranids consume multiplies that threat many times. Come, Pen. There are some things I need to discuss with you.”

VI. _____

The Hive mind looked back with hundreds of unblinking eyes. The Hive had to retreat, again, in the face of those wild green animals that the Hive keeps encountering. Those wild green animals have machines to take them into space, and machines to help them fight on a planet. Even without machines, the wild fighting creatures run headlong into a fight with the messengers of the Hive. Many worlds the green animals inhabit just do not have enough biologic mass to warrant a protracted siege or outright assault. With hundreds of eyes, the Hive Mind looked back at the star system they were leaving. The Hive could see that the animals in their machines were not following. The Hive could still see the smashed, and twisted, and broken remains of vessels. Drifting. Burning. Some were once living parts of the Hive. Others were broken machines full of dead green animals. The Hive pulled back because there was not enough food for the hive, however fierce the green ones thought they were.

The Hive looked ahead now. There is the three worlds that the Hive was

already moving on. Full to overflowing with biologic mass to feed the millions of servants of the Hive. The Hive Mind had come to expect such worlds would have to be fought for. So much to be gained, then large numbers of the hive slaves, lost to the inferno of war, could be off-set by so much gain. Deep in the thoughts of the Hive Mind, a pleasant feeling arose. A challenge from those pale skinned animals, and maybe that strong guiding mind encountered before, could be strangely pleasant. The chance to defeat that guiding mind of the pale ones, gave the ancient Hive Mind reason to look forward to the game of wits, and the risk of battle. Many parts of the greater Hive were returning. Fed. Stronger. From outlying stars, to the new risk of battle with the pale ones and their machines. The Hive felt stronger than it had for a long time. The Hive Mind was certain that no staunch defense could turn the Hive away from such rich worlds. No.

VII. ____

Pen sat in the second command chair on the fighting bridge of the fast cruiser. Tactical displays surrounded her and the cruiser's Captain. It was a sight to freeze the blood. All around the slowly maneuvering Imperial cruiser, Pen watched the Ork warships glide past her view. These were all the new design Pen had heard about. Large, medium, and small, they are all sleeker looking, and all built with a steel toothed grin and angry eyes on the front of each ship. And bristling with weapons, of course. These new designs also sported new weapons. The big cannon the Orks so love are still present in profusion, but now a new energy weapon has been added to most of the bigger Ork cruisers and battlewagons.

Pen hoped she would not have any first hand experiences with the new weapon.

A few Imperial ships had been struck by the new weapon, and lived to tell about it. Apparently the new weapon did not cause extensive damage, like other race's energy weapons, to a ship's structure, but rather did small damage to the part of the ship hit. The real trouble was how the energy from the weapon traveled about the ship. Getting into electrical circuits, fusing metal parts and gears, and even somehow magnetizing odd metal bits. The resultant ship's systems failures could completely disable a vessel, leaving it a drifting, helpless target for destruction, or capture. Even if the whole ship was not crippled, very often key elements of the ship were disabled. No captain wants to be in a fight with half the ship's abilities knocked out. Pen could actually see the strange looking weapon mount on some of the Ork ships she was passing.

All those Ork ships, seeming to ignore the presence of an Imperial warship, only served to make the cruiser captain more nervous.

"You said that this Ork warlord was expecting us." The Captain said to

Pen. "But I still remember how Orks will often disobey their big boss, if a chance to burn down anything Imperial presents itself."

"Not this Warlord." Pen answered, "Any Ork that disobeys Longtooth is publicly dishonored and disgraced, and left alive to face that shame. Orks do not fear death, but to suffer the ridicule of other Orks is worse then any torment of the flesh. They will follow orders. My worry is what those orders may be."

"Which makes me think a dozen Ork broadsides are still in my immediate future." The Captain said over his shoulder, to Pen. "To lose one of the fleet's newest cruisers, in this way, is wasteful and makes me angry."

"I'll do my best not to lose one of the Empire's finest." Pen said back, a wicked look on her face.

"You do that, Special Ambassador." The Captain had a wicked smile of his own.

"There! Do you see that battleship that's mostly red?" Pen suddenly asked, "That's his ship."

"Yes, I see. We'll pull up next to his launch bays, so you can have your meeting there, where he wanted." The Captain turned to face Pen, "I still think it is dangerous beyond reason for you to go aboard that Ork ship."

"Years ago I faced that big brute, with no weapons and no armor, and survived." Pen didn't feel the need to add how she had been hanging from wires, waiting to die. "I think I might survive this visit, as well"

"I'll tell your escort to get ready. At least you will have tough escort, if any of them over there want to play." The Captain said, a fierce smile erasing the worry lines on his face. "We'll be ready too."

"I have special instructions for you, Captain." Pen said with distinct formality, holding out a thin plastic sheet, not as big as the palm of her hand, the little imbedded gold square in its center catching the light.

"Oh?" The Captain asked, frowning slightly, "From the Imperium, or from you, Special Ambassador?"

"It is just this," Pen said very quietly, leaning forward to hand over the little sheet, "There is a task force on its way here. I couldn't keep them away. They are my responsibility. What I need of you, is that you take your ship out by the second moon. On this chip is the codes you need to relay my instructions to them. They will arrive hidden, and to better mask against any energy leaks, they will be behind that big desert planet just beyond this one."

"Hidden?" The Captain asked in a low voice, "Can you tell me how big a force?"

"Three battleships, eight cruisers, and a large number of frigates and destroyers, I'm not sure how many got back from other missions before this bunch set out." Pen quietly said.

"This much firepower is your responsibility?" The Captain sounded incredulous.

"I am the commander of that task group." Pen stated flatly, "Because of my family connections, and my past accomplishments, I am required to lead. They are not all my family's holdings, or responsibilities."

"I see," The Captain said seriously, leaning back, "I had momentarily forgotten how your people are organized differently. I have never been briefed on the tactical doctrines that the so called Misfits use. Regardless of all that, that task group is too small to fight so many of these new Ork warships."

"I am sure that is not their intention." Pen answered. "Even so, they must get these instructions. You must be sure to broadcast at the times indicated, they will not acknowledge."

"It will be done. I think we are in for an interesting time." The Captains frown was almost gone.

"Let's not make it too interesting. Hmm?" Pen replied.

VIII.____

Lynx looked on as the shuttle/bomber left the cruiser and made its way to the Ork warship's launch bays. The little craft soon disappeared inside the garishly red painted Ork ship. Pen was once again committed beyond Lynx's ability to help. Lynx turned back to other monitors, other spy probes. The pieces were coming together very rapidly now. So many ships. So many different agendas. Lynx has specialized as a go-between for the Centurion Marines and the other races or even the other planetary governors, that might be suspect, or required to provide logistics, or hosts of details. Lynx handled many details so that William did not have to.

Lynx switched a screen to a new view. Lynx wanted to see how the gathering might of the Centurions was progressing. Just as she thought, the fleet was already started toward the jump point. Lynx knew that the power of the Marines was divided among the many warships. The following support craft had more than just replacement supplies. Hundreds of infantry were aboard many of those ships, all in advanced training, and already well into the genetic modifications to make them Marines. William expected many losses.

A little while, and Lynx was through gathering the latest developments. Movement caught her eye. The big red Ork battleship was moving, followed by all the other Ork ships. Warcraft of every size were hurrying from the planet below, to join with the departing ships. What the hell is going on? Pen is on the Warlord's lead ship, what happened to make them leave. They were supposed to stay. Lynx started to bark instructions into some comm gear. The careful gathering of forces had just gone to hell, and Lynx was sure as hell going to follow.

The cruiser assigned to Pen was not following, and not answering repeated attempts to find out what in flaming stars is happening.

Lynx looked at each of the other monitors, as she relayed new instructions to each of the elements for her planned attack. She ordered each element of humanity's forces to wait at their assigned assembly areas, there was nothing else to be done until this new development could be worked back into the plan. Lynx had a sinking feeling that those walking metal death machines were going to latch onto other remnants of other races, including humans, and pursue them to extinction. Lynx knew that the attack plan had to move forward soon, before this could happen. And the Tyranids were on the move again. More worlds were going to die, while the races of this galaxy were distracted by this new threat. Lynx got an answer back that she expected. The Eldar were not going to wait, they are going ahead with their own plan. Lynx sincerely hoped they would succeed, despite her fears that too many Eldar would be destroyed first.

Lynx set her equipment on auto-record, and headed for the command bridge. It was well past time for this fast cruiser to earn its pay, and follow the ship carrying Pen, to wherever it must be going.

IX._____

Pen stood in the landing bay, waiting. Flanked by her loyal bodyguards, and two squads of Ogre warriors, the array of Orks were plenty agitated, but dared not approach. Longtooth was on his way down to the bay, but taking way to long, Pen thought.

The sudden jerk, making everyone sway, followed immediately by acceleration and the tilting of the deck, announced loud and clear that the Ork battleship was heading out. Pen kept her feet, despite the best efforts of the ship's pilot to throw everyone to the deck. All the Orks, except a few heavily armed and armored ones, scattered to whatever task they were supposed to be doing. After a couple more seconds, the warship settled into a steady acceleration, punctuated by occasional groans and squeals from the bulkheads. An Ork, rather larger than all the others, approached the waiting humans.

"Longtooth say little she come ... uh ... center fight ... um .. only she does come." With that the big Ork waved a hand toward the direction he expected Pen to go, turned his back and headed off toward the indicated blast door. Pen shrugged and turned to her people.

"You all had better wait on the shuttle, I don't like how the Ogres look like they're about to start blasting." Pen said, and turned to follow the Ork.

"But it must be a trap!" One bodyguard yelled after her.

"Of course!" Pen yelled over her shoulder.

Pen was grateful for the battle armor she wore, one of the atmosphere

readouts kept flashing red at times. Pen had never been aboard a Ork vessel before, and tried to take in everything as she hurried after the big leading Ork. The mess, and what could only be called disrepair, baffled Pen. How could these ships be so dangerous in battle if everything looked to be falling apart? Blast doors certainly worked Pen noted, and so did the lift, even if Pen could see the shaft walls sliding past. Pen also saw that every Ork, of whatever size, darted out of the hall or passage as she approached, to then turn and stare after her, once she had passed. Pen wished she could turn down some of the other halls, or stop and investigate some of the rooms she passed. But her big guide sauntered by too quickly for Pen to see very much, even if the room's blast door was open. Sooner then Pen would have liked - what were all the steam pipes for?- an extra large blast door in front slid open, grinding noisily but fast, and Pen found herself in the combat center of the Ork battleship.

Pen stood and stared. All around, big flat screens showed different tactical views outside the ship, projected courses, inside ship statuses, and even a view of how the other Ork warships were forming up behind this warship. But what had Pen's head spinning was the big screens that showed the squadrons and fleets of the Imperial navy, complete with illuminated charts showing those human fleet's progress and course. But how? The views on those big screens looked as if an Ork ship was among the Imperial ships. Pen took a few steps forward. Now she could better see a screen that had been edge on, thanks to curved walls. This screen pictured the progress of the Eldar fleets, but did not have a view as if among the Eldar.

"Har! Har! Humph! Little she break neck looking 'round so fast!" Longtooth's voice boomed out. "Here! Be here with Longtooth! Ha!" Longtooth gestured with a big hand, to a spot beside him.

"Not so fast, Longtooth!" Pen shouted back, "Where we off to? We sa posed to wait here!"

"Ah! Longtooth leader. Gotta go to little war. More Greenskins call help, Longtooth gotta go!" Longtooth answered, as Pen moved closer to him. Pen noticed that any Ork in the way, moved out of the way as if dodging a blow.

"Longtooth! We leave my people not know-whats," Pen began.

"Soon know-what," Longtooth said with a dismissive wave of his hand, "Little she-human war fight, bug fight, ship fight, now safe wiffa Longtooth!" Longtooth looked down at Pen, now near his side. "She-human not need purty suit an'a metal mask. Longtooth know she real face. Ya. Humph."

"Orky not care if is weak air," Pen said a little less loud, "but I needs stronger air, an pretty suit keep me strong, with strong air!"

"Ho-kay!" Longtooth answered, then let out bellows of his own language for a moment. Orks that he pointed at jumped to pulling levers, or turning brass

wheels, or doing something Pen could not see through their backs. "Now air stronger! Little she can unpull metal face." Longtooth grinned down at Pen, and then turned his back as he moved around a structure he had been resting his arm on. Pen saw it was some sort of seat or chair framed in iron, and decorated with Longtooth's battle trophies. A necklace of long teeth, a pair of Ork skulls polished bright, a bent knife, and a pair of gauntlets - one with only four fingers - were draped or nailed where Pen could see them.

"Um.. Longtooth," Pen began tentatively. How could she say that she could not bear the odor of so many Orks, all sealed up in this rusty, hot, flying bomb?

"Ere now!" Longtooth bellowed, and again launched into a stream of his own language, all the while waving his arms, and punctuating his words with thumps on his chest, or a slap to his forehead, or driving a fist into his other hand.

Pen turned to look at what the other Orks around the room were doing. They were all moving in a flurry of activity, turning knobs, pulling levers and throwing switches. Some were speaking into round holes below small screens with ugly Ork faces peering out. Pen was about to ask the meaning of all this, when suddenly a wave of disorientation, along with a feeling she had been launched out a window, almost made Pen fall to the deck. After a moment, Pen's vision returned to normal, and she looked up at the big front video display.

Pen thought it looked like this ship was flying down a tunnel. A ragged edged hole, in the middle of the screen, framed an enlarged view of a planet. Little sparks of red broke off the edges of the hole, and seemed to drift back toward Pen along the black of the surrounding tunnel on the screen. They had jumped into non-space. Pen had been kidnapped a second time.

This was all different to Pen. It felt as if the gravity compensators had been shut off. Judging by the growing image of the planet on the front screen, they were not going to be out of normal space for long. The sparks and smoke and noises from the surrounding equipment made Pen think they were about to blow up first.

"Har! Har!" Longtooth bellowed once more, "Lookit dis an know-whats!" With that, Longtooth fell back onto his waiting iron chair.

"Look what?" Pen asked, moving up beside Longtooth.

"Dis why little she wit Longtooth. Ha!" Longtooth pointed at the middle screen. The planet in the center of the view got no bigger, but the ragged hole got bigger rapidly, until it's ragged edges widened right off the screen.

Again, Pen felt as if she had been flung into the air, and fell heavily onto her feet, even though she had not moved. When Pen's vision came back into focus, she looked to either side. The side and rear screens that had been black and

empty, now showed flanking and following squadrons of Ork ships. Not only were they back in normal space, but other forces had arrived Pen had not seen before.

There was a battle above the green, brown and blue of the planet. Red arcs of energy, along with silvery streaks, crisscrossed the darkness. Pen tried to estimate the distance. This Ork fleet had managed to enter normal space between the orbits of planets, instead of returning to normal space well away from the possibility of gravity wells, such as well above the orbital elliptic of a star's planets. Pen frowned inside her helmet. Looking about her, she spotted a tactical video with this system's planets, and yes, gravity wells that could have been near to these Ork vessels, were instead on the other side of the sun. How did the Ork navigators know? Human navigators did not even try to guess where a planet might be in its orbit. Just to have the data on how many planets a star had, and what angle the planets orbited - relative to the galactic plane, was more data than navigators could hope to compile and analyze. Hence the tendency of all Imperial space vessels to re-enter normal space so far from a star. Up until now, Ork ships did the same thing. Thankfully giving human outposts, colonies, and fully settled worlds time to react, for defense or evacuation if needed. Pen's universe had just changed. And not for the better.

Pen moved a little in front of Longtooth. "Longtooth. Why Orky not 'fraid bump rocks when get here?" She pointed at the screen with planet's positions.

"Um? Err..." Longtooth turned his head from watching the front screen to where Pen pointed. "Ah Humph! There no big or little place near us. Why not? Har!"

"Ho-kay. How Orky know big and little places not in Orky way, when Orky get here?" Pen saw other Orks turning to watch Pen and Longtooth.

"Oh? Har! Har!" Longtooth's ugly, scarred face broke into a wide grin. Pen involuntarily shuddered inside her armor. "Orky looks first. Not see any big rocks or other stuff, um-kay, Orky lands here. No big hard thing we does. Humph!" Longtooth looked around, grumbled something in Ork, and all the others turned back to their tasks quickly.

"Yes, but little she like see how Orky see." Pen asked very quietly. She knew how important this new development was, and was sure Longtooth did as well, so Pen really didn't expect to be shown. But she had to ask.

"Har! Har! Little she like Orky new toys?" Longtooth leaned back, and continued, "May be Em-per not smart like Orky? Humph! Ha! Then know whats, little she."

Sudden as a thunderbolt, it dawned on Pen that Longtooth was not being insulting, and that the kidnapping might not have been treachery. A sinking feeling came over Pen, she was on new, unfamiliar ground. This Ork was not

acting as he should, and Pen was now unsure what would be true, and what would be treachery.

"Longtooth not able answer more little she asking soon," Longtooth continued, waving a big hand at the front screen, "so no more asking. Think this. Longtooth have new friends now. Now have new war toys. Some Longtooth's friends not want Orky build 'en on their place. So give Longtooth new toys 'n stay away. Little she give Longtooth new friends. Redbugs wanna eat human places, Orky places, everyone, everywhere. New friends like Orky stop Redbugs. Even nasty rebel humans not like'n Em-per give Orky new toys. Orky wins fights, picks up toys loser not need-en no more. Orky put all new toys together, gits help from other friends, puts more toys together better." Longtooth sat erect and lifted his arms in a big arc, and got louder. "Orky gots better ships, better guns, go where wants, faster an faster. Har! Har!" Longtooth dropped his arms, gripped the chair arms, and leaned close to Pen's helmet face, as if trying to look inside the eye lenses. "Now Tin-boy dead things ruin Orky fun. Smash ships, smash Orky strong places, follow-un Orky everywhere. Dead Tin things 'n ugly ships never end, always more. Humph!"

"And now Longtooth attack ugly ships?" Pen asked rather loudly, "Why go in if run away?"

"Err.. Newest toys now on lotsa Orky big guns 'n kroozers." Longtooth answered solemnly, "We gonna try new toys. Bust up ugly Tin-boys, ugly kroozers."

"Okay. Why want me?" Pen finally asked what she wanted to know most.

"Longtooth says no more asking." Longtooth turned to look at his center screen. "Orky fight 'n now. Asking after, if cans answers."

Pen turned too. Sure enough, a pair of squadrons of middle sized Ork ships were firing at the black blocky shaped things. A pair of crimson lighting bolts lashed out from the two Necro ships, and two Ork cruisers had their shields flare and then collapse, and the two Ork cruisers were on fire, end to end. Pen quickly played the scene back from her helmet recorder, and slowed the playback down. She had been right, the bolt of lightning was not a single streak of energy, but a stream of little red bursts that somehow swirled around a common course to the target. Pen watched closer as the surviving three Ork cruisers in each squadron, got closer, blasting away with their usual cannons. Just as the Necro ships fired, so did the Ork cruisers. Each Ork cruiser fired a pair of blue-white bolts, that seemed slower than energy blasts. The crimson streaks each caught a white bolt, both disappearing in a flare. The remaining white bolts struck home. Each of the two Necro ships had five white flares eating holes in them. The black metal, or whatever it was, was dissolving. White rings soon surrounded holes

that glowed with sick green light, and the white rings continued to grow, eating away at the ship.

Longtooth started yelling commands. It became clear to Pen that they too, were making a run at the Necro ships. Pen tried to take in everything at once. Closer views around the planet blinked on and off. Pen saw that at least four other Ork ships had been blasted into ruin before these fresh forces arrived. A couple of close up views of the planet showed where Necro infantry were advancing, but the screens flashed to different views too quickly. What the Orks operating the controls were looking for, Pen had no idea. All the while, Longtooth continued shouting, until all four big screens settled back on an enhanced tactical view to front, flanks, and rear. Only just in time. Longtooth's big warship began firing its many cannons. Pen had never been on an Ork warship before, certainly not while in battle. The incredible noise and commotion in the command center was mind numbing. Why the incredible booms of firing cannon could be heard at all, was outside Pen's experience. On Imperial ships, the shudder and vibration felt through the walls and deck tell of weapons fire. But here, the Ork weapons fire was deafening. And, Pen saw, with each volley fired the Orks howled and cheered. The loud noise was like some kind of drug to the Orks, a drug they could not get enough of. Pen opened a little panel on one wrist, and tapped a couple of buttons. Her sound receptors would filter out the terrific gunfire noises, but still let voice frequencies through. Pen couldn't stop the drumming of the noise on her armor.

Pen's attention was now back on the looming black Necro vessels. Neither was still showing signs of the earlier damage. Even the hull ruptures filled with green light were all gone. Repaired somehow. Crimson arcs of energy lashed out once more, as Pen held her breath. But the two lashes of energy passed by. A quick look over her shoulder at the rear screen, and Pen saw both red blasts strike home on the battleship following Longtooth's ship. A flare, and surge of what could only be flames, played over the front of the battleship. And were gone. The force shields held back the blasts. Another of Longtooth's new toys? Pen wondered.

The cannons all ceased their barrage, quite suddenly. A white-out of the front screen was followed by a pair of white streaks reaching out for the Necro ships. A crimson haze appeared around the ugly black ships, just before the impacts of the white bolts from Longtooth's ship, as well as from nearly a dozen other Ork ships. Quick as a blink, the white flares of the impacts on the red haze danced along the length of both dark vessels. A hole in the red haze was briefly created by each impact, and only where a subsequent white bolt got through such a gap, did any damage to the hull appear. Out of the twenty-odd impacts on the enemy shields, only three or four got through to each ship. But it was enough.

Gouts of peculiar green flames erupted from the damaged hulls, as well as more eruptions of crimson lightning striking out in several directions. One red bolt even struck Longtooth's ship, causing still more sparks to fly from some of the equipment around Pen, but seemed to have no other effect.

Despite the noise, sparks, and smoke, Pen watched the center screen intently. Longtooth's ship had slowed to match the speed of the Necros, and was joined by half a dozen other cruisers and battleships, arrayed above, below, and behind Longtooth. Each ship pelted the wounded enemy ships with the more familiar cannons and lasers, and the close in blows were telling now. Chunks were flayed from the Necro ships as huge shells detonated against them. Something vital was hit, as first one, then a moment later the other, Necro ship disappeared in a blinding flare of pale green radiance. More sparks flew around Pen in the command center, but otherwise the Ork's force fields seemed to deflect the blast.

Pen was just about to breath a sigh of relief, when Longtooth yelled, pointing at the left screen.

"Look! Ur! More Tin-Head ugly ships!" Longtooth then yelled even louder, "What big uglies do-un now?"

Pen saw at least eight Necro black ships, outlined by a crimson haze against the stars. Before Pen could answer, the haze around the enemy ships shifted to pale green, and the ships visibly accelerated on a perpendicular course.

"Leaving." Pen said simply.

First one box of four black vessels, then the other box of four vessels, shimmered like an image reflected in water, and disappeared in a brief flicker of light. To Pen's surprise, large caliber Ork shells exploded only an instant behind the last enemy ship's disappearance. Pen made a mental note that some Ork ships were able to lock on targets faster than before.

Longtooth stood and turned to face Pen. "Little fight over too soon. Little she go with Longtooth. Much asking now, hmm. Har!" Longtooth's large gnarly hand wrapped around Pen's arm, probably squeezing the armor hard, and pulled Pen along with him.

"Longtooth have new toys," Pen said impatiently, "and lotsa shooty. So what Longtooth gotta have this little she?"

"Lotsa asking, but no telling, har-har," Longtooth said, quieter than he should, "no telling yet." Longtooth continued pulling Pen along, into the dark belly of his warship.

X. _____

Lynx looked at the message again, not wanting to miss any hidden meaning or consequence. No good. It was as bad as Lynx wanted not to believe. She switched a comm unit to show the Captain of this cruiser.

"Captain, I believe you have reviewed the same message as I." Lynx said at the screen. "Please give me your appraisal of new developments."

"Very well," The Captain replied very formally, "I see no recourse other than your immediate departure. I believe developments need further investigation, therefore we should not re-deploy the forces we are gathering, but rather, proceed on our own."

"We?" Lynx asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Of course. My ship is already at your disposal." The Captain replied, "This cruiser is one of the fastest and most heavily armed in the service. Such a mission is what we are designed for. And, of course, you already know all this." A tiny smile tugged at the corners of the Captain's face. "I will enter in the log that I volunteered this vessel, of course."

"Of course. Then I suggest we depart as soon as we are able. A war awaits us, and we should not be late." Lynx said, then added, "Oh and please ask the Admirals to wait at the assembly points. We will send word as soon as we are able."

"Aye" The Captain said, and switched off.

Lynx continued looking at the dark screen for a moment. They had asked for her to intervene. Two allies of the Imperium were fighting each other, instead of their common enemy. Lynx felt that the entire fleet behind her, would make her feel better, but would probably only make matters worse. Apparently the Captain felt the same way. Both sides would gladly target her, normally. But they had asked for her to come. Deep down inside, Lynx felt that there was more to this than anyone was telling. Lynx turned and went to her locker, she had to check some things to be ready.

XI. _____

Wherever Pen had been led, Orks had stopped what they were doing, even talking, to stare at Pen. Perhaps they had never seen a live human up close before. Pen briefly wondered. More important, Pen was getting a guided tour inside an Ork warship. Once again, Pen was glad she still had on her helmet, as well as space armor. At different times the temperature was hot enough to make her faint, thanks to yet more steam leaks, or cold enough that Pen wondered if this area was open to space. Not to mention energy leaks, chemical fumes, and other hazards. Pen was most put out by one hazard in particular. A lot of small greenskins were hurrying about, getting into everything, everywhere. And underfoot. Try as she might, Pen could not avoid stepping on little green feet, or knocking down the little greenskins that bumped into her. Then Pen saw that Longtooth was actually trying to step on, kick, or swat the little pests, and they were skillfully dodging and ducking, and not being hit at all. Pen started

swinging her free arm and kicking at the small Orks, and sure enough, she couldn't hit a one. Once again, Pen reminded herself, Ork culture was completely opposite her own human experience. Humans would never try to bulldoze the little versions of themselves, but little Orks had to avoid the big bruisers from the beginning of their existence. Pen also saw other Orks constantly pummeling each other, no matter what task they were supposed to be doing. How anything got accomplished was beyond Pen's understanding.

The other perplexing fact Pen couldn't work out was the layout of the ship's interior. The basic layout seemed vaguely familiar, even similar, to Imperial designs. However, what filled the ship's spaces was entirely Ork. No sign of crew quarters were to be seen. If Orks ever slept, then they must be heaped one upon the other in one of the emptier decks areas. Pen did pass through one deck, where there must have once been the green growing things all ships had for air cleaning and food products. But, this area was now wild and overgrown. A riot of green and brown vines, and leafy things, that looked impenetrable beyond the path Longtooth took to get through. Pen was sure she heard growls and hisses, as well as the rustle of foliage.

At last Longtooth stopped short of a pair of closed blast doors, near the lowest decks of the ship, as best as Pen could calculate. What with the noise of the generators surrounding this place, Pen doubted she could have heard an explosion. Longtooth released Pen's arm at last, and mashed on the big green knob beside the door. Longtooth shoved Pen through the doorway, and followed quickly. The double doors slammed together, and near silence enveloped them both.

Pen stared straight ahead briefly, then quickly looked left and right. The big bay stretched out before Pen, with high ceiling, and most important, clean, cool air. The human occupants stared back at Pen. With a twist and a pull, Pen took her helmet off, and let it dangle from one hand.

"Ha! Longtooth say lots friends err.. Helping Longtooth now best toys for Orky war. Har!" Longtooth's voice from behind Pen startled her. A trio of men came towards Pen and Longtooth. "Longtooth always keep prom-sis's," Pen turned to see Longtooth was not speaking to her, and turned back to face the approaching men. "Even to snotty man brain worm 'n head 'n smart mouth! Huh!" Longtooth finished.

"Ah! You must be the Imperial messenger we have heard so much about." The man closest to Pen said evenly. Since all three wore only a simple coverall, Pen could not discern any station or rank for the three. "I suppose we should all thank you, for our present situation." The man speaking had raven black hair, the other two had brown hair, as their only difference.

"I know nothing of any humans being aboard Ork ships!" Pen replied.

Scenes of burning and blasted Ork vessels were flashing unbidden through her mind. The horror of yet more innocent humans burning on the alter of Ork war, was almost impossible to keep out of her voice.

“Longtooth’s smartest pet talk ‘n little she, an’ Longtooth go see what is! Humph!” Longtooth growled out as he walked past the little group, and soon disappeared amongst the machines all about the room.

“What are you people doing here? What is all this?” Pen spoke rapidly, but quiet as she could.

“Your treaty with him.” Raven hair jerked a thumb over his shoulder as he spoke. “I suppose I should tell you I am Sauraun. I am the representative of my people.”

“All right, Sauraun, then. Before that big Ork gets back, how about some answers.” Pen said softly, but urgently.

“As I said. Your treaty with that Ork Warlord set this all up.” Sauraun said, sounding a little exasperated. “I suppose you want some details. Very well. That big Ork Longtooth has been all around this part of the galaxy, offering ‘deals’ to the inhabitants of a lot of planets. Including ours. Our star system has several inhabitable worlds that specialize in agriculture, or industry, or mining. My home is mostly industrial. When a very large Ork fleet showed up in our system, and demanded a parley, we had no choice. The small amount of defenses around our worlds could not hope to be more than light exercise for so many enemies. We accepted parley, and found out about the treaty. In return for not sacking our cities and looting our worlds, we had to give up our industry’s production, and provide for their fleet’s needs. We feared the worst, but then a new threat appeared. A Tyranid fleet appeared and began an invasion of the outermost of our agri-planets. The Orks promptly assaulted the invader, both in space and on the planet, and destroyed or drove off the invaders. This happened at other star systems as well. The Imperial navy was too far away, and too busy to help our little, out of the way, backwater worlds. The Orks offered protection in exchange for indentured servitude. Many worlds chose survival, as did ours. We fear the day this Ork, Longtooth, dies, but while he lives, no Ork dares disobey Longtooth. Life is not too hard, and our cities are not occupied by Ork garrisons, these stay some distance away.”

“So all this new technology that Ork brags about came from you?” Pen asked.

“Not all. Some things they came up with themselves. Other things came from other sources that I have only heard rumors of. Some say that even Eldar tech is now in the hands of these Orks.” Sauraun said.

“I never thought I would find humans willing allies of Orks.” Pen said, her voice rising.

“If a gun held to your head is willing, then I guess we are.” Sauraun said.

“What gun?” Pen asked.

“I said our cities weren’t occupied, but they are still held hostage. If we fall short in production, or sabotage even the smallest thing, then Ork ships orbiting our planets will burn and blast cities as a lesson. We have all heard of such things, even before we became ‘allies’ to Orks.” Sauraun sounded as bitter as his voice could make him.

“I suppose it was a hard choice to make.” Pen responded quietly.

“A small infraction gets your wife or child sent to the foundries, or you get sent to crew a weapons turret until you die.” A different man chipped in.

“Enough!” Sauraun broke in, “A thousand examples will prove or disprove nothing. All you will do is make yourself and others angry and foolish.”

“Yes, enough.” Pen agreed, “Instead, before Longtooth returns, tell me what you can about new Ork technology.”

“Then there is not much time, indeed.” Sauraun quipped, then added more seriously, “The Orks that follow Longtooth have better ships. Not only can they bring their ships through atmosphere, but now the ships are faster and more maneuverable, in space and atmosphere. Add to that, the ships have improved weaponry, some of which is said to be from Eldar ships. How much, and even how the Orks got any, I don’t know. Lastly, Orks have always had force field tech, but now they have more and better force fields for shielding ships and even ground units, and fortifications. The Orks are now a more deadly threat than ever.”

“A succinct appraisal.” Pen said, “What were you before you were a hostage of Ork good will?”

“I am responsible for my people, “ Sauraun said, sounding a little indignant, “I was being trained as a servant of the people before the Orks came.”

“Time is short.” Pen said quickly, “I hear Longtooth returning. Tell me. Both you and Longtooth have said that it is because of me that we are all here now. How am I supposed to be responsible for all this? I have been in exile for more than a dozen years.”

“Never the less, your treaty between the Empire and that Ork has been the foundation upon which much is built.” Sauraun actually sounded sad. “Because the Empire is fighting on so many fronts, there is only so much the Navy can do. The vast armies of the Guard can only go where the Navy takes them. Because the Orks no longer wanted to fight humans, well, these Orks anyway, well now the Empire can concentrate more ships elsewhere. Imperial administration made it clear that no human, warrior or citizen, was to jeopardize that treaty. Orks were left alone. Orks left humans alone. At least openly. That

too smart Ork, Longtooth, has used the peace to waylay small, out of the way, human populations, and force them to do his bidding. Rest assured. There will be no human survivors coming forward to tell of Ork atrocities." Sauraun turned and motioned to the other two behind him to go, which they did. "Now, one more thing." Sauraun continued, "Humans and Orks have both used the treaty to their own ends. Some humans have gained profit and power dealing with the Orks. I have heard that some human governors have even replaced their personal guard, the army, and peace patrols with Ork warriors. If a few humans have it rough, well, they should have stayed out of the way. Hmm?"

"I have not heard of these things before. Where are the planets that are treating humans like this?" Pen asked, even as she raised her helmet, Longtooth was approaching.

"All along this part of the galactic center, there are human worlds dominated by Orks. This new dark enemy seems bent on exterminating all life, not just Orks, wherever they find it. While I have been forced to serve on this ship, I have seen planets rendered incapable of supporting any life. Only black pyramids remain." Sauraun sounded less regal, even sad. "I don't know how anyone can fight the black hoards I have seen."

Pen snapped her helmet into place, then asked, "Quick now. How many Ork ships have humans aboard?"

"Very few." Sauraun replied, "Most Orks want nothing to do with humans, except as slaves or worse."

Longtooth came up in long strides, grumbling.

"Hurr...Ha! New machines for shields not done! Sneaky human he-worm say you why, humph!" Longtooth poked a long, ugly finger at Sauraun's face, and continued his rant. "Say not got lots bits 'n parts whats finish engines. Ar-huh! Forgets you 'sa burn to? Shields holds nasties out! Fix 'n yes?"

"We will take parts out of broke machines," Sauraun replied evenly. For some reason, he seemed unafraid of Longtooth. "new machines will work soon. Yes." And bold as any Pen has seen, Sauraun turned his back on Longtooth and walked away.

"Err.. All humans to pushy. Not good make work. Not good meat." Longtooth almost muttered. "Now little she 'n Longtooth go."

"No!" Pen planted her feet, and put her fists on her hips, "I'm not going 'till Longtooth says what's! I tired 'n go here go there. Now tell me why Longtooth need only me!"

Longtooth looked at the little form, and smiled. Even in space armor, this human was smaller than most, and a lot smaller than Longtooth. But Orks respect fighters, and Longtooth had seen this little human fight.

"Humph! Now, huh? Err.. Teeth break 'n bad bite Err.." Longtooth had

not been slow to talk before, but now his voice was low (for Longtooth), and even the expected insults were missing. "Look. Little she smart brain. Smart talk 'n sneaky wordy ' n Urr... Human war kings let little she talk. Not let Longtooth talk human war kings. Urr.. Little she help 'n Longtooth?"

There it was. Longtooth expected Pen to help with some human war leaders. Longtooth was even asking, after a fashion, rather than demanding. Pen wanted to hit her head on the bulkheads, until all of this went away. First Lynx, then Foss, and now Longtooth expected some kind of help from her, and were willing to kidnap her until she agreed! Pen only allowed herself a moment of self pity, and Longtooth was growling and squinting by the time Pen spoke.

"What kind of help? These other humans have told me some of how you get help." Pen asked, trying to keep her voice neutral. She feared she already knew what the cagey Ork would ask.

"Longtooth wit' more Orky make wars. Make lotsa friends wit humans out here. Urr.. Arr.. But," Longtooth paused and looked around, "better place little she make sneaky what's wit' Longtooth. Snotty humans here wimp 'bout hard Orks on little she's they's has 'n, but Longtooth 'members how little she take all Longtooth knocks, and still not talk to Orky 'bout what's Longtooth gotta knows. Human little she's all hard. Longtooth thinks smart brains 'n all try 'n tricky. So go nice ship, good eat'n. Hmph!"

"Very well. Little she go where is Longtooth. But not far. Little she tired tricks here 'n there. Only help Orky when Longtooth give good talk, 'n no tricky or if when's. Yes?" Pen feared her voice sounded mean, but trying to phrase anything in broken Imperial Standard was not easy.

"Yes. Follow." Was all Longtooth said. He turned and passed through the blast doors in a hurry. Pen found herself having to run to keep up with the long, fast strides of Longtooth. Pen was sure that she had a very bad future ahead of her. Probably be burned to cinders by one of her own ships, while stuck on this smelly, streaming, ugly Ork ship. Pen briefly wondered where she could find something safe to eat and drink. Probably die of thirst and hunger first, then be blasted to atoms, she told herself.

XII. ____

Lynx could see the battle on her screens. The Eldar were having a tough time. But Lynx was not really watching. Her mind was trying to fix on the feeling she kept having, since she arrived back in real space, above this star system. Fine perspiration covered Lynx, and she could feel the cold knots that were her insides, tighten even more as she concentrated harder. Time was outside her reference, she did not know if minutes or days passed. Yes. There, at last. The ancient mind she had made war against for so long. Hiding itself better these days. But Lynx

knew were that vile invader was now. Not too close. Perhaps several days. The mind, and therefore millions of creatures, did not seem to be advancing very fast, not like before. Still, Lynx was sure. The Tyranids were coming this way.

XIII.____

The Hive Mind of the Tyranids had found a more efficient way of finding worlds full of the biologic stuff it needed. Spies. Many carefully crafted creatures, that could move among the races that tried to resist the coming of the Tyranids. Enlist more creatures that could be swayed into helping the Mind, from those already inhabiting the worlds trying to resist the coming of the Mind. Infiltrate the masses of those alien creatures and set up a network of spies on spies. Unleash the newest, smallest of the slaves to the Mind, amongst the masses of those worlds. Small eyes, hidden everywhere, to watch. When the Hive did come amongst the new worlds, to feed, well then there would be very many little creatures to help divide the defense. Attacked from within, and from without, by the many creatures loyal to the hive already amongst the defenders, the Hive should sweep over the scattered and ineffective defense.

The many ways that the Hive has to locate and absorb worlds are all being set into motion now. Somewhere out there, near the mass of stars that make up the galactic center, there is an enormous mind at work. The Hive can 'feel' it. Different. Strong. First here, then there, sometimes far from its first appearance, sometimes very near the last appearance. Always around the same section of the of the lower half of the galactic center. The Hive must find rival strong psychic minds, and eliminate them. No greater threat exists than one that could interfere with the Hive Mind control of its minions. Now that the Hive had grown, from a succession of successful feedings, more large exploratory groups could be sent out. Five large, and five small, fleets of Tyranids were heading in toward the part of the galactic center that held the greatest promise of locating the rival strong mind. The bulk followed close behind these tendrils. The full weight of the Tyranid Hive would be thrown against this rival, once located. Large groups that had been feeding elsewhere, have been called back. To feed the collected bio-mass to the main Hive, and to add many more soldiers to the coming battle. The Hive Mind no longer felt hunted, or defeated. The Hive was once again the hunter, the predator, with the entire galaxy its meat.

XIV.____

Lynx looked closely at the two-dimensional display. There is a definite pattern. The Necro ships show up, and the Orks they are pursuing scatter. The Necro vessels divide up as necessary to pursue each of the escaping Ork vessels, or groups of vessels. Then, usually near the outer reaches of a star's system, the Orks

being pursued return to normal space, hotly followed by Necro vessels. Except now there is also a large group of more Ork warships waiting. The tactic does not always work. Every Necro vessel is not always destroyed, before many more Necro vessels arrive. But then the Orks scatter again, trying to draw smaller elements of the enemy after them, to be destroyed in yet another trap.

That was not Lynx's main concern. The fact that the Orks were staying in every system where they won against the Necro ships, was a big concern. The other big concern was how the Tyranid enemy was apparently on the move again. The lack of detailed reports was largely due to the lack of an Imperial presence this deep in the galactic core. Lynx looked over the sketchy details with some disgust. Proper actions could not be taken with so little solid information. One detail that did stand out, was how wrong she had been. Like everyone else, Lynx had thought that there were very few, if any, habitable worlds so near the swirling galactic center. To much radiation. To many swirling stars yanking worlds this way and that with high gravity. To much of everything. At least that had been the accepted 'fact' within the Empire for a very long time. Now these fragments of reports, transmissions, and intercepted messages, all point to a lot of inhabitable, and inhabited places. Some even had human colonies. Out of contact with the Imperial administration for who knows how long, those colonies of humans prospered or died entirely on their own. Lynx could see the Empire was going to have an interesting time, bringing this area into the Imperial fold. Lynx's most immediate concern was right behind her.

"Well? What do you say?" Inquisitor Foss was clearly impatient, "Can you tell me anything yet?"

"Yes, but I'm forced to work with very incomplete information." Lynx stood sideways, so the Inquisitor, and her visitor, could see what she was pointing to. "I believe Imperial forces should take up positions in this sector, and I believe the Eldar will be moving into this area." Lynx pointed to adjacent sectors, one above the other.

"An interesting observation." Yamul said, while pointing at an area two sectors away. "And why would the Eldar fleets not want to strike here?"

"Is your purpose to strike at Ork and human forces?" Lynx asked guardedly, "The large Ork forces in that area have taken over a number of human inhabited worlds, but not sacked them. All information coming out of there say that humans have been coerced into working with Orks, but the human colonies remain intact."

"It is interesting to let you talk," Yamul said blandly, "so much is left unsaid, yet the meaning is there none the less."

"I have always worked to better our relations with the Eldar peoples." Foss broke in, "So I think we should all be plain and straight forward with our

intentions." Foss was nearly glaring at Lynx.

"Plainly then." Yamul continued, unfazed. "The Orks have raised the blood moon banner over these worlds." Yamul's finger traced a tight curve over several stars on the display. "That is a challenge we will not ignore. The sign of the red moon holds great meaning to my people. The Orks know this, and so dare us to challenge their hold on those worlds."

"Even if diverting to those worlds leaves the Necro and Tyranid free to devourer all your forces already here?" Lynx asked severely, pointing to the same sector she had offered to the Eldar earlier.

"As you say," Yamul answered just as severely, "your information is incomplete. The worlds that we must hold are for the Eldar alone to inhabit. We will not suffer any other race to take hold on the places we have built for the future of our race!"

"We have not taken any places that are claimed by the Eldar!" Foss looked shocked.

"Had you or any other human tried to build your house on such a world, you would have been removed by force, before now. Around those stars are places for the Eldar alone to hold." Yamul pointed at the stars he had already outlined.

"I see." Lynx said more slowly. "The jeopardy to our combined peoples must wait. A holy cause must come first, whatever price must be paid. This begs one last question, in my mind."

"I have more than one question to ask." Foss said quietly.

"If you receive no answer, that too is an answer." Yamul muttered flatly.

"Should I, we," Lynx implicated Foss with a wave of the hand, "remove those offending life forms from your sacred ground, will the Eldar stay the course against these most dangerous enemies?" Lynx finished the sweep of her hand before the part of the map she hoped would soon hold the Eldar fleets.

"It will be considered." Yamul answered without expression.

XV. _____

Pen switched to her other gun. The cursed things can take a lot of punishment, she reminded herself. Jumping up, Pen ran across the rubble to a corner of two broken walls. Pushing herself tight into the corner, she chanced a peek over the steaming ruin of a wall. She could not see Longtooth, or any other Ork, anywhere she could see through the smoke and dust. More worrying still, her bodyguards and the other marines she had been with were likewise missing. Pen ducked down again. More heavy impacts all around, but not too near. Pen mentally kicked herself. Everyone was running back to the fortified positions, but no, Pen had to stop and try some long range shots at her pursuers. By the time Pen had noted the effect, or lack of it, and turned back to getting the hell

out of the way, everyone was gone. Pen was just winding herself up for another dash, when she saw it. A curled, misshapen sheet of metal. And under that, the edge of a closed entrance down to.. Where? Pen crouched, then rolled on her side under the metal sheet. Under the shadow, Pen could see that the way in was broken. A gap that just might fit her, armor and all, and let her slip down and out of sight. With a rasp of rubble under her back armor, Pen slid, then fell, into the narrow opening. With a clatter and a thump, Pen slid down the few steps on her back, and came to a stop on her head and shoulders. With a twist, and shove, Pen righted herself and crouched backwards into the darkest corner.

Pen looked around, and mentally took stock of her situation. Pen liked to carry extra things with her, in case of something unexpected. She always carried extra weapons, extra ammunition, and other odd bits she might need. Her bodyguards teased her frequently, since they preferred to travel light. Now Pen wished she had found some way to carry more. All she had left was a few extra reloads, and nothing else. Everything else had been blasted away when her backpack took that hit. Somehow her comm. equipment was not working either. She felt very alone.

A wave of forlorn self pity swept over Pen. She had only agreed to come to this planet under duress. The Orks were trying to put up some kind of defense, all over this part of space. The pursuing Necro forces, or 'Tin Heads', as Longtooth sometimes called them, seemed bent on exterminating all life they encountered.

Then, the Eldar had shown up around several previously uninhabited planets, to likewise burn away everything and anyone they found. Orks and Eldar have a long history of conflict. Both sides seem eager to pick a fight at any time, and neither one will let the smallest challenge pass un-fought. Pen had seen the recordings of groups of humans slaughtered, even as they tried to surrender. This part made no sense. Except for the one renegade faction of the Eldar race, Eldar did not normally murder the helpless. Longtooth had brought Pen into all this, in the hope that she could negotiate with the Eldar for the Orks. Longtooth had explained that many of his new 'friends', or allies, would abandon Longtooth if the Eldar got involved. Pen had found enough evidence to confirm her suspicion, that renegade human forces were supplying the Orks with weapons, and maybe even warships. Pen couldn't help but wonder why renegade enemies of the Empire would help Orks that were not fighting the Empire.

All these became moot points in an instant. Pen had been on the roof of a tower, listening to Longtooth brag about his defenses, when the sky lit up. With no warning at all, a sheet of flame descended from above the clouds, right down to the ground only a few kilometers away from Pen. The sheet of flame had broadened into a glaring wall, and vanished. Revealing a huge black pyramid.

The pyramid was not quite touching the ground, when a broad, greenly

lit opening was revealed. From this opening poured thousands of metal parodies of life. Two legged 'Tin Heads' were accompanied by multi-legged spider like machines of several sizes, and above were swarms of the fliers Pen had seen before. As these forces poured out of the pyramid and spread out, the pyramid appeared to be retreating away from the Ork city. Just before Pen followed Longtooth from the tower, Pen saw the pyramid settle amid a swirl of dust.

Through all this Longtooth had been shouting unceasingly into a metal box he had been carrying on his belt. Orders to his forces, no doubt. The bombardment had begun before Longtooth and Pen had made the bottom of the tower. Longtooth and Pen met up with their respective escorts, and began to run toward the edge of the city where the shuttles were parked. Dull metal enemies fell from above, amongst the structures of the Ork town. Where these were launched from was obscured by the clouds. But now the town was peppered with small groups of Necro warriors. Every corner could be, often was, an ambush.

Pen was quick to learn a trick from Longtooth and the other Orks with him. Before entering any intersection, or broad doorway, that may hide an enemy, the Orks would stop just short and throw a small fuzzy thing in front first. The little thing would squeal and try to run, but any Necro warriors would blast the little beast. The Necro could not let even the smallest thing live. While the enemy was so distracted, the Orks could jump around the corner, firing everything they had. Pen was glad more Orks kept joining Longtooth, because even with that trick, Orks were still getting shredded by the enemy weapons. The shrill, piercing shriek some of the Orks inflicted on Pen's ears, as they died, still echoed in Pen's mind. Never had Pen heard such a sound of agony from any living thing before. The unnerving sound was ample explanation for the retreat of anything living, when attacked by the living dead, silvery metal hell-things.

Pen looked behind her, down the broad way they had been running down. Ranks of the metal monsters completely filled the width of the road behind them. Longtooth led them around a sharp corner, before starting to run quicker toward his goal. Pen took this opportunity to try to slow the enemy advance a little. She pulled a missile from a leg compartment, clipped it to the front rail of her weapon, slid it down to make contact on the firing stud, quickly raised the weapon, aimed and launched the missile. It impacted just left of center on the front rank of what looked like walking metal corpses. A very satisfying flare of released plasma momentarily obscured the results of the hit from Pen. Pen was shocked. The ranks of metal obscenities came on without having missed a step. Three of the enemy were missing from the front rank, where she had hit. Even humans in battle armor, would have lost more of their number from such a hit, Pen told herself. Pen duplicated the maneuver with her last missile, then turned to run after Longtooth. That's when she discovered that they had all left

her. As she ran after the rest of her party, she was struck from behind. Knocked to the ground, she rolled and quickly regained her feet, and ran to the end of the street. No sign of anyone to the left or right. Pen ran a short distance down the right turn, and stopped to take cover. Just in time. Explosions blossomed all around. More of the bombardment Pen had been hearing all along. Two of the metal forms appeared out of the smoke and dust, crouched, and headed right for Pen, firing as they came. Pen fired a steady stream at the advancing enemy, knocking both over backwards. Neither moved, rather they dissolved into a gray smoke, and were gone. That was when Pen had retreated into this dark hole. Pen was now alone. She had no pocket full of little beasts to reveal enemy hiding places.

Pen only allowed herself a couple of minutes to mentally kick herself. She reminded herself that she would surely be dead, if the shuttles all left before she got there. Pen risked a tiny light. From the opposite wall, stairs down. Pen had a hunch. Rising quickly, Pen went down into the dark.

Sure enough, another room after a few steps. And, another tall, rather narrow door. Pen grabbed the latch handle and yanked the door open. Small greenskins were running by in a continuous stream, like packs of rats. Some had an array of weird looking tools, or weapons, but most were empty handed, and all were running by in a panic, not giving Pen the least notice. Pen turned into the flow of running little Orks, and ran along, among them. They still paid no heed to the larger form running among them, although she did notice that they were very good at getting out of her way. Pen was sure these creatures knew where they were going, Pen was hoping that it would be near the shuttles.

After nearly ten minutes of running amongst the little Orks, Pen emerged in a large round room, with ladders going up at eight different places. The little Orks were swarming up the three ladders opposite where they had all entered. Pen ran up to the center ladder and looked up, and could just see light past the little bodies scrambling up the ladder. Some of the little creatures started to climb up Pen's back, as she stood for a moment, looking, before climbing. Ignoring the grasping creatures, Pen grabbed a metal rung, and started to haul herself up as fast as she could. Somehow the little things scurried ahead of her even faster, so that she caught up to not even one, before her head emerged into the light.

And noise. Some of the little Orks had weapons after all, and were blasting away in several directions. But that was not what caught Pen's eye. Only a few meters away, an Ork light cruiser was warming up its engines prior to takeoff. Pen hit the top rung on the run, and ran as fast as she was able toward the only portal still open on the Ork ship. Standing in the door was a large Ork warrior, looking for all the world as if counting the little greenskins running past him. The big Ork saw Pen running toward him, and hard as it was for Pen to believe,

waved at her to come on. Pen threw herself into the opening in a crouch, even as the Ork slammed the hatch closed behind her. The rumble of the engines getting louder, and lifting the ship, nearly drowned out the Ork's words.

"Heh, ha! Nearly missed da boat dinna ya?" The Ork said around his grin. Pen saw that he had his hand on the heal of his weapon, however. "Com'n on. Cap'n wanna see ya, sure."

"Longtooth 'ere then?" Pen gasped, catching her breath.

"Ar-hah! Is true den! You human she much talk'n 'bout!" The Ork sounded even more gruff. But continued leading Pen through the halls and passages. Pen did notice that the paths down which she was led were awfully straight, and cleaner than she expected. Most unsettling was how empty of Orks the paths were. Longtooth's battleship had been over-run with every size Ork.

"Ere ya goes up." The Ork pointed to a square platform, guarded by two very big Orks in crude plates of armor, holding quite familiar lightning spears. Pen looked up. The platform was carried up on a single track. The lift looked big enough to hold five or six big Orks, but had no railings to keep one from falling off. The lift would go through a hole in the ceiling into darkness. What was up there could only be guessed at. Pen stepped up, and moved to the center. Her big guide did not follow.

With a suddenness that blurred Pen's vision, the platform rocketed upwards. Floors of different levels passed in a blur. The acceleration slowed, and then the platform stopped with a suddenness that made Pen think her stomach was still firmly pressed against her lower jaw. In a moment her vision stopped twisting things, and she looked around.

"You may step down and join me now." The voice came from a suit of Ork heavy armor, fully blocking a doorway to Pen's right. "I do not know what I have done to be so lucky. However, you are as safe as may be, here with me." The armored figure lifted its arms and pulled off the Orkish looking helmet. Pen felt her breath leave in a hiss. A human! In Ork armor!

"So you're human," Pen answered levelly, "and working for Orks. That is not going to make me feel any safer, whatever you say."

"I command here." The faint smile on the young man's face made Pen wonder what kind of trouble she had made for herself. She had a thought that maybe she'd been better off back on the planet.

"This is your ship? That has to be some story. A human commanding an Ork warship." Pen let the sarcasm come through in her voice.

"There is no time for banter, although I would love to wage a war of words with you. Orks love direct insults, direct action. Subtlety and sarcasm are lost on them. We must make time later. But now we are about to enter space. Follow me to the combat center, but mind yourself. My guards are quick and suspicious."

He finished, turned and replaced his headpiece just as he vanished from sight beyond the doorway.

Pen quickly followed, and asked his back, "Who are you?" just before they went through a second door into a circular room. A very familiar human style control room.

"I am Oord, an Admiral of a squadron of fast raiders, as well as Captain of this vessel. I must now fight my ship. You may stand there, or sit over there." Oord waved a hand at the position the second in command would normally be, particularly if about to enter battle.

"Where is your second?" Pen asked from beside the very human styled command position.

"He is dead. They killed him." Oord answered emotionlessly.

Pen looked where Oord was pointing. The largest pyramid she had yet seen just hung there in space. The ghastly pale green glow surrounding it, separated out the details faintly. Just in front of it was arrayed nice, neat formations of every size Necro ship. Pen sat heavily in the command chair. It had been meant for a larger specimen than her, but the restraints on her legs and lower torso would still hold her during any wild maneuvers.

Screens came up all around Pen. As she twisted around to look at each screen, Pen was startled by another revelation. The command bridge crew were not all Orks! Something very strange was at work here. There were Orks, alright. Also at least ten humans (maybe) in space armor, or more accurately, Space Marine armor. The fact that Eldar, and at least two races Pen did not recognize filled out the rest of the bridge crew, and all of them wearing some form of combat armor, led Pen to one conclusion.

"You're Pirates?" Pen asked, leaning forward some to better see Oord's face mask. Oord had taken the Captain's chair while Pen was looking around, and was plugging a pair of cables into ports on his left thigh. Direct data feeds. No one else in the combat center would hear what went out on those feeds.

"Mercenaries." Oord answered flatly. "If I were a pirate, I would love to have you as my guest. The ransom would be very handsome indeed."

"Captain, there are still more of the black ships coming through some sort of gate." One of the technicians broke in, urgency in his voice.

Pen looked up, then around at the other screens again. The Necro force was at least four times the size of the Ork forces, and still growing. But what were they waiting for? Pen had a nagging feeling she should know. A sudden idea jumped into Pen's head.

"Aren't you going to try to run for it?" Pen asked of Oord, noting that his helmet was moving in such a way that Pen guessed Oord was speaking with someone.

“Wait a bit and see.” Oord replied, this time his voice was not emotionless, but held a hint of almost playfulness.

“You’re bait for a trap, aren’t you?” Pen asked accusingly, “All those Ork ships milling about, instead of running, aren’t here because of Longtooth’s commands. No Ork gives a shout in hell for commands, if they think they’ll get scratched for nothing.”

“They are not all Ork ships, some are mine.” Oord replied again. Playfulness again. “If you’re going to sit in that chair, you could make yourself useful.”

“Who would do anything I say?” Pen asked slowly. There may be a trap here.

“Oh, I have been telling everyone about you. How you jumped onto my ship in your hurry to get back into space. There is not an Ork or Mercenary vessel anywhere that does not know you’re in that chair. If you speak, you will be heard.” Oord still sounded playful. Pen thought this had to be some kind of trap.

“Hear me, okay. But if I’m to play at being your second, what do you think would be useful?” Pen asked as carefully as she could manage, still wearing a helmet that changed her voice.

“In battle my second officer would take charge of gunnery. He would also watch my back, as it were, so that I’m not preoccupied with one matter, and miss something else.” Oord sounded less playful, more serious, but Pen still wondered what was really going on in that mercenary’s mind.

“If helping me does not sit well with you,” Oord went on, “just keep in mind that you’re helping yourself stay alive. Benefiting me and my crew is entirely an accidental consequence. Hmm? Decide quickly. The enemy is moving.”

“Perhaps sacrificing myself to be rid of the likes of you is worth it. Hmm?” Pen sounded taunting now, “But, I’ll work with you for a little bit. Perhaps I’ll learn something about you renegades.”

“So be it, then. Those Tin-heads are speeding up on the right, they’re sending in their small stuff first.” Oord was louder now, “If the Orks are going to stand and fight, then let’s get this fight started!”

Pen quickly scanned the monitors to either side of her. More cruisers were falling in behind and beside this one, while a wave of small destroyers roared past to take the lead. Pen could make out the mix of vessels for what they were, human renegade mercenaries and Ork warships. Pen was sure she would learn something this day.

XVI._____

Lynx looked hard at the data sheet that had just been thrust into her hand.

So. Pen had somehow been separated from her warship, and then separated from that Ork windbag that was supposed to be guaranteeing Pen’s safety. Now Pen was aboard a mercenary’s warship, just as the Necro forces attack. Lynx briefly wished that she had kept Pen at her side.

The rest of the report was just as cheerful. The Misfit fleet that Pen was supposed to command had left normal space. Lynx could guess what they were up to. The rest of the Misfit forces were still committed to this action, but had given notice that planned future operations were now needing review. Fancy language that says most of Lynx’s and Foss’s plans were now scrapped. First the Eldar break away, and now the human fleets are scattering to different objectives. Lynx felt the need for a vacation. But not now.

Lynx switched to different holo screens. Foss was with the Nova Marine ships. They were coming up on the right. The remaining Misfit ships were spread along the left, and above, the Imperial fleet. The Centurion warships took up reserve positions below and behind the Imperial formation. Up ahead, the enemy fleet was scattering, spreading to all sides of the central grouping of Imperial warships. Enemy warships were still gathering from around the system. Lynx would like otherwise, but all the enemy would be gathered around their respective warlords. These Orks warlords and chieftains had broken with Longtooth, what with the defeats at the hands of the Necro forces. Now they were looting and conquering any settlements they find in this sector. Including at least one Eldar star system that the Eldar should have been defending, but were absent thanks to those same Necro forces. Now Lynx and Foss were here to secure this area of space. Or more plainly, kick Ork butt. Then leave. Asked, not so politely, to remove all human presence from this system. Well, Lynx knew that these Orks were nothing but trouble, now that they were no longer part of the treaty with Longtooth. Have to deal with them sooner or later, let’s just take care of matters now.

Lynx watched the shifting forces closely. The half dozen groups of Ork vessels had settled into a slow advance. Lynx could see a danger already. The way the Imperial center force was out ahead, and pulling further ahead, of the other supporting forces, the Ork fleets could hit the flank, and worse, the rear of the Imperial ships. Lynx’s hands moved rapidly over the keys. Lynx suggested to let the Orks try to hit the center, then once committed to the attack, the trailing Imperial support elements could close against the Ork’s flanks and rear. Lynx was shocked at the reply. Foss thanked Lynx, but the Nova fleet had other plans. One of the Ork elements is commanded by an Ork warlord with an especially evil history. In the past the Nova marines, and the worlds under their protection, had suffered grievously from that Ork’s forces. The Nova marines had a blood debt to settle, and would apply their full strength to ending that Ork’s days.

The Misfits had a similar reply. The largest group of enemy ships, the one hanging back from five groups stretched out in front, was entirely made up of forces the Misfits had driven out from their space. Before they left, these Orks had 'poisoned the well' by leaving behind large amounts of radioactive debris. Air, land, and water were beyond redemption for a millennia. Plants, animals, and any people there are now all horrors. Mutated, sickened, and driven mad. Not one ship of that clan of Orks can be permitted to live.

Lynx calculated that the Empire's forces were out numbered by three to two in heavy ships, and two to one in smaller frigates and destroyers. And more than half of the Imperial ships were about to launch into 'private' battles. I think I should start my vacation now, Lynx told herself.

Lynx keyed into the orders that the Imperial Admiral had issued his units. The Imperial ships were about to re-deploy. They would form up into lines of battle, with the battleships forming the center two lines, the cruisers forming two lines above and below the battleships. All with their broadside weapons exposed. Classic defense. Let the enemy close into your strongest firepower, hopefully paring the enemy down a lot before all the enemy's weapons can be brought to bear. It also left the initiative with the enemy. They may not play by the rules, and charge straight into the guns, and the Imperials will have a hard time countering almost any other move the enemy makes. Lynx once again looked over the developing picture. To be honest, Lynx told herself, she could not think of anything else to do, what with so many of the supporting fleets committed to individual actions. Lynx could of course suggest that the Imperial fleet join in a headlong rush into the Ork guns, but Lynx knew that this Admiral was not one to throw away ships the Empire will need later.

Lynx sighed. In a few minutes the action would start, and all Lynx could do was watch. Lynx considered taking a shuttle back to the Centurion ships. They were taking up positions to guard the backs of the Imperial battle lines. Also the Centurion ships were the only ones that could respond to protect the Nova and Misfit fleet elements, if they weren't too far ahead. Lynx decided to stay and watch, but sent a message to a Centurion destroyer to closely shadow this Imperial warship. She may have need of the destroyer, very soon.

Lynx engaged some switches, set some dials. The room filling 3D projection swirled into existence behind Lynx. She picked up a stylus and turned into the middle of the room. The swarms of ships were each tiny, but this laser projection had such fine detail, that individual ship designs could be recognized. The Nova fleet was going to be first. The Nova battleships set out in a straight line, one behind the other, to become a spear thrust straight through the heart of the enemy formation. The Nova cruisers lined up along the right flank of the battleships, far enough away that enemy ships could be caught between the lines

and be hammered from both directions. Another line of light cruisers and fleet destroyers took up positions above the Nova cruisers and battleships, and above them Lynx saw fighters and bombers in a score of 'V' formations. Streaks of light jerked Lynx's attention back to what the Orks were doing.

More streaks of light cut a path toward the Nova battleships. The Ork fleet was coming on with its best foot forward, as well. A lot of firepower is built on the large 'heads' the Orks build on their vessels. Usually the longest ranged weapons as well. Orks love big guns that go "BOOM", and so that makes up nearly all that Orks mount on a ship. Sometimes torpedoes, and, very rarely, one kind of beam weapon or another. However, these Orks are firing a lot of beam weapons from their newest ships, even cruisers. Each Ork cruiser and battleship had pulled up even with the other ships around it, so that the Ork formation resembled a wall of oncoming ships to Lynx. Lynx could see no logic in how they were arrayed in that wall, however. Cruisers and battleships were mixed so that a battleship might be surrounded by only cruisers, or a battleship or two. Behind this mix came a milling swarm of Ork escort sized vessels of every type. Lynx took her stylus and picked out a wedge of these specks. Suddenly enlarged in front of Lynx, the escort type was known to her. Hung under their belly, wings, and mounted in ports on the escort's head, torpedoes could plainly be seen. Except that these were not just long tube shapes, these had sharp wings jutting from each one. New design. Lynx fervently hoped that finding out what this new type torpedo is capable of, would not come at too high a price.

Now the Nova battleships were firing as well. Lynx had not seen any Ork beams do any damage to the Nova Marine ships. Now there was a lot of hits showing on both side's vessels. The Nova and Ork ships closed on each other at terrific speeds. Neither side altered their formation, except to fill in the gap where a ship fell out of formation, on fire, with explosions causing the little representations in front of Lynx to twinkle. Tiny lights to show the deaths of many. Already there were a lot of ships falling back, burning. Lynx thought that the lines of Nova ships would speed through the Ork formation, just like spear thrusts, but then be out of the battle for a long time as they laboriously turned back around.

The Orks must have thought so too, they continued to press forward at top speed. First blow past these dark blue warships, then get among the Imperial fleet vessels before the rest of the Ork formations. More glory.

Nova warships don't play by the rules. Instead of a spear thrust, the lines of Nova ships suddenly resembled a bomb burst, as they scattered among the Ork formation. Each cruiser and battleship first angled toward an assigned part of the Ork box formation, then turned tightly in the direction the Ork ships were flying, all the while firing every gun and laser and torpedo in every direction.

Lynx could see that even the forward thrusters were glaring at max burn, to help the Nova warships turn.

Lynx clenched her jaw, as she watched the Ork reaction. Several Ork cruisers, of the older type, just bored straight in, and rammed whatever Nova ship was in front of it. Lynx had seen this before, when an Ork ship was so badly damaged that it could not strike back with guns. But this was done by ships that were intact, or nearly so. Lynx took her stylus again and touched the brightly lit tip to the tiny forms of ships in front of her. Each expanded into a somewhat larger shape, with little readouts of that ship's status. Yes. Each of the rammed cruisers and battleships were damaged severely, or were drifting, burning wrecks. Lynx touched the tiny shapes of the Ork ships that did the ramming. All but three of these were smashed into wreckage, and those three would not pose much threat anymore.

Lynx pressed one of the small studs on the stylus handle, restoring the projection back to its original size. Now Lynx could take in the whole picture, as the battle unfolded. Lynx suddenly made a decision. She couldn't hold still, and just watch. Foss wanted Lynx on an Imperial warship that was not going to pay the slightest heed to their 'guest'. Foss felt he had to be on a Nova fleet warship, because he feared the Nova Marine leadership had been too long 'influenced' by Lynx.

Of course, the Centurion Marines were corrupted from stem to stern, after so long an exposure to Lynx's wiles, Foss had all but said so. Lynx decided to invoke some of her back door methods.

First Lynx sent a highly encrypted command to a Centurion fleet destroyer. It would hang back, not engage the enemy. Through that destroyer, and four other Centurion dreadnaught's comm gear, Lynx set up secure message links to every ship, except the one Inquisitor Foss was on. Lynx had no intention of trying to command these fleets, but, she also had no intention of letting things just develop of their own momentum. Lynx would make sure that no misguided judgments, or misdirected attentions would go unchallenged. Like now.

While Lynx had been setting up her back door to the command net, a lot of Ork ships seemed to be getting no attention at all. The Ork escort destroyers and frigates, escorted by a lot of fighter bombers, that had been accompanying the now engaged Ork heavy warships, were all swinging around underneath the fighting heavies. Left alone, these Orks would love to fall on the rear of an Imperial formation. Lynx would not allow that. When Lynx finished talking, several light cruisers and some squadrons of frigates, were all set to engage the Ork escorts, as soon as they began their attack approach. Lynx next guided a Nova heavy cruiser, that had just restored maneuvering power, to protect the rear of a Nova battleship that was in jeopardy.

Lynx reminded herself why she was alive. To help in any way she can, anywhere she can, even at the risk of an Inquisitor's wrath.

Now the big 3D hologram was really busy. Almost far enough away to be a separate action, the Misfit fleet had succeeded in their bid to swing around the main Ork groupings, and get their teeth into the large Ork formation. The Ork heavies were not so fast as the Misfit ships attacking them, but the Ork ships had every bit as much firepower. Lynx increased the magnification. Now larger, and with more details, Lynx's face became grim, at watching the deaths of thousands.

The Orks here were not behaving, either. Groups of three or four battleships, or cruisers, or a mix of heavies, were firing as one, turning as one, and displaying a level of cooperation that Lynx had never seen before. In response, the Misfits changed their tactics. Instead of remaining in groupings similar to the Orks, the Misfit ships dispersed. Lynx figured that the Misfits were hoping to cause the Ork warships to divide their firepower again, faced with threats from all sides. Lynx admired the speed at which those Misfits were able to change tactics in mid-fight. Lynx noted that the Misfit heavy warships were still working as a team, as if in a squadron. Lynx doubted if any Imperial warships would be able to coordinate their attacks, while so widely dispersed.

Despite all the attempts at organization, the fight was breaking down into a melee very rapidly. Lynx could see no way to help. The confusing mess of so many ships twisting, firing, and dying in flames, Lynx knew that the only help that would matter now was to get more warships over there to help the Misfit fleet. But not now.

The slower advancing main groupings of the Ork fleets had entered range of everyone's big guns. This would be where the deciding blows fell, the majority of each side was committed to the battle in the center. Lynx took one last look at the Misfit and Nova actions. They were mixed up to where it would be up to each ship, how well it fought and maneuvered, as to who survived. Lynx could send the Centurion ships to help one group, or the other, not both. Lynx might even need to bolster the Imperial center, they were still heavily outnumbered. Lynx could only wait.

The deck plates under Lynx's feet shuddered and vibrated. The ship she was on was both shooting and accelerating. Lynx focused her big holo of the battle on the Imperial fleet. Centered as the fleet was in the holo field, Lynx had a better grasp of the complex maneuvering, and the distances between the now split up Imperial forces.

The long range firing was not having much effect on the Ork fleets. Some of the biggest guns the Imperials were firing were only making holes in empty space. Most of the biggest Imperial ships were swinging around just now,

presenting their bows to the enemy. As soon as the ships were facing straight on at the Orks, swarms of torpedoes streaked toward the Orks. Lynx groaned. The Orks had proven in the past to be able to deal with waves of torpedoes. Particularly when launched at them from long distance. Sure enough, the Imperial ships turned back into line, broadside to the Orks. And just as Lynx knew they would, the Orks wiped out the oncoming torpedoes with the horde of fighter-bombers already swarming around the biggest Ork ships.

The Orks were coming faster now. Brilliant shafts of silvery energy tore through space, from many Ork warships. Targeted on only three of the largest Imperial battleships, the protective energy shields on all three were momentarily overwhelmed. White hot, and even violet hot, gouges appeared in armor. Lynx expanded the view on those three, and yes, the damage was bad. Some big guns would not fire now. Lynx frowned even deeper. Orks should not have such powerful beam weapons. Lynx spoke again into her personal log recorder. She recorded a reminder to try and backtrack, and try to locate where such weapons were coming from. All Imperial ships were turning into the onrushing Orks now. Most likely going to launch more torpedoes and short range missiles, prior to charging amongst the enemy. Lynx wondered if the person commanding this fleet had only just graduated from Naval Academy.

Alarms went off all over Lynx's console and screens.

Lynx quickly backed off the view, to take in more of surrounding space. Just beyond the most forward ships of the Nova and Misfit melees, more Ork ships of every type, just coming into real space. They were not, however, pointed the right way to close on the Imperial fleets. Also, curiously, they were not really formed up into any recognizable formations. The third curiosity was that they just kept going.

And then, Lynx was very surprised. The other Ork ships broke off their attacks, and put every atom of power to their engines. They took off in every direction, wherever they had been pointed when this newest group appeared. Lynx quickly called up the emergency frequency, and ordered every Imperial ship to not pursue, but rather form up. A terrible thought had occurred to Lynx.

Lynx watched her display as the fleets pulled back together. Everyone was not quite ready, when suddenly it was too late.

Three black pyramids of incredible size appeared in the dark space not far from where the Orks had recently appeared. A thin green fuzz of light surrounded each, illuminating the step design and other details of the blockish things. Very quickly, ships appeared. Big ones, then small ones, and then more big ones. All ugly black block shapes, pouring out of the three great pyramids.

Lynx called up Foss, no answer. She then invoked the command net, broadest possible coverage of every Imperial frequency. Run. Lynx commanded

every Admiral and Captain to turn away and jump into non-space as quick as could be managed. Wounded ships were not to be left behind. Jumps were to be opened for any ship that could not, and take time to recover fighters and bombers. Lynx could see that the Necro ships were, for the moment, still chasing Ork ships.

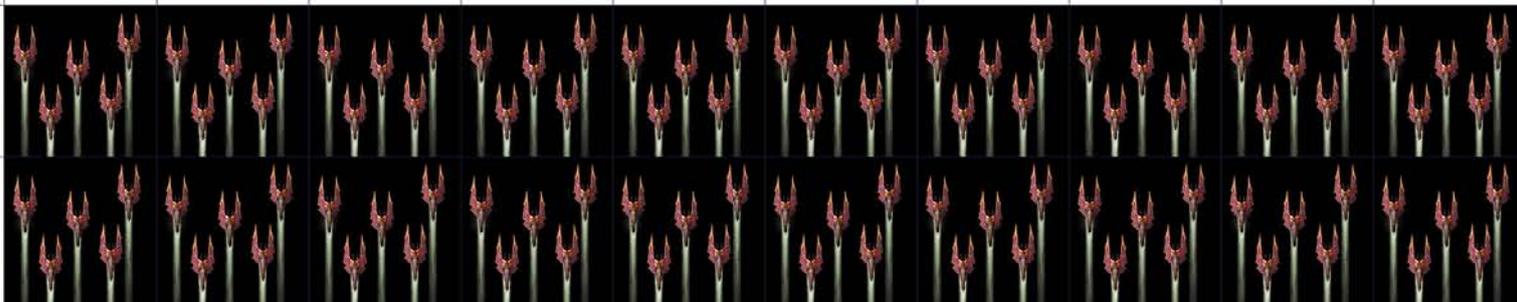
A most urgent message was blinking an indicator on Lynx's console. She tapped more little studs on her stylus, and got the face of an Admiral. In terse language, Lynx was informed that Inquisitor Foss was injured, badly, and would be, for some time, unable to take further part in these matters. Lynx asked if Imperial Commanders would now follow her plans, her commands. She did not wait very long at all. All Imperial ships accepted her offer, except the Misfits. The Misfits replied that they were going to find their kidnapped officer, namely Pen.

Lynx watched the Imperial ships launch into non-space in squadron order. Lynx's screens showed the Necro warships were still not paying the smallest attention to the departing Imperial vessels. The Misfit fleet jumped into non-space as one. The ripple in space caused Lynx's ship to rock slightly. Lynx had asked this ship's captain to wait until last, to jump out of here. In moments, Lynx was alone, the captain asking to leave also. Lynx stood watching the big holograph. Ork ships were also jumping into non-space, all over the sky. Not all were getting away.

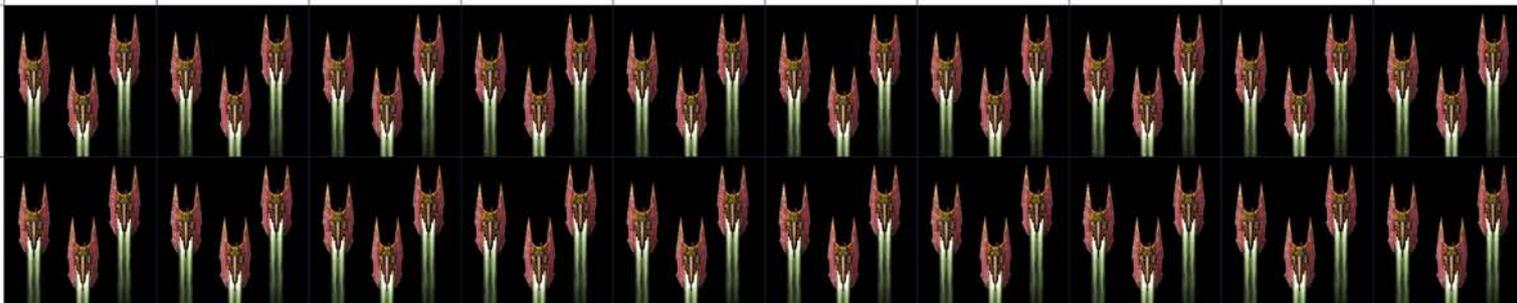
Not all screens were monitoring the carnage. Three screens displayed directives. Each of the three directives held conflicting agendas, and each held Lynx as bound by those contrary commands. The fact that different races were behind all three communications, still left Lynx with no means to disregard any of them. She knew what had to be done, in each case, but how to get it done, with more interference than help, was the real puzzle.

Lynx asked her ship's captain to please jump now. Without reply, only a nod from the captain, the ship accelerates, then launches into non-space.

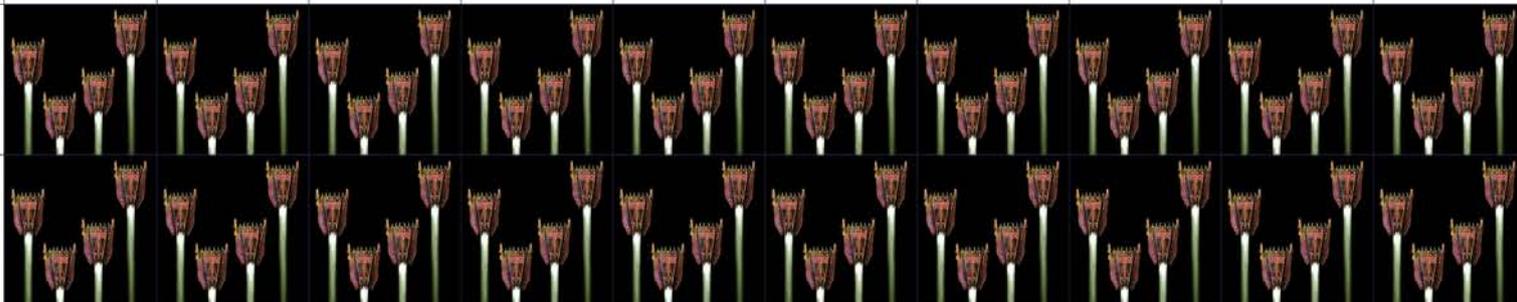
The End of Chapter Ten. Watch these pages in future Warp Rifts for more Tyranids and other enemies of Lynx.



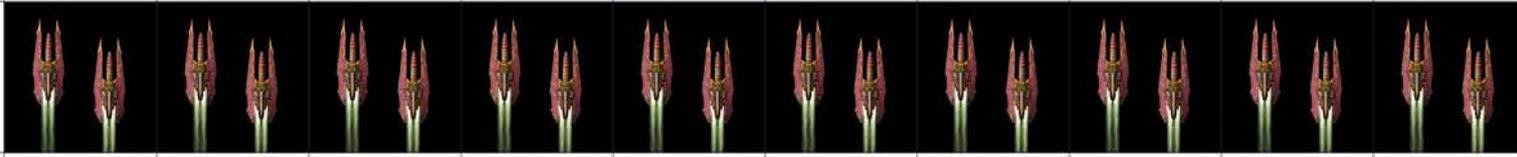
Hell Talons THE FORGE - CHAOS **Hell Blades**



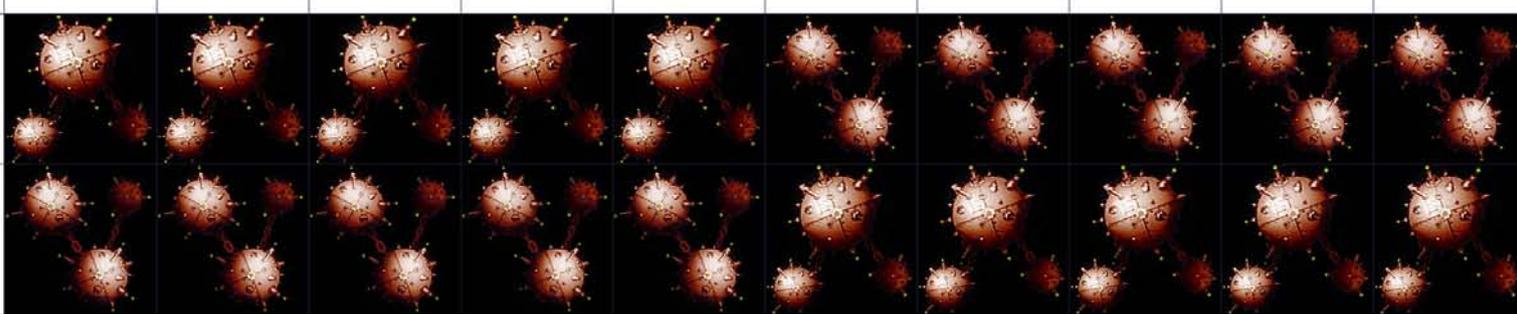
Dreadclaws



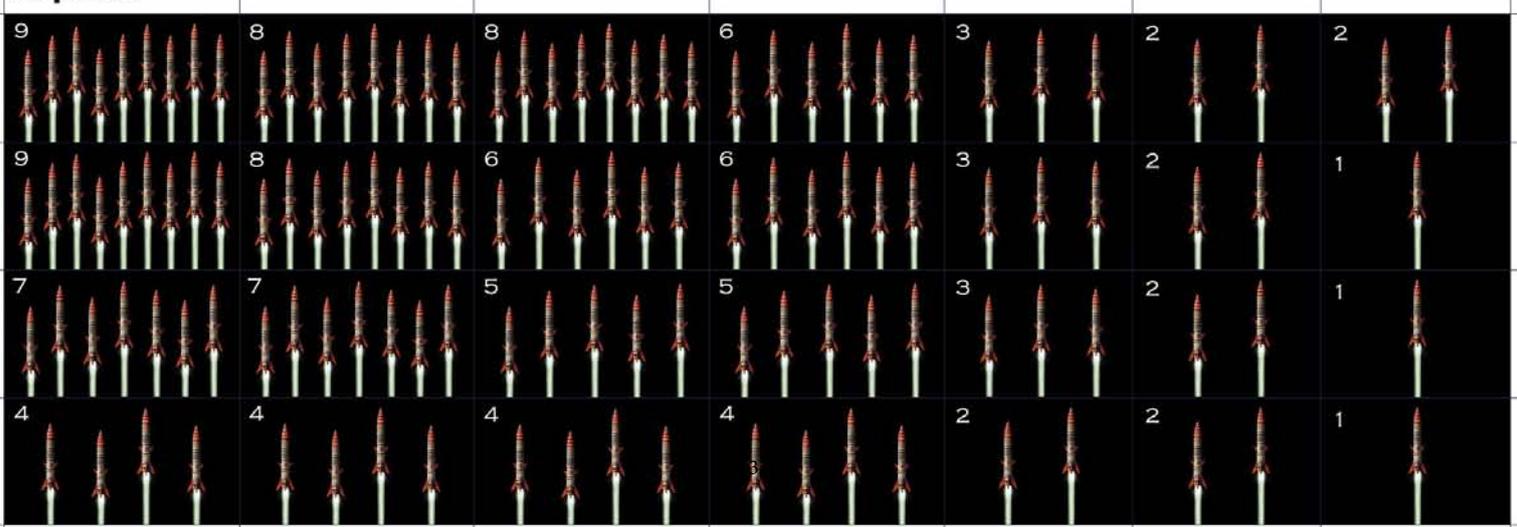
Torpederos Hell Talon



Minas

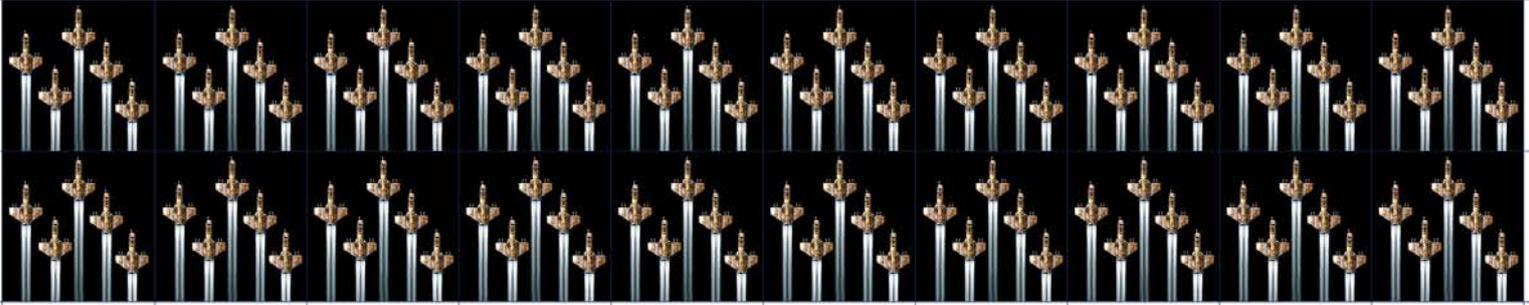


Torpedos



THE FORGE - IMPERIAL NAVY

Interceptores Fury



Bombarderos Starhawk



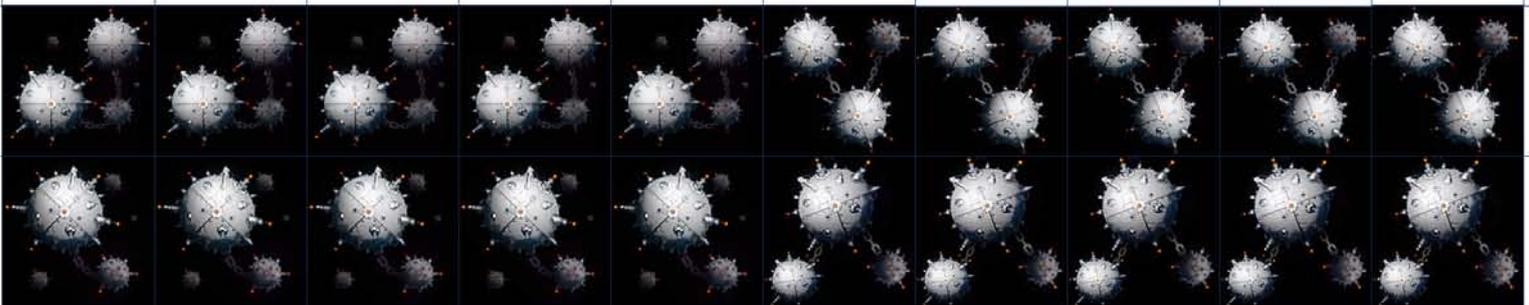
Botes de asalto Shark



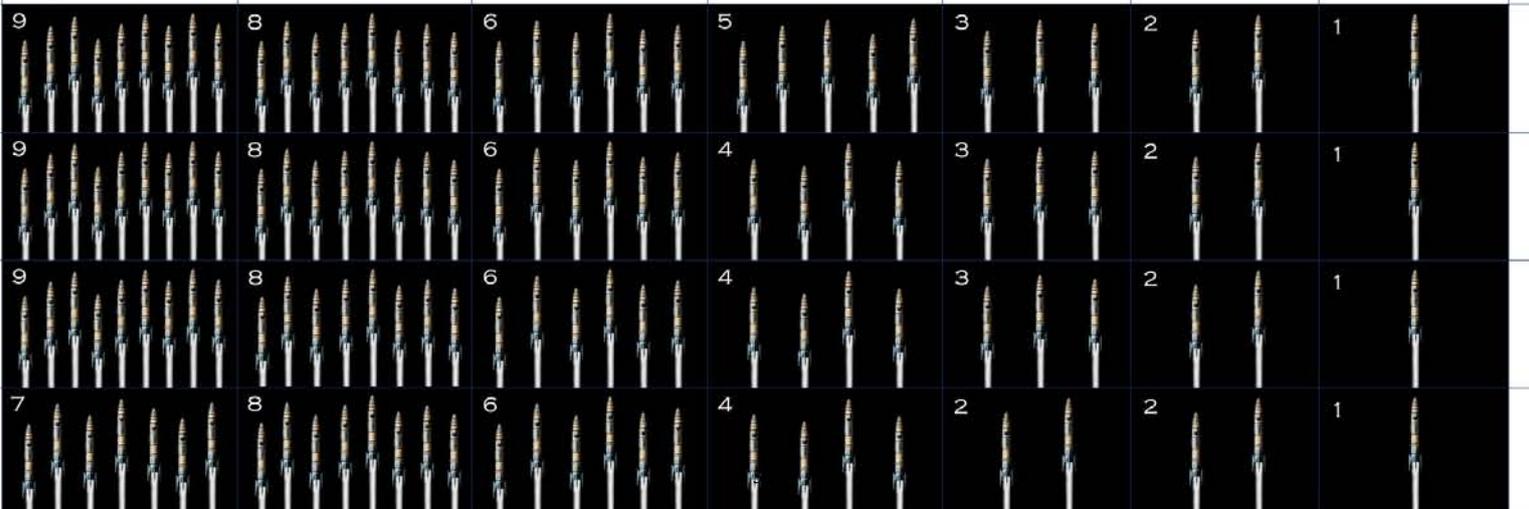
Torpederos Starhawk



Minas



Torpedos



THE FORGE - ORKS

FIGHTA BOMMAS



FIGHTAS AND BOMMAS (unofficial)



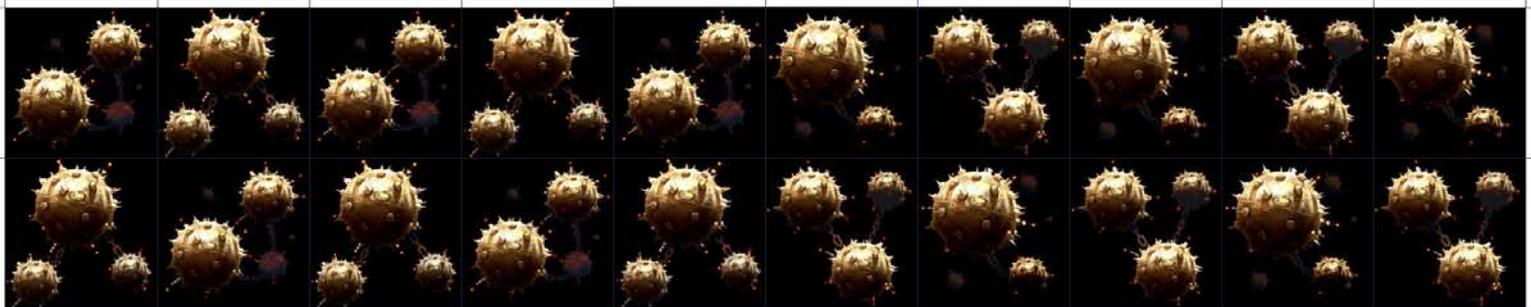
ASSAULT BOATZ



TORPEDO BOMMAS



MINEZ



TORPEDOZ

