

## The brief history of humanity

Over the course of history, humans looked up to the stars, hoping to reach them one day. None of them, however, thought that reaching the stars would be not merely a dream achieved, but the only way to save humanity.

But that was exactly how it went.

By the end of the 24th century, Earth's population numbered over 20 billion human beings. The biosphere struggled to support the terrible amount, despite the oceanic expansion. What was left of forests and jungles - mostly those in Siberia and the Amazon Basin - were under the strictest UN control as the most important oxygen recyclers on the planet; the oceanic expansion was also artificially slowed to preserve the plankton phyto-bacteria responsible for half the oxygen.

Like most cities, Moscow had grown enormously, almost merging with Saint-Petersburg and housing about 80 million. The Sol system colonization was an ongoing success, with multiple millions inhabiting Mars and Venus - yet this was still not enough to solve the issue of overpopulation.

The solution was found in an unexpected place. In year 2398, an unknown object, shattered into pieces, was discovered by foresters patrolling the Siberian taiga preserves near the Podkamennaya Tunguska river. The strange item, very old and undeniably nonfunctional, had been transferred to the scientific organizations. Few remembered the 1908 Tunguska incident; however, the very first research results have proven the object to have an extraterrestrial origin.

A thorough examination had yielded phenomenal results: the "Tunguska meteor" happened to be an alien ship engine component. Reverse-engineered, it gave a colossal push to Earth understanding of physics; antigravity, force fields, and - most importantly - a surprisingly simple and cheap way of FTL travel, were now in the humanity's hands.

The dream of reaching the stars came true.

The first experimental ships were quite unreliable; the jumps so inaccurate that it was possible to reemerge in hundreds of lightyears from the initial target. Most scouting missions of the early waves never returned, having most likely had their energy reserves depleted by frantic attempts to get back home, every single one of them unsuccessful.

Creating the hyperspace beacon net (years 2420-2440) was the first step of galactic exploration; unmanned probes, intended to reemerge somewhere far away and transmit signals, became the basis for manned ship triangulation.

Mass expansion started in 2437, with UN transformed into the United Government of Earth, and former militaries into the Scouting Corps - a half-military, half-scientific organization with the mission to discover and study habitable planets. Colony transports, each carrying 70-80 cold-sleeping thousand humans of similar nations and languages, followed the scouts; the relatively inexpensive nature of FTL ships allowed Earth to launch about 500 such "passenger ships" yearly.

Over the following 500 years, the human population of Earth became four times smaller, with hundreds of thousands of planets turned into new homes for millions of ex-earthars. With centuries passing, the colonies were gradually stopping to communicate with the ancestral planet; despite the beacons being a cheap and reliable communication solution, it was far from everyone who wanted to be reminded of their past. There were even instances of planetary governments disabling their own beacons to start their lives and histories from scratch - and the UGE, of course, had neither the ability nor the desire to monitor thousands of worlds and beacons themselves.

And the humanity has turned into a patchwork, with every piece unlike its neighbours.

In year 2862, the first crisis occurred, dividing the humanity further. Hundreds of years of exploration had turned the Scouting Corps from an amorphous international amalgamation into a self-sustaining

organization. Seeing the failure of the UGE to control the expansion, the Corps leaders decided to separate themselves from the rest of civilization; joined by their relatives and anyone willing, they took a remote star cluster on the outer rim of inhabited space for themselves and turned all neighbouring beacons off. The UGE couldn't do anything with such a desertion (and didn't try too hard anyway); a desertion that costed them hundreds of best scout ships and crews - and therefore the ability to inspect and keep most beacons in check.

And in deep space, even the most reliable devices eventually cease to function.

In an attempt to restore control over the colonies, the rulers of Earth ordered to develop an entirely new interstellar drive with utmost haste.

According to theory, it was entirely possible to build an engine able to move a whole planet. The benefits seemed obvious: why build thousands of FTL ships, if you can instead move Earth itself to a suitable world and colonize it directly? Such a "Traveling Earth" would even prove itself the master of the galaxy once more - imagine a remote corner, not supporting beacons and not paying taxes for three or four hundred years, to suddenly have Earth with all its space forces appear in!

It took almost a century to build a planet-scale FTL drive; the road included testing the tech on Mars, Venus, and several Jupiter satellites to change their orbits and terraform them - and devoting all resources to it, putting all other colonization attempts to an end (and it's not like the Scouting Corps could've been replaced anyway).

Year 2960. The long-awaited day of the launch of Earth has come.  
With a press of the button, Earth has disappeared from the Sol system...

...and was nowhere else in the galaxy to be found.

Following the initial shock, various explanations appeared. Some said that Earth was destroyed in a drive malfunction; some said that it was transported into a parallel universe; some said that it was just lost somewhere in the unknown space, like the beaconless scouts of old. None of these hypotheses were proved, there was now only the fact - the ancestral planet of all humans was no more. With generations, Old Earth became a legend - and Mars and Venus, not having the resources to support Sol beacons, left them to stop working.

From that moment, the entire Sol system was now off-limits for the rest of humanity.

Year 3001 A.D. The Human Dominion - the entire space inhabited by them - has no center, no unifying force.

Earth has disappeared, Sol is unreachable, the Scouting Corps have isolated themselves long ago, and there are still no known nonhuman civilizations, so you can't even unite against the xenos.

As it commonly happens, an absence of reasons to unite became a reason to argue. Small-scale wars were roaring all over the Dominion - "small-scale" in terms of the entire galaxy, of course; continents were turned into radioactive glass lakes, planets were made hostile to all life. Empires, federations, reichs appeared and disappeared over the same centuries during which the hyperbeacons decayed, making interstellar communications less... and less... and less reliable.



Most colonies have stopped communicating and traveling to other planets, and, as it is known, isolation always leads to regress.

Almost the entire fourth millennium (about 3050-3990) is considered to be Dominion-wide Dark Ages of sorts, with thousands of planets retreating to quasi-medieval ways of life, swords and horse- or local fauna-drawn plowshares existing alongside hypercomms and plasma weaponry. With the beacons dilapidated, interstellar trade was a risky endeavour - with ships, like during the old times again, disappearing with no trace. The most civilized planets, buying rare metals and other resources for "barbarians" in exchange for ready-made high-tech, were the first to feel the impact of the issue.

On year 3998, twenty-four most advanced planets of the Dominion decided to form the Trade League, aiming to support and possibly restore what was left of the interstellar travel. The League created a standing repair fleet, so that every willing planet in its sphere of influence (about a million cubic parsecs) could ask to repair its beacons.

Of course, the services provided by the League were not free. The League members got double benefit from such deals - by restoring access to resource planets for their own merchants, and by charging these very planets for that! Many planets asking the League to help soon found themselves in what amounted to bondage, resulting in armed conflicts.

Nonetheless, such "cooperation" was fruitful to an extent; the League stopped the inhabited space from fracturing once again and reminded its inhabitants that they were not, in fact, alone in this galaxy.

In 70 years after the League was formed, representatives of developed planets met once again to revise the treaties - it now was more than a hundred worlds as full-fledged League members, with more than a third of the entire Dominion interconnected with the League-restored beacons. There was, however, a side effect to the booming trade - piracy; it was not unknown for self-styled "isolated" planets to keep an unregistered beacon and sustain themselves with plunder; small yet well-armed ships ambushing League caravans.

A reasonable response to the threat of piracy was to create a united fleet, tasked with peacekeeping duties within League space - including finding and neutralizing pirate beacons, if not the pirate havens themselves. The renewed agreement incorporated clauses for cooperation in case of external treats; the

alliance was no longer purely trade-focused anymore, and on year 4102, the League was renamed into the Trade Protectorate Treaty, with the last word omitted in common parlance.

Two hundred years of rule made the positions of a hundred planets - the full members of the Treaty - much stronger, yet the relationships of that hundred and the unnamed thousands were still strained. Many underdeveloped worlds found themselves to be mere suppliers of raw materials for the Golden Hundred, the beacon tariffs grew higher and higher, and the fact that the Protectorate makes the backwards planets to pay for trade lines serving the Protectorate's own enrichment was a secret to none.

The planets started to refuse the services, thirsting for independence even at the cost of isolation - especially that the centuries of the Protectorate's rule meant that most planets could now support the beacons on their own. Moreso, they started organizing their own trade fleets, threatening the monopoly of the Golden Hundred.

Years 4360-4370 saw the beginning of Trade Wars (later dubbed Pre-Empire Military Conflicts). Not being able to use its standing military fleet against the separatists (who weren't in any breach of any actual law by doing what they did), the Protectorate found another option - inspiring and sponsoring "independent" militaries who could attack the unruly planets, allowing the Protectorate to racket them. A century of such treatment turned the situation into a powder keg: by year 4450, thousands of Dominion planets were ready and willing to rise up in arms against the Golden Hundred's predatory policies; underground unions and alliances were formed to prepare for the rebellion.

That's when a third side appeared.

On year 4451, about 30 Protectorate-controlled inhabited systems in the Ursa Major cluster were attacked by hundreds of well-armed ships, with hundreds of thousands of identical human men acting as planetary invasion troops.

This was the Dominion's first encounter with the Polaris Empire.

No one in the Dominion had a hint on how did the Scout Corps, who had previously isolated themselves for 1600 years, turn into a fearsome Empire; but it was absolutely true that they preserved and enhanced the old tech, that they knew the "secret" Protectorate beacon passcodes, and that they prepared the Protectorate space for an invasion by seeding it with beacons of their own.

During the First Wave of Invasion (years 4451-4461), the Empire triumphed, and the Protectorate panicked - having had controlled approximately eight thousand systems, it lost three thousands to the ten years of the Empire's victorious march.

Many separatists initially welcome the Empire in hopes that it would end the age of the Golden Hundred's yoke. Very soon, their hopes were dashed, as the supposed cure turned out to be much worse than the presumed disease. The Empire preached the belief of an ideal human - a warrior human; with the role prepared for the rest being that of slaves.

During the initial years of the war, the Protectorate was effectively unable to foster any resistance due to its rather loose structure and internal conflicts. It took the Second Wave (years 4478-4495) to end as another imperial victory for the Protectorate leaders to invent a method to strike back.

More than five thousand systems in the galactic north were now under the Emperor's control. To counteract that, the Protectorate, unused to direct action, created the institute of Advisors - agents able to infiltrate the imperial planets and organize insurrections from within. Numerous smugglers, grown much stronger during the Trade Wars, offered their services in arming the rebellions as well. On year 4522, when the Third Wave started, more than a thousand planets of the Empire rose up in flames, the riots guided and supported by Protectorate advisors. The Empire now had to fight a war on a thousand fronts, and even the biggest clone soldier factories weren't intended to replenish losses of a scale inevitable for such a war - or, rather, hundreds of guerrilla wars.

Furthermore, this was the first time when the Empire met fierce resistance on the planets singled out for conquest. Mercenaries, Trade Wars veterans, and Protectorate cyberinfantry fought with fury and

tenacity. Robots, unable to fear death, perished by hundreds, but did not back down. Thousands of beacon probes were sent into imperial space, allowing Protectorate special forces to strike deep and destroy numerous strategically important targets, including two of the largest biofactories. The invasion started to choke, and internal intrigues did not help.

The last, the most desperate, effort of the Empire was the assault of the city-planet of Velian (years 4527-4528), which got to a stalemate. Soon, the Third Wave was to end due to certain events.

Early on year 4528, the Imperial Legion Fleet infiltrated the Protectorate space and, with one precise blow, struck its enemy into the very heart. It was the Star Rapier, a secret weapon of the Empire; the star orbited by Jamiria, one of the oldest Protectorate planets, has suddenly gone supernova, seemingly without a reason, and the entire system with thousands of years of history had been burned into nothingness over the course of a couple hours. At the same time, the Emperor has issued an ultimatum to the entire Dominion; accept his rule, or else.

Numerous worlds were seized by fear.

The Protectorate had an ace in their sleeve as well.

During the last century, Protectorate scientists have managed to reestablish communications with Earth; as it turned out, Earth was neither destroyed nor sent somewhere far, but shifted out of phase, making it into a ghost planet of sorts. Its researchers tried for many centuries to invent a way to bring Earth back into phase and were eager to cooperate with the Protectorate, sharing long-lost technologies with their newfound allies. Among these technologies was a method for beaconless large-body FTL travel.

This tech became the basis for the Cloud - an immense force-field-held conglomeration of microscopic machines able to gather energy to be released in a singular burst later. Combat-ready, the Cloud's volume was that of an average asteroid - with much less mass, but with the ability to destroy an entire planet with its energy shot.

In a month after the system of Jamiria had been destroyed with the Star Rapier, the Cloud appeared on the orbit of Polaris Prime, the Empire's capital world. With a singular strike, the planet's nearest moon was shattered into asteroids; only the excellent counterspace defenses of the capital prevented it from being made into a crater-covered desert, yet victims still numbered in the millions. Now, it was the Empire fearing total annihilation.

After exchanging such blows, it was clear that a war of such totality can make the entire Dominion into a space hell and destroy the spacefaring civilization. Based on that, the two sides have made an unofficial pact not to oppose each other directly from now on - the Vigilant Peace, a peace treaty in name only.

The only actual treaty was made regarding the city-planet of Velian, and it was still war-torn until the news reached it; with advisor Pyriel relentlessly pursuing Lord Cross and clashing seven times, none of them able to strike the foe down once and for all.

The meeting of Protectorate and Empire ambassadors on the planet of Locust-D made Velian into a neutral planet, a transit point for trade between the planets of the sides.

Year 4530 A.D., also known as year 532 since the creation of the League.

The Empire still conquers planets of the Dominion, using conventional weaponry.

The Protectorate still supports rebellions and guerrillas, but doesn't use the Cloud either.

A galactic stalemate.

## The cosmography of the Human Dominion

The Human Dominion can be imagined as a misshapen sphere with the Sol system at its center. During the great expansion, humanity was spreading out randomly in all directions from Sol, colonizing the first fitting planet on their way. Many planets colonized in such fashion weren't even properly surveyed; because of this, many human settlements were founded on planets where no sane man would willingly choose to serve as a home for his children. Numerous colony transports simply vanished (such occurrences being especially common before the beacon probes were made into a standard procedure), with their fates unknown.

Within the Dominion, there are still tales of the Star Tulip, a Netherlands-backed colony ship that had launched from Old Earth over two thousand years ago. Protectorate archives keep no less than a hundred accounts of people encountering this vessel; some even claim to have boarded it personally, although their reports are not to be trusted due to the fact that all known "boarders" returned unhinged from their presumed visit to the ghost ship.

You can probably guess what moniker does this apparition have among the Dominion spacers.

The coordinate system accepted within the Dominion uses the Sun as the starting point. Each point within the Dominion can have its position expressed via three numbers: galactic equator angle, galactic equator elevation angle, and distance to the Sun in parsecs.

The Dominion, when imagined as a sphere, has a radius of approximately 350 parsecs (about 1000-1200 lightyears). Of course, not every planetary system within this sphere is inhabited - there are vast unsettled spaces within. Many stars don't have any planets orbiting them (such as Vega); planets that orbit dim red dwarf stars (Proxima Centauri, Barnard's Star) are mere clumps of dirty ice, cold as space itself. There might be unregistered settlements as well, the ones forgotten over the thousands of years that passed since the original beacon malfunctions. It's quite possible that people of tens of planets have long forgotten that there might be other humans living high in the skies.

The Polaris Empire lies outside of the sphere, about 20 parsecs away from its outer border. The original imperial worlds belong to a tight cluster of systems orbiting Sol-like stars, no more than one parsec away from each other. As a result of the three Waves of Invasion, a wide Empire-occupied zone has formed in the Dominion; the Empire planet closest to the Sun is about 200 parsecs (approximately 650 lightyears) away from it.

Historically, most of the Elder Planets of the Protectorate (the Golden Hundred) are on the opposite side of the galaxy, but there are exceptions. Such is the world of Blood, which is now bordering the Empire and acts as a Protectorate outpost. The Empire has tried to conquer Blood over thirty times - with no success; the fact is that Blood is also a center of worship, of the cult of Khorai the war-god, one of the few cults popular all over the Dominion. Numerous followers of that Khorai godling go to Blood in order to protect it from the "blasphemers". Previously a relatively minor member of the Trade Protectorate Treaty, Blood has rose in importance greatly. It's no wonder that it now also houses the main forces of Protectorate starfleets.

## **Political structure of the Protectorate and the Empire**

The Trade Protectorate Treaty resembles a confederation of sorts. The Elder Planets - the Golden Hundred, or, more precisely, 112 of them - send their representatives to form the Upper Chamber of the Protectorate Parliament. The rest of planets covered by Protectorate beacon nets have their representatives in the Lower Chamber, with one Upper Chamber vote being equal to twenty-five Lower Chamber votes.

The supreme executive body of the Protectorate is the Board, composed of parliament-elected Masters, each responsible for his own field of policies. The Board has under its authority the united army of the Protectorate, the Advisor Corps, the Mercenary Hall, the Tax Chamber, and Trade Supervision.

The Empire is an authoritarian state, with the Emperor being the supreme executive, legislative, and judicial power, the most indisputable authority, God's steward, and the official ruler of the entire universe. His Word is Law. The Emperor does not have a name; if succession takes place, ordinary citizens never know of it.

Below the Emperor is the Council of Lords, a collegial body of imperial military aristocrats entirely dissimilar to the Parliament of the Protectorate; intrigue and conspiracies flourish in there, with each lord wishing to move one step closer to the throne while unseating (and preferably beheading) any rivals. The highest award is the Emperor's own throne, as, when he dies, a new one is chosen by the lords and from among the lords, too.

The General Staff, the Financial Tribunal, and the Colonial Office all report directly to the Emperor himself, and it is by his hand that all the officials and officers are appointed. Most of time, of course, it takes him no more than to sign the decrees carefully prepared by His Majesty's Chancellery...

## A comparison of army structures of the Protectorate and the Empire

Despite the difference of their ends and means regarding military conflicts, the army structures of the Polaris Empire and the Trade Protectorate Treaty are similar in many regards. Infantry, the Queen of Battle, still forms the foundation of both militaries, despite the theorists' claims of it being bound to become obsolete - this isn't going to happen as long as it is not total annihilation the armies pursue, but conquest.

The main branch of imperial armed forces is the line Armored Infantry - the result of prolonged genetic, educational, and medical research. The line infantrymen are not fully human; beginning their existences within the cloning machines of imperial military bases, they are meticulously culled, with specimens found subpar eliminated without remorse. Educated in the basics of warcraft, the clones receive medical augmentations: comm and tracking devices, hormonal control microsensors, and neurological implants intended to, when required, inject painkillers and stimulants transforming the trooper into a fearless, unwavering berserker. Fully prepared, the clones enter the line regiments.

The Protectorate uses a different approach concerning infantry units. As the Protectorate has to defend more frequently than it conducts offensives, its strategists and politicians have devised the concept of "local armies". On planets where a strong resistance to possible imperial incursions is desired, local militia units are formed, equipped with Protectorate gear. In the Protectorate General Staff parlance, such militia divisions are commonly referred to as "scythemen". They're often helped by officers tasked with control and general command duties; each Protectorate embassy has a military representative whose tasks include raising such regiments in times of need.

A state must also have assault forces. The Polaris Empire uses regiments of human drop troops in such a role; their prolonged training makes them into soldiers as excellent as clones, but their fully human minds allow them to solve tasks much more sophisticated. The drop troops' job is to land onto planets and hold the dropsites, allowing the line units to arrive later and build on the initial success.

Protectorate assault forces consist of cyberinfantry able not only to make the initial drop, but to conquer the entire planet by themselves too. Each unit is commanded by a human officer, using an implant to directly communicate with his subordinates. While somewhat inert and cognitively limited, the cybers are superior to imperial lines and drop troops in many other respects: easier to keep supplied, better at shooting, and much harder to disable due to titanium plating many times more durable than imperial body armor.

The next level of military organization is special forces. The Empire possesses units intended to reinforce the main strikeforces and to occupy conquered planets: the forces of the Financial Tribunal, also known as tribunators, resemble military police. They fight alongside the clone infantry and drop regiments, but their main strength is neither numbers nor fanaticism - it is their wide arsenal of offensive and defensive wargear and vehicles.

The Protectorate uses dedicated bases to raise specfor teams, tasked with supporting the main forces and sabotaging the enemy. Trained in all sorts of infiltration and stealth drops, specfor teams surgically strike at the opposing forces' positions and objects; they destroy bridges and missile installations, attack military towns and facilities deep behind enemy lines.

Of the seven known cases of tribunators and Protectorate specfor meeting in direct combat, four happened during imperial army landings and were won by tribunators. It is, however, known for certain that it was a specfor team who destroyed the main drop trooper training base in the 32nd sector, despite all the tribunators deployed to protect it...

Every army needs a commander. In the Empire, members of the Imperial Legion fulfill that role. Every legionary is a superb warrior and an outstanding strategist entrusted with the finest machines and huge armies of infantry, drop troopers, and tribunators. Legionaries rarely fight on foot, commonly opting for



powerful battle vehicles instead. Such warmachines are masterpieces of military technology, allowing their pilots to survive at the epicenter of a nuclear blast, destroy targets tens of kilometers away, and burn small cities to ashes. In addition to that, legionaries use similarly well-protected and well-armed personal spaceships for interplanetary travel.

Of course, legionaries are still vulnerable and mortal like any human; history keeps a number of cases when a legionary has been killed in action. However, defeating even a single legionary has always costed the enemy dearly. When the dictator of New Okinawa, instigated by Protectorate advisors, had suddenly attacked then-allied imperial forces, his armies managed to kill a legionary - losing more than two thousand soldiers when fighting him and as many again in the self-destruct blaze of the warmachine.

The only worthy competition for the legionaries are Protectorate advisors. Unlike their rivals, advisors do not rely on brute force; they are agents of influence, and their tools are bribes, blackmail, persuasion, and lies. Every rebellion on an imperial planet, every act of sabotage, every assassination of a person important for the Empire - there are advisors behind that.

Despite the fact that direct combat isn't their primary task, advisors are still excellent fighters; their bones house forcefield implants, useful both in offense and defense. Unlike a legionary's common appearance being that of an insane technician's nightmare, advisors are handsome and charismatic. Their trademark piece of equipment are silver-colored cloaks, which are parts of their forceshield protection as well; another testament to the Protectorate's higher tech opposed to the Empire's troop numbers and strength. Advisors have nonetheless fallen victims to the Empire many times, but at a great cost every time.

There's a semblance of a third force in the Empire-Protectorate confrontation: the Space Knights, a sect that has arisen at the very dawn of human expansion. While their earliest history is unknown, most researchers believe them to be descendants of independent space explorers. Seemingly fragmented, the Space Knights are actually a strong and monolithic organization. Powerful warriors, they have participated in almost every major war during the last thousand years; often at opposed sides, but never against each other. A distinctive feature of a knight is his monomolecular sword - a weapon of pure high-durability crystal cutting alloyed steels as easily as flesh. Both the Empire and the Protectorate have tried many times to uncover the secret behind these swords' manufacture, yet it remains a mystery; such a sword disintegrates upon its owner's death, and there was never a knight taken alive. The Knights are quite vindictive, and many officers both imperial and Protectorate have lost their lives after unsuccessful attempts to capture a knight.

Guided by motives known to nobody else, the knights participate in the great war on both sides; even the Empire, ever disdainful for mercenaries, accepts their services, as mere presence or absence of a knight can turn the tide of battle.

## Polaris: an attempted coup d'état during the First Wave of Invasion

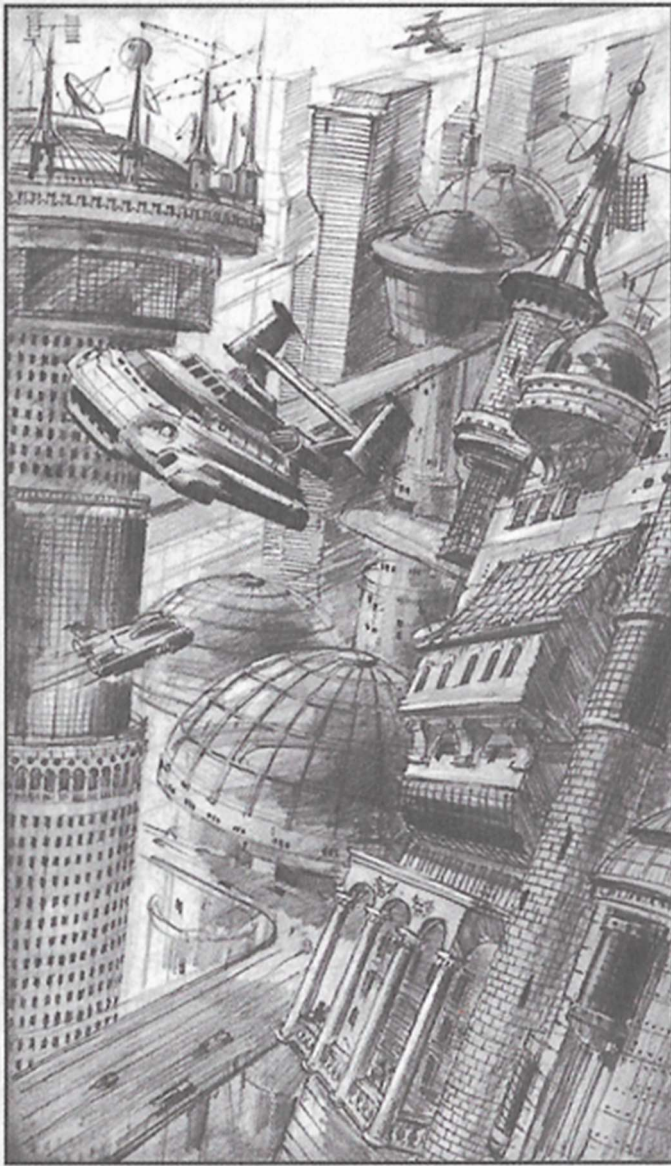


The essence of the conflict between the Emperor and the upper echelon of imperial officers was the difference of their views regarding the upcoming invasion into the Dominion Sphere. The Emperor believed for it to be time for his theory of superiority of imperial denizens over the rest of humanity to be proved in practice and, using his authority, ordered the invasion to begin.

On the other hand, certain senior members of the army command and the most influential imperial families pointed out that it couldn't be a proper time for conquest of such scale; not all barbarian worlds on the outer reaches, they said, were pacified yet - with the Emperor's finest troops waging war in the Dominion, the barbarians would surely seize the opportunity and strike at the imperial planets, now much less protected.

In truth, this was just an excuse; a long war of pacification, conducted prior to the First Wave, had left barbarians weakened and shattered into bickering factions, unable to threaten the Empire. The actual reason for the elites' opposition was the fact that the Emperor's family, disliked and envied by many already, would be elevated even more by a successful conquest, weakening their rivals' positions further. Such state of affairs had eventually led select officers to rebel against the current ruler.

It took the officers a long time to prepare the rebellion. One of them, a garrison commandant of the capital planet of Polaris Prime, used his position and half a year to replace regiments loyal to the Emperor with regiments loyal to him and his associates. By the moment the First Wave started, there were almost no Emperor-loyal forces on the planet.



As soon as the First Wave started, so started the rebellion; over 40 garrison regiments of Polaris revolted and rushed to take control of the capital city complex and the barracks. A comms disruption, caused by a traitor commandant, left the loyalists divided, then defeated one by one; a similar fate was shared by the Imperial Legion members who were at the capital at that time. In under twelve hours, the insurrection took the orbital elevator, the spaceport, and the command centers of orbital defense and long-distance strategic communications. The General Staff bunker was among the few objects not captured, yet it was rendered unable to participate as well; deprived of comms and blocked with directional explosives, the staff couldn't do anything but spectate. Having had taken most of the capital over, the rebels were preparing to storm the Imperial Palace.

The Palace was a giant complex measuring several hundred square kilometers, with its own security forces, power supply, and comms; however, the latter were useless. Several months prior to that, probes able to suppress interstellar communication were secretly launched into orbit - to be activated at the same time with the signal to start the revolt.

It was the security force that posed the greatest obstacle; the Palace Legion, the Emperor's own bodyguards, their numbers rivaling the planetary garrison and being only two times smaller than the rebelling army.

In 56 hours after the rebellion had started, the assault on the Palace began.





Wave after wave the attacking armies surged upon the Palace, while it responded with gun posts. Every wave, a part of the Palace's defenses was destroyed. In about a day, twelve regiments reinforced the rebels.

It was a critical moment of a section of the Palace's defenses falling when a third force entered the fray; not expected neither by the besiegers nor by the besieged, a strike targeted the rebels' rear. These were small groups of imperial troopers harassing the revolt's forces, preventing them from making a concentrated effort.

It was only long after the rebellion, during the investigation, that the unlikely savior's identity had been revealed. A week before the revolt began, a regiment had based itself temporarily on Polaris while in transit from the outer reaches; prior to that, it had suffered several defeats from the barbarians, resulting in heavy losses. It was commanded by Alexey Dolgorukiy, a young colonel, once a soldier of that very regiment. Scheduled to receive reinforcements and vehicles at Claus-7, an imperial drop troops training base, it soon found itself stuck at Polaris due to the garrison commandant's sabotage. Having had themselves stationed in barracks near the spaceport, the drop troops enjoyed a rest from clashes against barbarians for seven days. On the eighth day, everything went awry; first they were preparing to board the transports heading away, but then a rebel regiment appeared, capturing the spaceport.



Initially surprised, the troopers pulled themselves together. Spreading his regiment out and engaging outnumbering line infantry units, Dolgorukiy used his personal comms channel to connect with the General Staff; the rebels, devoting the most effort to blocking interstellar signals, had forgotten about planetary communications. Before the bunker side of the channel fell to directed explosions, the Staff managed to get Dolgorukiy up to date, share a detailed plan of underground passages with him, and order him to stop the rebels from taking the Palace.

Understanding that any resistance without outside support would be futile, Dolgorukiy decided to find a way to tell the outplanet forces of Emperor-loyal Order lords about the situation. As all planetary transmitters were rendered useless, he assembled a team of most experienced drop troopers and spaceport technicians and ordered them to repurpose an orbital silencer into a transmitter instead, then use it to send a pre-recorded message, while the rest of his regiment was leaving the spaceport via the underground pathways.

His initial plan involved getting into the Palace and waiting for the response together with the Legion. It proved impossible, as the Palace was separated with impenetrable walls and defenses even underground, and therefore Dolgorukiy launched a guerrilla war in the attacking armies' rear.

For three days his soldiers distracted the besiegers' attention; three days that proved crucial. Before it could be possible for the rebels to capture the Palace and kill the Emperor, an assault fleet of three imperial lords who had withdrawn from the frontlines after receiving Dolgorukiy's report descended upon them. During the following seven days, with the help of more commanders arriving, the rebellion was crushed, with only a handful of participants able to escape.

It was about that time Helen Pyriel, now an ex-legionary, began her contacts with the Advisor Corps.

## Aleksey Dolgorukiy

Most members of the Imperial Order originate from the martial aristocracy families of the Polaris Empire; these generals form the Empire's core leadership. Still, some leaders began as soldiers, and Alexey Dolgorukiy is one such commander.

Dolgorukiy was born on the border planet of Tsargrad. Such worlds have a reputation for being frequently harried by the out-Empire barbarians of various sorts - descendants of Old Earth colonists, ex-imperial renegades, and ex-imperial genetic experiment failures known as nightstalkers; toughened by constant skirmishes, border planet populations serve as a natural source of recruits for the elite drop units.

Dolgorukiy's career began 45 years before the First Wave; in the 12th Light Battalion of the 8th Drop Regiment, where he was a soldier. During the assault on the planet of Nightmare, the informal capital of outer reach barbarians, his battalion's commander was killed in action; Dolgorukiy took command and brought his fellow soldiers through the encirclement with minimal losses. Following getting a field promotion shortly after, he led his battalion until the end of the punitive campaign.

After that, his career skyrocketed. He graduated from the Imperial Military College in absentia, becoming one of the few Imperial Army colonels not of noble birth. During the First Wave, Dolgorukiy did not participate in the actual invasion, as he unexpectedly found himself involved in a civil war within the Empire itself.

Taking advantage of the fact that most loyal regiments were busy fighting outside the metropolitan territory, a circle of high-ranking nobles attempted a coup; several regiments stationed on Polaris Prime, the capital planet, rebelled and marched towards the Imperial Palace. Despite the strength of the Emperor's personal guard, his life was in danger.

It was by fate alone that colonel Dolgorukiy, his regiment on its way to receive reinforcements, happened to be on Polaris Prime, completely disregarded by the unknowing plotters. As a result, it was his soldiers who played the decisive role in the suppression of the uprising; the Ribbon of the Imperial Order and the Emperor's own gratitude were his rewards.

During the Second Wave, Dolgorukiy fought at the spearhead of the assault on Protectorate worlds and proved himself to be an excellent frontline commander. While the most conservative lords of the Imperial Order claimed that such a low-born man cannot lead troops in full-scale warfare, Dolgorukiy broke the stereotype down - and simultaneously made many enemies among the generals; between the Second and Third waves, he survived several assassination attempts.

Dolgorukiy is acknowledged as a renowned specialist in the field of fighting numerically superior forces. He achieved that experience commanding patrol units in the outer reaches, repeatedly facing situations where his troops had to hold their positions against numerous foes, waiting for the reinforcements to arrive.

Dolgorukiy's most recognized success is the defense of the imperial base on the planet of Sera<sup>1</sup>; in addition to that, prior to the assault on Velian, Aleksey Dolgorukiy and his subordinate troops held their ground against the innumerable hordes of Protectorate scythemen and mercenaries for seven weeks.

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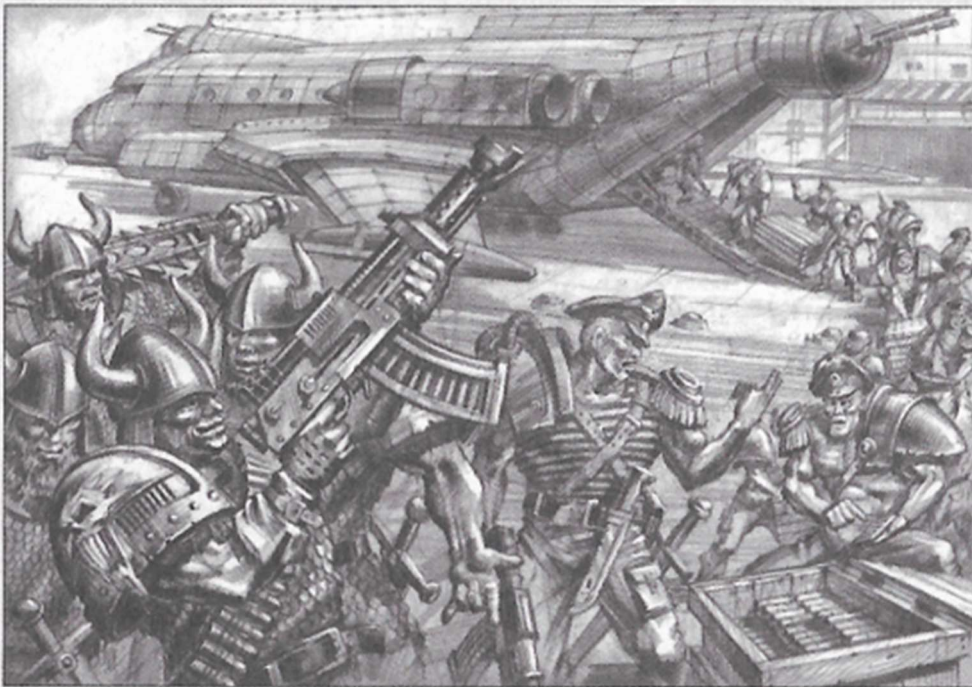
<sup>1</sup> Uncertain if this one needs transliteration or literal translation as "Sulfur".

## Report regarding the Felician Conflict (top secret, for Protectorate advisors only)

The planet of Felicia is located approximately 750 lightyears away from Earth. Colonized by a population coming from Canada, it has preserved the use of both English and French languages - and also the initial tech level, the ability to communicate with other planets, and its neighbouring beacon. Nonetheless, there's more to it than meets the eye; the planet's proximity to the Dust Zone is a huge problem for the Felicians.

The Dust Zone is a breeding ground for piracy and banditry; unfortunately for many, a lot of Protectorate trade routes run very close to it. Local planetary forces, coalitions, and even Protectorate punitive fleets attempted to put an end to piracy many times, to no avail.

Within the Dust Zone, there are several stars with planetary systems; their populations' cultures are very similar, as all of them ultimately originate from a single ship. At the middle of the first half of the Great Expansion, the USA government decided to get rid of the numerous convicts flooding the prisons. Half a million inmates were loaded onto a colony ship, set out for a planet discovered recently; one rich in resources, but extremely difficult to colonize due to its unstable crust and atmospheric conditions changing far too often.



A mutiny set the ship off-course. After drifting for three years, it crashed onto a planet orbiting the largest star of the Dust Zone, with none of the crew and only a tenth of the "passengers" surviving. In 10-12 generations, the population, having had progressed from its primitive form back into space, unsurprisingly (taking its origin into account) turned into the Dominion's pirate center.

With many trade routes running around and through the Dust Zone, human flotsam from the entire Dominion started accumulating. The planet which the ship had crashed on was dubbed Tortuga, honoring the Old Earth pirate haven of the same name; but it wasn't the only planet. Over time, more than three billions inhabited half a hundred of Dust Zone planets.

Felician trade vessels were constantly attacked by pirates, but this wasn't the reason for a catastrophe. As it usually happens, two languages, two nations, and two religions resulted in a civil war - a war going on for over 100 years with short pauses, later dubbed the Hundred Years' War. The warring sides, fortunately for their descendants, did not use nuclear weapons; biological weaponry, however, was widespread. By the end of the century, the overall planetary population was forty times smaller - and this wasn't the worst thing to come.



A combat virus mutated and received two new characteristics: it stopped being vulnerable to known treatment methods, and it started targeting males and males only. Five years after the war, men of Felicia went almost extinct, and birth rates plummeted, threatening the whole civilization with extinction as well. At the same time, gravitational storms around the Dust Zone made interstellar travel to and from Felicia impossible for 55 years, leaving the planet to try to survive on its own.



The few surviving males gained immense authority; men were now ruling the remnants of civilization, while women, by necessity, were assuming the hardest and most dangerous roles; army, construction, restoration of the destroyed world. After a while, the entire planet was united under the rule of the King of Felicia.

In approximately 200 years after the war ended, birth rates returned to normal. The population grew, the males were common once again, but the traditions persisted; women still comprised 97% of army, police, spacefleet, and similar organizations' personnel. Meanwhile, it was always a king ruling the planet, never a queen; introducing elections later on did not change that either. Such was the state of the planet by the start of the Second Wave.

Based on experience of the First Wave, the imperial high command agreed that it was useful to conduct sabotage within Dominion societies to destabilize planets planned for conquest (more on that in lord-admiral Corigan's report for the General Staff). The Empire started supplying pirates and smugglers with money and weaponry so they could serve as agents of chaos, paving the road for the main forces. Almost all pirate leaders of the Dust Zone accepted such terms; with the Empire crossing the borders and starting full-scale warfare, hundreds of small pirate armies lashed out at the less-defended Dominion planets. Felicia was one of such worlds.

The assault on Felicia was commanded by Markus the Three-Eyed, so nicknamed for the artificial eye implanted at the center of his forehead. Being a superb strategist and the oldest of the Dust Zone pirate lords, he maneuvered to his great tactical advantage. The target for his attack was Siamia, the capital city of Felicia; the richest city - and the most delicious morsel for every star pirate.



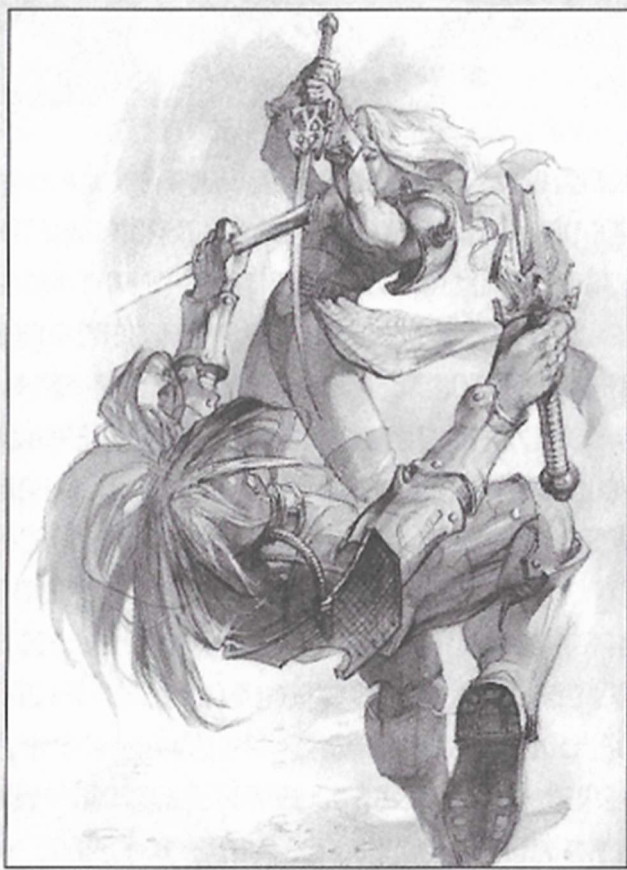


Hundreds of small pirate gangs disembarked all over the planet, rampaging and plundering, distracting the army and police. The armed forces took the bait and separated, trying to hunt the pirates down and restore order. In the meantime, Markus' main units landed in the Round Valley - an enormous stone-walled depression in the center of the Grey Alps, a mountain chain in the north. A direct path led to Siamia from the Round Valley, with only a tiny garrison in the pirate horde's way.

Catherine des Bois, the garrison's commander, ordered it to prepare for battle. By the time Tortugans reached the garrison, the planetary general staff figured out that they got tricked by the pirates and began to reassemble the army into larger units, but none of them could arrive to Siamia before Markus; the only hope was that des Bois' soldiers could hold for at least a day.

For thirty hours, the squad endured the assault of an army a hundred times larger; a 200-soldier-strong garrison reduced to 30, half of these wounded, too. Alexander Bricks, a special forces sniper and the only man in the unit, was among the severely injured.

A military transport helicopter that arrived on the second day of fighting to evacuate the wounded found itself in the thick of the battle; the fortifications were done for, with the pirates surging inside. The extra firepower from the copter still couldn't allow for everyone to be evacuated; a suicidal counterattack by des Bois bought enough time only for the thirteen wounded, Bricks included, to get on board and leave.



The Tortugans breached the initial obstacle barring the way to the city, but precious time had been lost along with the tactical advantage provided by it; three regiments of planetary guard were now denying Markus passage, with three more approaching the capital from the north and south.

A grandiose battle played out on the plains of Svinbick<sup>2</sup>, thirty kilometers away from Siamia. Markus rushed to the south, into the capital, knowing that it would be harder to dislodge his forces were they to take the city; however, luck was not on the Tortugans' side. Another planetary guard regiment joined from the east, and city militia dealt the pirates a blow from the west. Captain-admiral Carrie struck Markus down in personal combat, sowing panic among the pirate army. Having had broken through the barrier at the Grey Alps, they fled to their ships, hoping to escape and save their lives. They did not succeed.

Twenty airplanes belonging to Felician airforce launched from a base north of the Grey Alps, carrying on board a drop regiment ready to join the battle at Svinbick; following Markus' death and the pirates' flight, the plans changed. The planes turned back north; as the pirates were boarding their ships, paratroopers hit their very heads, but did not win the ensuing skirmish and were forced to retreat to the caves at the south of the Round Valley.

Units led by captain-admiral Carrie run the pirates down, ready to destroy them all; but a pirate captain from among Markus' followers, his name not preserved by history, shown himself to be a cold-headed and capable warlord. He arranged his landing cutters across the ravine and used their weapons to hold the Felician advance down long enough as to move a ship and destroy the canyon walls with its guns. The Tortugans boarded their vessels and took off for the Dust Zone, decisively defeated.

Meanwhile, the 12th Strike Fleet of the Empire arrived to the planet, aiming to conquer it; along with it, four Whale-class landers, each carrying an entire division of line infantry, and a drop regiment was ready to assault. The ground and space forces of Felicia, however, were already warmed up; almost all imperial landing boats were shot down in the atmosphere, the few units reaching the surface utterly

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<sup>2</sup> Whether this is a reference, and what its intended language of origin is supposed to be, is unknown; left transliterated for now.

destroyed in the absence of orbital support, despite fighting desperately.

On the orbit, bombers of the Felician spacefleet torpedoed eight Empire destroyers, leaving the capital ships unescorted. Moreso, the fleet of the neighbouring planet of Gomel, reinforced with the 75th Rapid Response Squadron of the Protectorate, arrived at the height of the battle. Acting in concert, the allied fleets destroyed every Whale-class vessel and *General Rommel*, the flag first-class battleship; the remnants of the 12th Strike shamefully escaped, hiding in subspace.

So ended the invasion on Felicia. After the Third Wave, which spared Felicia, it became one of the border systems between the Protectorate and the Empire.

## Markus the Three-Eyed



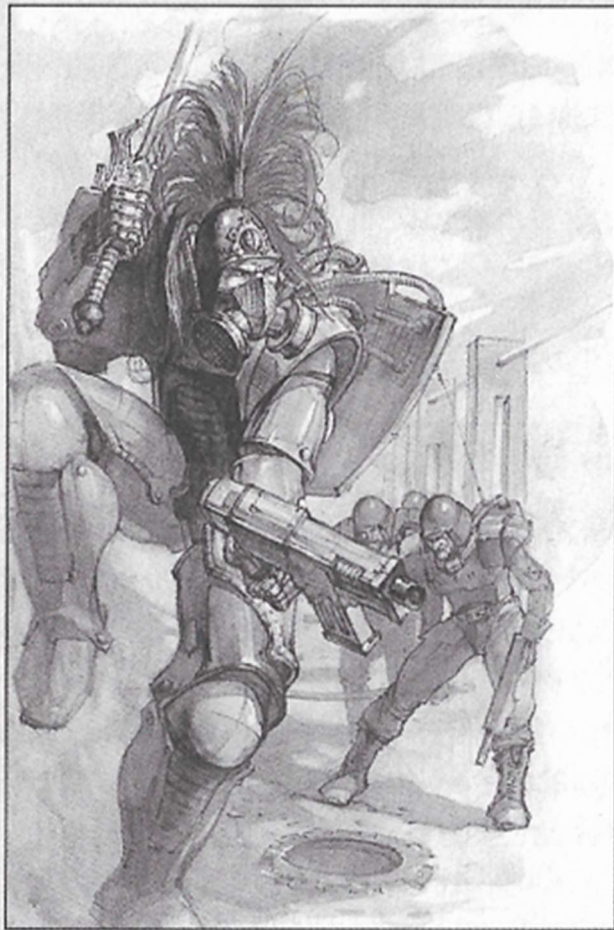
No one knows how did he survive.  
Thousands witnessed him fall, cut in two by the sword of captain-admiral Carrie.  
Nonetheless, he returned.

The first mentions of the fact that Markus the Three-Eyed, the legendary pirate and imperial mercenary, did not die, appeared during the first ten years following the end of the Third Wave. At first, no one in the Protectorate wanted to believe the reports from smugglers and traders, repeating from time to time. Eventually, rumors became truth.

Markus the Three-Eyed had somehow cheated death; a free pirate admiral transformed into an imperial warlord. Existing accounts of his current appearance might allow to make certain assumptions on the nature of his survival.

There are records of pirates returning to Felicia for a short time almost immediately after the battle; of a small band of well-armed and well-prepared cutthroats landing on the plains on Svinbick near the battlefield and crushing a low-strength militia unit, but leaving the planet several hours after that, accomplishing nothing obvious.

One can only guess how did Markus achieve such loyalty in his men - and how did they find his body. It also remains a mystery as to why did the Empire agree to revive such an unruly man and how did they win his loyalty. The fact remains: twelve years after the Third Wave, Markus is infamous for ruthlessly enforcing the law on the Empire on conquered worlds.



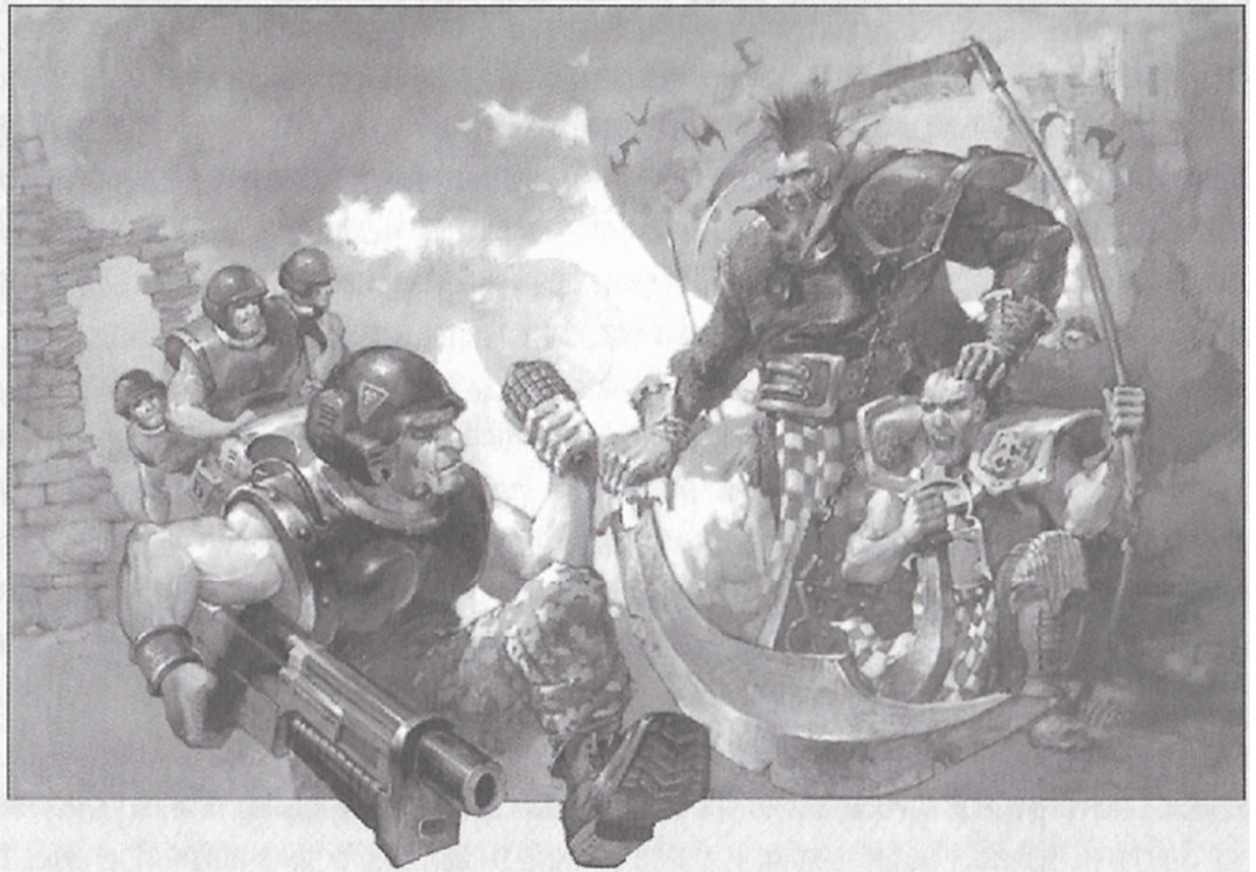
Even before his "first death", Markus' appearance has been making an unpleasant impression, to say the least; following his revival at imperial labs, his look is plainly horrid. A mask of titanium, utterly devoid of emotion, replaces his face, almost completely burnt at Svinbick; only the eyes remain, and even they make an impression of vestiges compared to the one mounted at his forehead. With his body fully encased in a suit of armor more aptly described as a sarcophagus, it is impossible to tell how much (or little) human he is now.

His modus operandi remains mostly unchanged from the rogue times. He commands the largest pirate squadron in service of the Empire, his army composed not only of humans, but of nightstalkers, a folk from outside the Dominion, as well. These creatures are descendants of the victims of early genetic experiments of the Empire conducted on humans. Nightstalkers are a vicious and belligerent people; before Markus, no one has managed to subordinate them. The reason is that they are absolutely unhinged, genuinely enjoying slaughter and destruction; for a long time, the Empire's policy on them has been that of an extermination war. It is unknown how has Markus managed to appeal to the nightstalkers, yet, under his leadership and with the Empire's money, they do indeed raid Dominion and Protectorate worlds.

Over twelve years, Markus has fought on more than fifteen planets, with many lifeless bodies remaining on each battlefield. It has been him commanding the imperial forces during the Battle in the Void: the fight for the space station of Thargonodrim, orbiting its namesake world; the fight resulting in the station falling and the planet shattering into many shards.



## The Battle in the Void



At the far south of the Human Dominion lies an unassuming planet under the name of Thargonodrim. It's uninhabited, and it has been uninhabited for the entire time humanity knows of it. Several attempts to colonize it were made; its climate neither too friendly nor openly hostile, it seemed humans could live there.

However, every time something wrong was happening. One time, a navigation error led a colony ship to be vaporised in the corona of Thargonodrim's sun. In a hundred years, another settlement seemed successful, yet it died out fifty years after without any known causes. For some time, Thargonodrim was regarded to be a cursed world; this, too, was forgotten, as the planet was far away from the main trade routes, its region rarely visited.

Everything changed after a smuggler ship passing by had discovered a surely artificial object of enormous size, orbiting the planet. The smuggler shared the find with his acquaintance within the Protectorate Admiralty; later, information and pictures found their way to the tables of the highest-ranking Protectorate officials, causing unhealthy levels of activity. A grand fleet was assembled in absolute secrecy and launched to reach Thargonodrim. Such an inadequate reaction piqued the Empire's interest, imperial intelligence gathering all possible data to learn the reasons for such actions on the Protectorate's side.

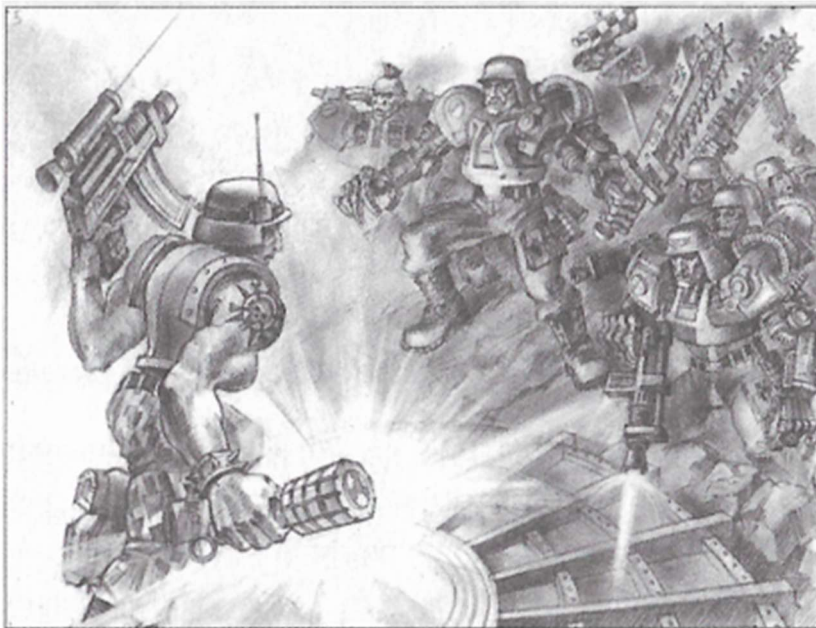
Several sources at once reported that the Protectorate has the basis to believe the huge station to be a guest from the future and to link that to the mystery of Old Earth's disappearance. Such knowledge, however imprecise and scarce, was enough for the Empire to respond. Some few mobile fleet groups, led by imperial lords, set out for Thargonodrim.

Imperial scouts were the first to reach the station; they couldn't get too close to it, but they intercepted enough Protectorate inter-squadron messages to build up a picture. It turned out that Protectorate engineers were conducting repairs on the station, trying to restore its outer hull which had lost its properties and prohibited deeper entry; and that the station was a part of the project to recover Old

Earth, the planet missing since the end of the Great Expansion as a result of a failed planetary transportation experiment.

It was a testament to the Protectorate's technological advantage over the Empire, which could prove fatal to further plans of conquest. This also meant that Old Earth's loss was not irreparable, and that the planet could play a decisive role in the Empire-Protectorate war. The most important conclusion, though, had been made that the station over Thargonodrim was a colossal accumulation of technologies yet unseen.

The first to get close enough to Thargonodrim was the fleet of Markus the Three-Eyed; harassing the Protectorate fleets in a nearby Dominion sector, he aborted all ongoing operations and rushed to Thargonodrim upon receiving scout reports. Understanding that his fleet won't be enough to deal with several full Protectorate line squadrons, he betted on his advantage in planetary troops. With a breakneck hyperspace jump, Markus emerged exactly on the planet's orbit, deep within the star's gravity well. It is well-known that emerging less than one-tenth of a lightyear away from a star's center is almost impossible due to danger of hyperdrive explosion.



That was exactly what happened to some ships of Markus' fleet. Three-Eye, however, was a veteran pirate, used to such tricks. Some of his vessels engaged the nearest Protectorate ships, while the rest pierced the station like sharp thorns. Each vessel under Markus' command was a raid-built one, with boarding prows allowing to first penetrate a target's hull, then spew boarders into the breach. Within a mere moment, more than a hundred of ships dug into the station. In less than an hour following that, all Protectorate troopers, engineers, and repair teams were slain, their corpses thrown into the space. Markus ended up as the king of the hill.

For several days, Protectorate forces in the vicinity of Thargonodrim were paralyzed by such an unexpected imperial strike. First, they tried to repel the ships rushing to the station; then, Golden Hundred units tried not to let the distracting vessels get away - with zero success. The security fleet then attempted to drive Markus out of the station, with no success either; his ships latched onto the hull and fired at the defenders, while they were afraid of returning fire in fear of damaging the installation.

Such a state of affairs lasted for days. Markus, though, was also out of work to do. He took the station, but all efforts to restart its functions were fruitless. In their "excitement", his bloodthirsty troops had killed anyone who could've been able to shed the light on the installations' control methods. Markus was suffering from success. Moreso, he had no idea that the rest of Empire battlegroups were intercepted long before they could reach Thargonodrim; one of them attacked at the very border of the

system.

Aside from his subordinates, Markus the Three-Eyed was now all alone.

The matters changed when a Protectorate representative arrived at the flagship. Well, not quite a Protectorate representative. Well, not a Protectorate representative at all - yet with full Board-granted authority regarding suppression of the Empire's actions.

"You have let me down for the last time!" - he stated upon his arrival to the commanding admiral just before personally throwing said admiral out of the airlock.

After that, the man (but could one be sure?) known as Ghost among the Protectorate soldiers, assumed command, and work ensued. The fleet surrounded the station from every direction as not to let the pirates out, especially in case they could've looted the unique tech. Alongside Ghost, several Protectorate marine squads arrived, immediately preparing to storm the installation.

In a day after Ghost's coming, the battle of Thargonodrim entered a new phase. The station was attacked by Protectorate units from eighteen directions at once, its entire volume becoming a battleground. Pirates and their nightstalker allies fought like beasts, inflicting huge casualties; during the 52 hours of the assault, Protectorate forces lost more than half their personnel yet did not advance deeper than four levels in.

Meanwhile, Markus pulled the hull-latched ships deep into the huge station hangars to protect them from capture or destruction. Understanding that a frontal assault would not produce a favorable outcome, Ghost led his troops away from the station.

A miracle happened.

The station went active on its own, left the planet's orbit, and began to fall in a gentle spiral trajectory.

In fact, there was nothing supernatural behind that; it was only Ghost realizing that at least one pirate vessel would be bound to eventually escape with technology samples. He decided to sacrifice the station, yet not let the Empire close to the precious secrets.





Markus found his life dependent on the haste of his actions. Three-Eye had no illusions regarding the survival of his men in the impact; in an instant, his ships were now breaking through Protectorate lines. The breakthrough did not go well. More than three fourths of Markus' fleet were destroyed, the rest forced to hide from the huge battleship guns in the atmosphere. However, the air sheath of a planet subject to an object the mass of the Moon falling onto it could not serve as refuge; the station fell approximately at the equator, causing earthquakes and hurricanes. Markus' vessels were effectively nailed to the surface by storm wind and dust clouds, like mosquitoes by a rain. He was barely able to gather the remains of his forces in time, when Ghost and what was left of his marines came to haunt Markus, landing near his surviving vessels and attacking immediately.

On the hilly plains, a battle flared up between the pirates and Protectorate marines. Markus and Ghost met each other in single combat in a day after combat began; it had been said that Ghost possessed extrasensory abilities and was a fearsome warrior, but that didn't help him. Markus inflicted several wounds upon his enemy, but had to cease fighting as well after the planet reared in a sequence of monstrous earthquakes.

Despite holding together for almost a day after the impact, Thargonodrim finally began breaking down. Seeing what was happening, the fighters rushed to save their cheap lives; Ghost and his troops boarded their transports and took off.

Pirates had it harder; due to battle damage, none of their ships could get off. It was an abandoned settlement near the battlefield, with several old ships of just the size to fit everyone parked, that saved Markus from an untimely demise. They were trade vessels without hyperdrives, but Markus was certain that he was bound to be rescued after the Protectorate fleet's departure.

And so it happened. The Protectorate vessels left the orbit of the collapsing planet and took a course back; Markus' battered fleet took off as well, but only ten days later. They were picked up by a battlegroup led by lord Shinji. It was a pyrrhic victory for both sides.

## Ghost

Ghost is one of the most mysterious individuals belonging to the Protectorate-Empire war era. His real name is unknown, but the moniker used within the Human Dominion Sphere is well-deserved, as he always appears wearing a black cloak fully concealing his body and face. Under his hood, it's always glittering darkness than neither eye nor most advanced camera can penetrate; the effect of a technology unknown to the Dominion. A trail of legends regarding his origin and abilities follows him. It is known for a fact that Ghost can turn invisible and instantly teleport over short distances. It is rumored that he can use a weapon of unseen destructive force at will, generating a blastwave as if it was caused by a huge explosion, but there is no documentary evidence to that - although it's always possible that no witnesses or records have survived the weapon being used.

The theories on his origins are many, the mystery being no less popular than the history of enmity between lord Cross and advisor Pyriel. Some imagine him to be a particularly old and powerful member of the Knight order. Some suspect him of being an alien emissary, the first of the upcoming horde of extraterrestrials from outside the Dominions, plotting to enslave and eradicate humankind. There is an opinion that Ghost is an envoy of the parallel universes. Still, there's another guess, with much more evidence to it.



There is long-running gossip that the Protectorate communicates with Old Earth; the planet absent since the failed experiment on moving it akin to a starship, its whereabouts unknown to this day. In exchange for the tech-secrets of the ancient planet, the ruling bodies of the Protectorate provide research assistance to it, helping its scientists in their centuries-long attempts to bring Earth back.

Many knowledgeable people in the Protectorate and the imperial intelligence have their reasons to think that Ghost is an emissary of Old Earth, liaising between it and the Protectorate. This seems to be only explanation both to his gear, completely surpassing everything known to man in this galaxy, and to his actions. The secretive figure, never participating in ordinary battles, is always present when Earth's interests are at the stake. The Battle in the Void, near the station and planet of Thargonodrim, has been one such event. It has also been Ghost leading a Protectorate specfor raid into the imperial base in the

Nightingale Mountains on the planet of Woodward, where space-time experiments have been conducted alongside drop regiment training.

It has also been Ghost commanding a mercenary fleet during an attack on an imperial research ship convoy returning from outside of the Dominion and rumored to be carrying innumerable products of alien technologies; Ghost's efforts completely destroying this precious cargo.

## Lord Erkhart



While all members of the Imperial Legion profess the cult of war, not all of them serve War the same way. To most of them, war is akin to a game of chess to be won by the one with the most shrewdness and foresight. But there are lords viewing war as a bloody arena, where war goals don't matter, and all that matters is the act of slaughter and bloodshed.

Lord Erkhart can be seen as the most unusual and the most unhinged of them all. Almost every Legion member has been subject to regenerative treatment following the inevitable injuries and mutilations, but every rule has exceptions: having lost both arms in the battle of the Young Sprouts Fortress, the training base of Protectorate advisors, lord Erkhart literally went crazy.

An heir to a glorious noble family of the Empire, its history full of heroes participating in hundreds of wars, he brought dishonor to his lineage by having had suffered such a defeat. Burning with shame, he refused to regenerate his arms, instead ordering to implant him combat manipulators. Each such arm as strong as ten men and containing various weapons ranging from lasers to razor-sharp diamond blades, they earned Erkhart the moniker of Steelclaw.

It was the end of the Second Wave when he finally left the medical centers. Still, he found a way to slake his thirst for killing.

Preparing for the Third Wave, the Empire was hiring mercenaries and pirates to use them in keeping the Protectorate's borders from fortifying. Erkhart took command of one such fleet and set off deep into the Protectorate to commit acts of piracy. A year later, he earned the reputation of a merciless killer unable to tell ally from enemy; many peaceful towns on undeveloped border planets were turned by him into smoking ruins.

Eventually, a united squadron of several systems' vessels, supported by Protectorate forces, cornered Erkhart's fleet near the very edge of a black hole's gravity field. Following a fierce space battle turned boarding action, his entire fleet was destroyed, and he was forced to use an escape pod.

It took a long time for the pod to be discovered; over twelve years he was drifting, animation suspended, near the black hole, risking entering the collapse field. He was lucky to have his pod found and sold to the Empire by a wreckage-gathering adventurer; by the beginning of the Third Wave, Erkhart was back commanding an army corps fighting on the Protectorate's borders.

He was one of the few lords who were not busy with rebellions and riots on the planets previously conquered, but attacked the Protectorate - and had success doing so. Together with lord Shinji, Erkhart managed to conquer almost half a hundred worlds; by the time of the Vigilant Peace, he was a war hero. Still, twelve years of cold sleep haven't changed him; it is his name that's used to scare children on many, many planets imperial and Protectorate alike.



## Battle of the Young Sprouts Fortress

At the beginning of the Second Wave, the Empire decided to strike at the very heart of the Protectorate. The Young Sprouts Fortress, one of many training bases of Protectorate advisors, was chosen as a target. The base itself was a vast fortified area, a five-meters-high wall bristling with autoturrets serving as a deterrent to the belligerent, hostile locals.

Aside from the fortress, the only full-fledged continent of the planet was home to descendants of ancient colonists who lost touch with the rest of the Human Dominion and, as a result, descended into barbarity. The many tribes led half-nomadic lives, constantly warring with each other; but with the appearance of a fortress defended by magics, the tribes found a common enemy in it.

The nomads' tech level was quite low by galactic standards; while able to produce small quantities of firearms on their own, they had to buy modern laser and plasma weaponry from interstellar traders and smugglers for precious animal bone obtained through hunting.

Since the very beginning of the fortress' existence, small parties of nomads were probing it for weaknesses. With none of the parties returning, they switched to much less frequent raids - but with much more numerous armies. The commanders of the Fortress treated that as a benefit, as such engagements could serve as a close-to-reality training for the young advisors.

Such was the planetary situation by the beginning of the Second Wave.



The Empire was also prepared to attack the Fortress.

Over the course of almost a year, Empire-backed pirates and smugglers were shipping weapons to the planetary tribes. Moreso, lord Erkhart - an Imperial Legion member and strike force commander - had arrived to the planet shortly before the war, his duty being the fortress assault itself.

He killed several tribe chieftains from among the most respected and made the rest accept his leadership, promising them an opportunity to raze the hated Fortress to the ground.

Shortly after the first invasion battles of the Second Wave, the united tribal armies led by lord Erkhart

attacked the Fortress. Its leading advisors, including Mark Chang, the most senior of them, were surprised by the nomads' coordination and wargear. Mobilization was announced, and every student took up arms and took their places at the defensive perimeter.

The battle against the locals went on for nearly three days. The advisors didn't initially pay attention to the fact that the nomads were especially active attacking sites near the distant early warning buildings. A portion of the radars monitoring the star system was destroyed; when the Empire fleet appeared at the planet, it was too late to do anything. Fortress spaceships were pinned to the surface by cannonades from the orbit, every vessel taking off an easy target. That's when the Empire's plan became clear.

By that time, some nomads were killed, and some driven off and scattered. But the imperial troops were already landing, preparing to finish the locals' job.



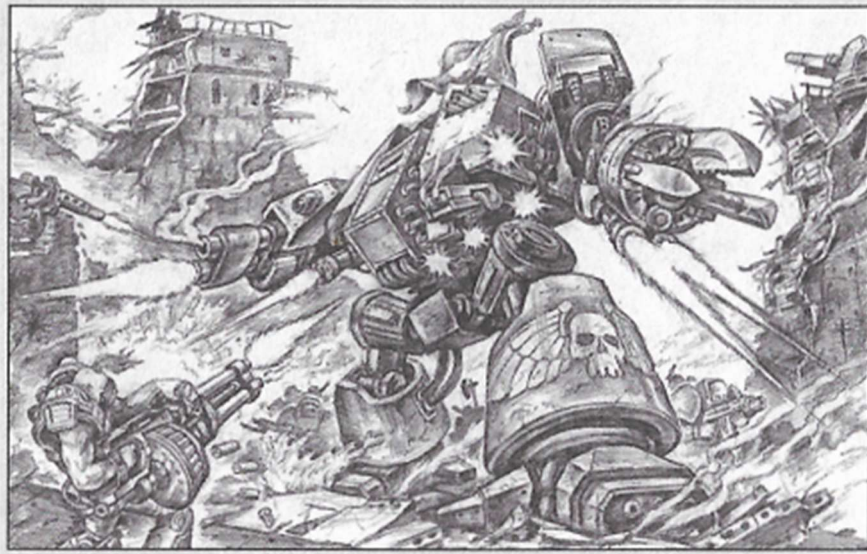
As the most senior among the full-fledged advisors present, Mark Chang assumed the command of the Fortress and ordered to start evacuating the personnel - the youngest students first and foremost - through the teleport gates a kilometer deep under the citadel, with squads of senior students covering the escape. Robotic infantry, held within the storehouses, was also activated; still, it was clear that the Center could not hold until the metropolitan reinforcements' arrival. Leaving only the robots at the perimeter, Chang ordered small groups of students to disperse over the territory of the Fortress and prevent the imperials from entering the lower levels.

Every entrance to the lower levels was closed, sealed, welded shut and, when possible, disguised - not to say that the doors were intended to withstand a directed nuclear detonation. Squads of students and soldiers harassed imperial engineering units, not letting them cut through the doors.

In the meantime, Chang was enacting his evacuation plan. Together with a small number of the most well-trained soldiers, he used the tunnels to reach the nomads who were gathering after being defeated. Chang's plan was to attack the imperials' rear with the locals' help.

Equipped with the standard advisor issue of state-of-the-art gear, he used a hypnofield to make the

chieftains believe him to be the real lord Erkhart. He claimed that some of his troops betrayed him, bewitched by the black wizardry from within the Fortress, and spoke that only the brave warriors of this planet could help him expel the forces of darkness from their homeland.



The chieftains almost believed the false Erkhart; unfortunately for him, the real Erkhart arrived - in his war robot, accompanied by a rather large unit of tribunators. Chang, forced to prematurely end the seance, was somewhat surprised to learn that he had played himself. He was in the middle of the enemy territory, surrounded by locals who were far from being friendly. Still, he was not dismayed.

Mark Chang challenged Erkhart to a duel, one on one, while exclaiming that he won't need anything more than a sword to defeat the huge Erkhart-ridden metal monstrosity. In a large open area outside of the encampment, surrounded by nomads who watched with interested the two skylords fight, advisor Chang clashed with the imperial legionary in an uneven battle...



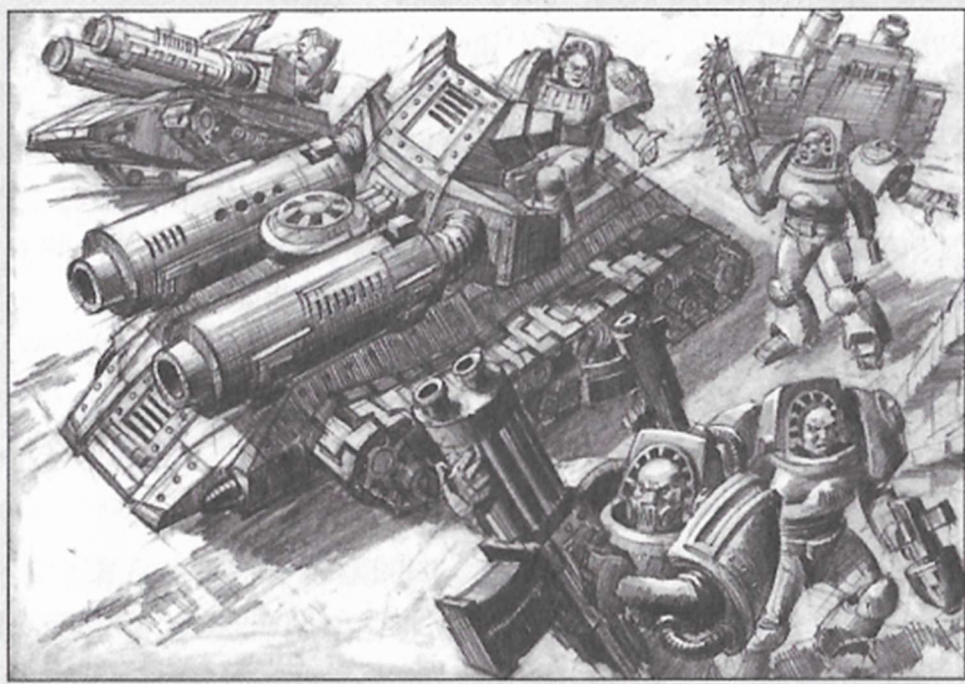


...a battle not favoring Erkhart. Despite the might of the five-meters-tall robot, the advisor in his full attire was more than a match. Antigrav devices allowed Chang to make breathtaking jumps and leaps, while the powerful forcefield protected him from the most of the robot's attacks. The battle took long, scales shifting back and forth; but at the end, Chang prevailed over the mighty yet ponderous warbot of the legionary.

He knew of the weak point located at the cockpit - the connection of the access hatch's armor plates, and that was the point Chang's sword was directed into. The strike didn't reach Erkhart, but made the robot's control computer go haywire.

Within a second, the nerve-connected control system went against the pilot; an erroneous nerve signal made Erkhart spasm so hard that his own muscles ground his bones to dust. With Erkhart losing consciousness almost instantly, the warbot collapsed to the ground, now a giant heap of useless metal; seeing their commanders' defeat, the tribunators rushed to help.

This caused outrage among the spectators. Taking intrusion into the deadly duel of the skylords as blasphemy, they joined a small retinue of students who were accompanying Chang and fought the tribunators off.



Chang took full advantage of his victory. He called the nomads to attack the forces of the Empire who were prowling across the Fortress in search of gates. The hordes led by Chang attacked the imperial army and destroyed all logistical structures, including the long-distance communication device. Robbed of comms, the imperial officers couldn't inform the outside world of the events. Meanwhile, a small Protectorate starship squadron tasked with evacuating those still fighting approached the planet. It turned out that Chang overdid the lower levels sealing - by doing so, he prevented himself and his men from leaving the Fortress by teleport.

The nomads' attack on the Empire armies' rear couldn't have been better; the imperial officers at the orbit, busy with providing fire support to the land troops, overlooked the approach of the Protectorate mobile squadron. Consisting mostly of high-speed destroyers, light cruisers, and several fast liners for carrying troops, the squadron was still able to destroy more than half the enemy fleet, flagship included, with a rapid torpedo run.

Unable to communicate and coordinate, the Empire fleet dispersed all over the system, allowing the Protectorate to evacuate its personnel. To get the nomads to leave the vicinity of the Fortress, Chang employed a huge holoprojector; the sight of a titanic Chang rising over the citadel and reaching far with his voice instilled awe in the locals, who made haste to go away.

Chang put the Fortress' reactor into overload mode. With the last student leaving the planet on a Protectorate cutter, the Fortress was evaporated in a powerful nuclear explosion.

The Young Roots Fortress was no more, but most its students had been evacuated, with many of them gaining invaluable experience.

Eight days later, an imperial fleet approached the planet in order to learn the reasons for the comms being silent. They only found the scattered remnants of the land forces, the remains of the flotilla, and lord Erhard's war robot - the pilot still alive by some dark miracle; put in suspended animation by the vehicle's life support system.

## Advisor Mark Chang



There is a widespread belief that all advisors are daring knights of cloak and dagger who "spread their tentacles into the internal affairs of sovereign planets, using trickery and guile to disrupt the Polaris Empire's noble plans". This is not entirely true. Some of them, the most old and wisened, have instead chosen the path of training new advisors, of searching for talented youth throughout the entire Human Dominion Sphere.

But even among his colleagues, Mark Chang is famous for his longevity. It's said that he was born two years before the first - then pre-Protectorate - treaty. There isn't much information available regarding his past, but it is known for certain that, prior to joining the Advisor Corps, Chang was leading quite an active lifestyle.

One of the earliest investigations regarding piracy within Protectorate borders mentions the name of Black Mark, a pirate captain; the resemblance of his description to Mark Chang is uncanny. However, that's ancient history.

By the beginning of the First Wave, Chang was leading the recruitment department of the Advisor Corps Academy, many famous and successful advisors having had started their careers under his guidance. The most famous battle among the ones Chang took part in is also closely linked to his Academy activity. At the very start of the Second Wave, the Empire attempted to deal an irrecoverable blow to the Advisor Corps; an imperial contingent, half consisting of human drop troops (unusually for the clone-reliant Empire), struck the so-called Young Roots Fortress, in which an advisor training base was located. By the way, it was Chang, a big admirer of Chinese and Japanese literary classics from the times of Old Earth, who gave such poetic names to the training bases.

Protectorate forces were completely unprepared to an attack that sudden; there was only a small garrison on the planet where the base was located. In a quick battle, imperial drop troopers overthrew the defense units and broke into the training camp's territory, its personnel not having had the time to evacuate.

Advisor Chang, present in the Fortress at that time, was now responsible for the evacuation and defense. Together with eighteen full-fledged advisors from among the postgraduates, he assembled a small force tasked with protecting the other students during their escape through the teleport gate deep within the rock underneath the camp. With the gate's capacity rather small, it would take at least three days for everyone to leave.

Chang made an unusual decision; he ordered the defenders to abandon the perimeter fortifications, divide into tens of tiny squads, and spread throughout the camp with its small buildings, underground passageways, obstacle courses, and other favorable terrain features. Benefitting from the environment, advisor-led student units were attacking imperial forces in order to not let them enter the underground levels. For three days and a half, until Protectorate reinforcements arrived, the Empire never managed to break into the depths. The reinforcements, of course, couldn't lift the siege, and the camp was lost to the Protectorate; however, after a number of strikes aimed at the imperial force that scattered across the Fortress, Protectorate troops successfully evacuated the units providing cover to the retreat.

A day before the evacuation, advisor Chang met against Erkhart, a member of the Imperial Legion, in mortal combat on one of the camp's training areas. Erkhart was fully clad within his warbot, while Chang only had a monomolecular sword for a weapon and a force cloak for armor; despite this, it was Chang who emerged victorious. He managed to find the warbot's only weak point, a connection of armor plates over the cockpit, and short-circuited almost all electronics inside with a singular strike. As a result, Erkhart lost both his arms and was out of the campaign for several months; meanwhile, Chang successfully left the Young Roots Fortress and continued his work.

During the Second and Third Wave, Chang took part in no epic clashes; the small skirmishes and battles he participated in, however, were many.



## Lord Cross

"But my lord, how are we supposed to tell Empire-loyal citizens from insurgents?"

"Kill them all, my son; let God sort them out."

Attributed to lord Cross



Among the members of the Imperial Legion, among the most esteemed commanders and conquerors of the Polaris Empire, lord Cross nonetheless stands out, the number of his victories impressive. Despite being the oldest of the Legion members, having served four Emperors, he is mighty to this day; imperial restorative medicine allowing even a three-hundred-years-old man to stay strong and clear of mind.

He started his military career as an officer-cadet aboard the flagship of the 12th Imperial Fleet. Other than that, there's no information within the Human Dominion Sphere regarding his early career. When the Empire invaded the Protectorate, Cross quickly grew (in)famous within the Sphere, the strike wing of the imperial fleet winning many engagements of the First Wave under his leadership. During the Second Wave, however, his luck ran out. His fleet was defeated in the 45th sector by a united force of thirty-two planet; lord Cross, having had barely escaped death himself, was in disgrace for a long time. Nonetheless, when the Empire had been confronted with the multitude of uprisings on planets previously conquered, Cross was called back - and it was the time of the Third Wave and the Vigilant Peace when he earned the most renown. He took part in suppressing rebellions on no less than a hundred worlds, each time proving himself a superb tactician and a ruthless enforcer of the imperial rule.

In addition to that, there was more than one way he became famous in.

Every historical text mentions the personal feud between Cross and Helen Pyriel, a Protectorate advisor. They faced each other on more than thirty planets, and each time there was more to that than them simply belonging to two warring sides, their duels turning into merciless personal combat, both warriors forgetting their duty.



Such deep hatred, such suspicious persistence led to rich speculation within the circles of the Council of Lords and Protectorate leadership alike. Nevertheless, the reason for such a conflict is not known. Perhaps it can be found in Pyriel's past, especially given that her biography prior to joining the advisors is top secret within the Protectorate.

When commanding, Cross is akin to kings of old; hard-fisted, he achieves results by instilling fear in his soldiers. A tactician without equal, he is mostly right when anticipating the enemy's actions on the battlefield. Cross is merciful to neither foe nor friend, his orders unambiguous and meaning certain death to those noncompliant; he does not hesitate if military necessity demands sacrificing the local population.

Lord Cross is also known for the fact that he eschews piloting a command mech, instead preferring to fight on foot, and personally leads tribunator and even line infantry charges. He is considered one of the top specialists at fighting within cities and confined spaces overall.

The most well-known battles where he has participated include the hundred-day-long assault on the

city-planet of Velian, crushing the uprising on Cronos-7, and the attempt to take the mining complexes on Rusty Shard.

## Taking the city-planet of Velian



The battle of Velian was the most fierce and bloody battle of the entire Third Wave Invasion.

The entirety of the oceanless planet of Velian is covered by a world-spanning city reaching kilometers high and kilometers deep, its population numbering over 25 billion. Belonging to the founding planets of the Protectorate, it is also the largest trading center of the entire Human Dominion Sphere. Neighbouring a great many trade routes, Velian is the biggest transit point of the Golden Hundred, the numerous cargo terminals and warehouses on its surface and orbit loading and unloading tens of thousands trading ships daily.

Near the period yet to be known later as the end of the Third Wave, the Polaris Empire attempted to seize the planet. An invasion force led by three commanders, all members of the Imperial Legion - lord Cross, lady Agatha, and Aleksey Dolgorukiy, one of the few legionaries not of noble birth - was assembled. Cross was appointed as the commander-in-chief; however, both his Legion colleagues would be glad to cut him out of that position and take all glory for themselves, given an opportunity. The invasion started with a three-pronged assault, each legionary's army easily taking one of the three main orbital defense/cargo stations also serving as space elevator endpoints. However, during the



forces' elevator-assisted landing and ongoing attacks on installations less significant, Cross' soldiers were unexpectedly met by a huge army of outworld origin, its vessels located around the north pole station.



The imperials were unaware that, following a contract with the Protectorate, the north station was intended to be used by the forces of the Golden Hundred. As it was revealed much, much later, a troop transfer was being conducted through Velian in order to reinforce the defenses of a select direction targeted by the Empire; the planet's orbit, on that day, temporarily accommodated an immense army that was on its way to be distributed between twenty-seven worlds.

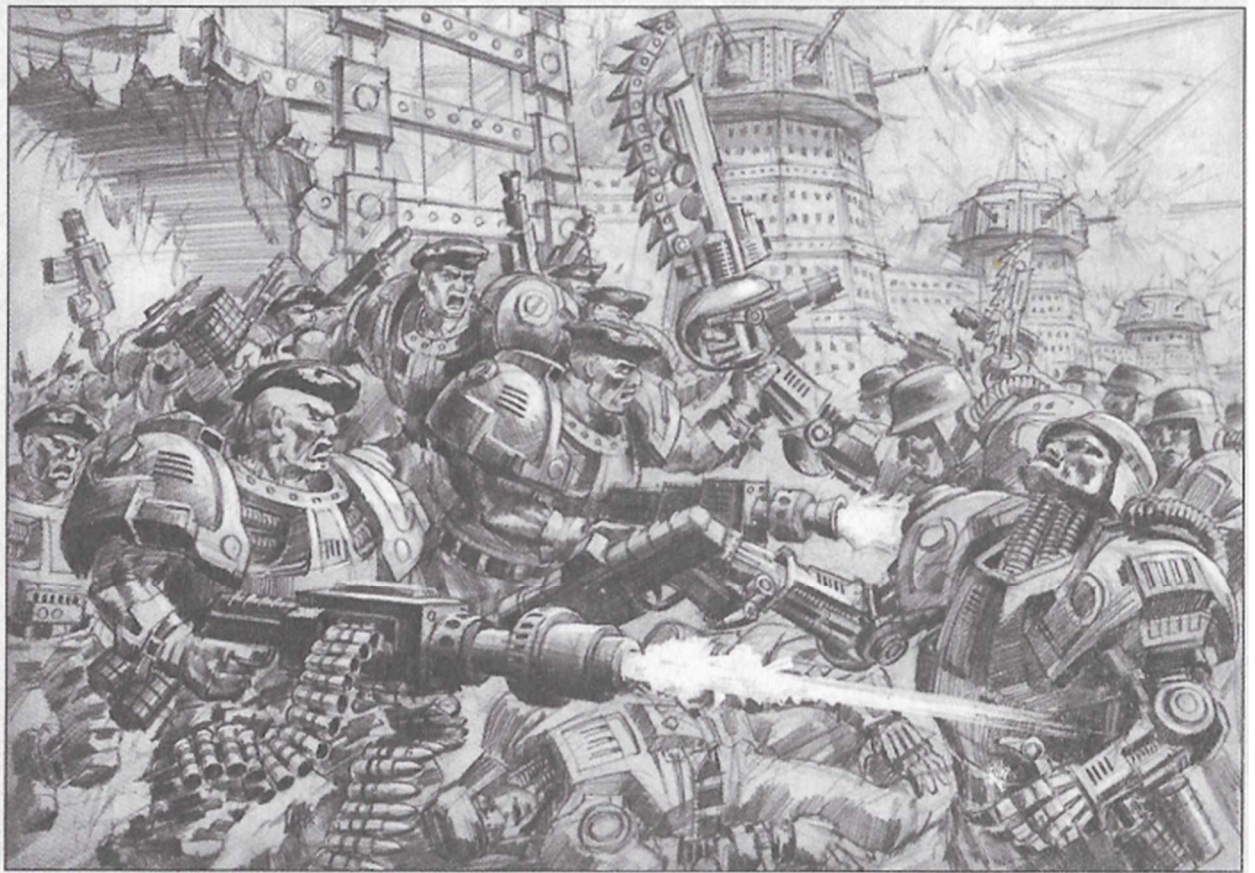
It's said that the chief of the Imperial Foreign Intelligence Department paid with his head for missing such an important fact; however, that's particularities.

Almost twelve divisions of robotic infantry under the command of Mark Chang, the most experienced advisor of the Protectorate, and six his colleagues now faced the troops of the Empire. Chang's judgement was quick; he ordered to land immediately and to defend the Northern Block, the city part located around the north pole. Understanding that trying to retreat from the planet without orbital support would make his forces an easy prey, he opted for a surface battle.

Meanwhile, Cross ordered the space squadron accompanying his troops to attack Chang's vessels before they could all land. In a day, one third of the Protectorate contingent was dead, having been given no chance to descend; nonetheless, the remaining two thirds managed to successfully repel the first ground assault led by Dolgorukiy. It was the first battle where advisor Helen Pyriel took part after her release from the court-martial's custody, and it was the battle where she distinguished herself.

The imperials now knew that there was no way to conquer the planet quickly, with Protectorate forces holding the north pole, ready to fight to the last man. Even the fact that all orbital stations were now

Empire-controlled gave little comfort to Cross, who was well familiar with Chang and knew him not be the one to yield easily.



Based on that, lord Cross ordered the drop troops led by lady Agatha to dig. By that time, almost all the planet except for the north pole was occupied by the Empire; lady Agatha decided to drive a tunnel several kilometers under the deepest city structures. Over the course of forty-five days, a 120-kilometers-long way had been dug by the engineers, allowing the drop elites to burst from under Protectorate soldiers' feet.

With digging underway, Cross was still trying to breach Chang's defenses using methods more simple. The fighting turned the city around the Northern Block into a field of debris and slag; still, Cross did not succeed and had to order Agatha to strike. The full-strength drop division, enacting the breakthrough, achieved overwhelming results; half the Protectorate forces were ground up within less than a day, and three advisors fell. The rest of the advisors, their teamwork disrupted, now had to act each on their own.

Advisor Olgerd secured a foothold in one of the Northern Block's districts, isolated his positions from the rest of the city, and prepared to fend the Empire off to the bitter end. He entrenched so well that Dolgorukiy lost a quarter of his troops - and didn't succeed anyway - in attempts to dislodge him until the planet-wide fighting was over.

Advisor Ramirez was killed in action together with his division while trying to break free from the encirclement. Chang, cut off from the rest with only several robo-infantry battalions under his command, chose to act smarter; he waited until the last of Agatha's forces emerged from the tunnel, then rushed to use the tunnel himself. With only the imperial engineers remaining inside, busy strengthening the arches, Chang eliminated everyone in his way, covered 120 kilometers in three days, and broke free in the very middle of the imperial army.





Now, it was Cross forbidding further passage. In a battle short but tense, he almost completely destroyed Chang's forces, but could not reach the advisor himself. With Cross' personal guard all killed in the fight, Chang got away almost on his own, disappearing within the city depths.

The fiercest fighting unfolded around advisor Pyriel; it was her troops suffering the brunt of Agatha's impact from under the ground. Pyriel was doing her best, but the outnumbering imperial forces pushed her divisions to the very edge of the Northern Block; but now, the tides were turned. Some of Agatha's units got trapped and perished in the flames of a power station exploding; lady Agatha herself clashed with Pyriel one-on one.

With each woman having enough weaponry as to turn an entire regiment to ash, the duel razed several districts. Nobody knows what was the exact outcome, but Pyriel returned to her soldiers and led a new attack. She lost three fourths of her troops; nonetheless, she broke through, the remains of her army scattering all over the planet.

A courier ship of the Empire urgently escaped, carrying lady Agatha's severed head towards much-needed regeneration treatment.

In the meantime, an Imperial Legion fleet infiltrated Protectorate territory and struck a blow to the very heart of the enemy. The brand-new secret weapon was used.

Beta Equitis, the sun of Jamiria, one of the Elder Planets of the Protectorate, went supernova for no apparent reason; more than thirty billion people ceased to exist in the blink of an eye.

The day after the destruction of Beta Equitis, the Cloud appeared at the orbit of Polaris Prime and blew one of its moons into a swarm of asteroids, which promptly began falling onto the capital world. It was only the superb orbital defense that saved the planet from becoming a crater-covered desert.

Both sides finally understood that continuing such a war would lead to total annihilation. In fifteen days, a ceasefire was signed, and the Vigilant Peace began.

The order for both sides to cease hostilities reached Velian on the hundredth day of fighting. Both sides were extremely exhausted, with the war continuing due to inertia alone.

Only the ever-inexhaustible Pyriel still was going for lord Cross' throat. No less than seven times they clashed, no less than seven times they failed to strike the foe down. Even as troops started to withdraw, following the Locust-Di treaty, Pyriel disobeyed Chang's direct orders, pursuing revenge; Chang, Olgerd, and several other advisors had to hold her with their forcefields and take her, still fighting back, to the

ship that was to carry the last of the forces from the planet.

The treaty of Locust-Di has made Velian into a neutral planet; it is now a transit point, through which planets of the Polaris Empire and the Protectorate trade with each other.

## Advisor Pyriel



The Advisor Corps doesn't consist solely of those originating from the planets of the Golden Hundred. Prior to joining the Corps, many its members have lived on remote planets of the Human Dominion Sphere - and have been discovered by those advisors whose task is to scout for talent. Even the enemies of the Protectorate can become advisors, if willing and fitting the criteria. Over the centuries of the Imperial Legion's history, there has only been one instance of a legionary discarding one's loyalty to the Emperor, becoming a renegade, a traitor - that of Helen Pyriel, now a Protectorate advisor. No one knows for certain how has Pyriel come to hate her homeland. It could be so that she found herself in the way of the steamroller of imperial internal politics; it could be so that she had to run after being unable to complete an assignment. Imperial sources call her a talentless deserter escaping the Legion's judgement following a failed mission. On the other hand, the story prominent in the Protectorate is that of unrequited love, jealousy, and death; while most sensible people deem such talks to be nothing more than gossip, the famous holodrama "Helen Crucified" has contributed to the version's popularity immensely.





To this day, it's known to none what has happened to Pyriel to make her switch sides; however, she is now among the most brilliant advisors. While prone to use her position for personal aims, her victories number many more than her failures. Her unauthorized raid deep behind the Empire's lines during the Second Wave, when she commanded only a small unit of marines, should've inevitably ended in her death; instead, it resulted in many months of guerrilla warfare spanning several planets at once, distracting large numbers of imperial troops.

After a successful breakthrough from the encirclement on Titanium Mask, one of the mining and industrial worlds of the Empire, advisor Pyriel was trialed for disobeying orders and conducting a military operation without permission for half a year, until the Second Wave ended. The Corps took her accomplishments into account and pardoned her. Only a few noticed that, during her raids, eight members of the Council of Lords were killed - all with Pyriel's personal participation in the operation, by Pyriel herself.

Despite leading quite a personal life, Pyriel remains one of the most esteemed and feared advisors of the Protectorate. During the Third Wave, she took part in a hundred-day-long defense of the city-planet of Velian, the last known instance of her facing lord Cross. Over the course of the battle, they clashed with each other no less than seven times; each time, an exhausting duel ended with no conclusion to speak of.

The hostilities on Velian ceased after both sides had destroyed an enemy planet each, and the treaty of Locust-Di, later dubbed the Vigilant Peace, had been signed. It's said that advisor Chang had to drag Helen Pyriel onto the ship carrying the last Protectorate regiments off-planet, and that the following quarrel that occurred on board almost destroyed the vessel - with only a joint effort of several advisors managing to harness Pyriel's explosive temper.

## Advisor Elveret



Every advisor of the Protectorate has a distinctive working style. Some are peerless schemers, while others use abductions and blackmail, and still others more peaceful and conventional methods. Unlike the legionaries, whose personalities are usually shrouded in mystery, many advisors are popular figures within the Dominion Sphere, present as characters of many novels and holoserries.

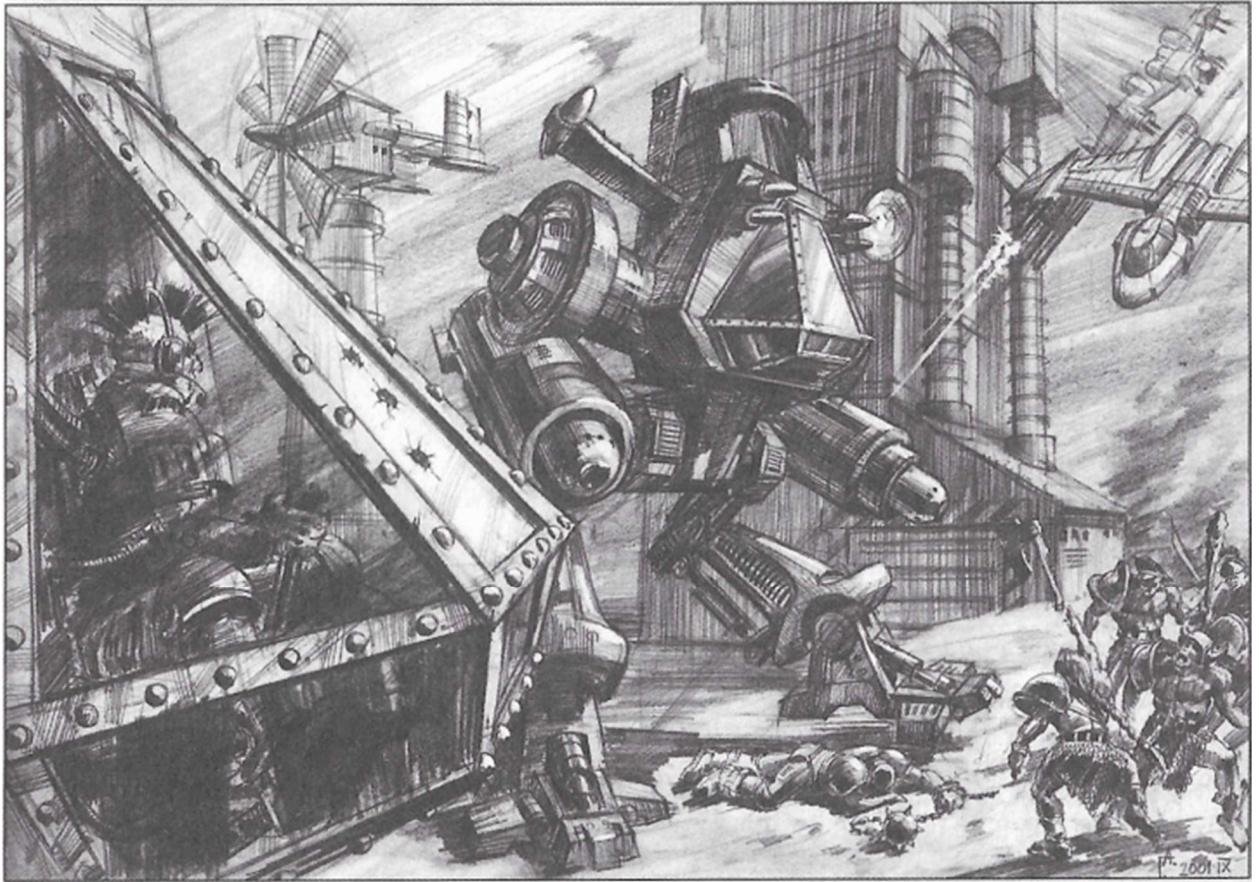
Advisor Elveret was born into the family of a high-ranking noble of the planet of Helionia, one of the oldest members of the Protectorate. Helionia is one of the few planets with a semi-feudal (of course, adjusted for tech level) society; its nobility a ruling class, owning vast fields of land and production facilities located on the world's three moons. Like all nobles, Elveret received a superb education - first in an elite school, then in academia; his father taking care to ensure that his only son (Elveret had two sisters) would get everything.

But fate intervened into the easy life of the young nobleman. While he was accompanying his uncle, Helionia's representative in the Board, to a Protectorate meeting on the world of Maxis, the First Wave Invasion began. Helionia ended up attacked by the Polaris Empire; following drawn-out battles on its moons and then the planet itself, it fell - a big blow for young Elveret. With his family dead, he couldn't find peace for quite a time.

That was when he met advisor Mark Chang, the member of the high concilium of the Advisor Corps who was implementing the program of resistance preparation. Mark Chang was searching for new potential advisors, young and hot-blooded, and lured Elveret into the Advisor Corps with prospects of revenge. Elveret gladly jumped at the opportunity and began to train hard. In twenty-five years between the First



and Second Wave, Elveret turned into a highly-skilled, well-prepared advisors. His first assignment was to free his homeworld.



Elveret's performance was splendid. He organized an underground in the cities and carried out a series of terrorist acts targeting the Empire's military objects on the planet. An explosion on a line infantry staging area, a landslide on a mountain-located fleet repair base - these and many more weakened the Empire's war machine on Helionia. Led by members of old noble families, the uprising was victorious, Helionia now independent once again. Elveret went on, still obsessed with erasing the Empire from the galaxy.

He wasn't always fortunate. One time, he was sent with a huge army to crush a small imperial garrison on the world of Lorke-3. Elveret didn't expect to find a worthy enemy in there; the imperial commander, lord Shinji, a Legion member and a samurai, proved himself a great and steadfast leader. A maneuver intended to be a triumphant crusade of the Protectorate escalated into a protracted war. Three times Elveret and Shinji met face to face; three times Elveret could not defeat his foe. First time, when Elveret's flagship rammed Shinji's command vessel, the two commanders clashed in a boarding battle. Elveret himself dealt a wound to Shinji, who had to retreat on an escape boat; the command vessel of the imperial brigade was lost. Second time, they met on the planet's surface, both clad in mighty battlesuits; it was now Elveret suffering an injury, saved only by a timely intervention by his personal guard. Their third duel was interrupted by an unexpected arrival of imperial reinforcements; Elveret's units had to retreat in order to evade imminent destruction.

During the Third Wave, Elveret was leading a sizeable fleet of pirates, smugglers, and soldiers of fortune, raiding imperial planets and convoys alongside his motley crew. He helped the rebels on Cronos; together with a militia fleet, defended the orbital cities of the Mother-of-Pearl Planet; landed on Firespear, the planet producing half the Empire's hyperdrive materials.

## Lord Shinji

Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily. Every day when one's body and mind are at peace, one should meditate upon being ripped apart by arrows, rifles, spears and swords, being carried away by surging waves, being thrown into the midst of a great fire, being struck by lightning, being shaken to death by a great earthquake, falling from thousand-foot cliffs, dying of disease, succumbing to radiation, suffocating in vacuum, or committing seppuku. And every day without fail one should consider himself as dead.

Hagakure<sup>3</sup>



In spite of its history counting thousands of years, humanity has not lost its ancient cultural roots. In the Polaris Empire, amid considerable technological development, numerous cults flourish, many of them paths supposed to improve one as a warrior: codes of chivalry originating in the Middle Ages, Slavic teachings of martial perfection<sup>4</sup>, and, of course, Bushido. Lord Shinji is the most prominent imperial samurai of the modern times.

Among his many Legion peers, Shinji's distinguishing feature is the consistency of his achievements; never the one to win a resounding victory like lord Cross, but also never the one to lose. Over the course of his career, he moved progressively from one success to another.

It was a few years before the start of the First Wave when Hikaru Shinji, back then a young officer of the imperial fleet, won his first mark; leading a small destroyer squad on border patrol duty, he routed a large pirate fleet of total tonnage several times exceeding that of his own flotilla.

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<sup>3</sup> The quote seems to be altered in ways other than a simple adaptation to the far future.

<sup>4</sup> With no historical prototype known, this is likely to be an invention of the authors.

At the time of the First Wave, Shinji wasn't at the forefront of fighting, but proved himself to be a capable convoy escort leader - a necessary task for ensuring the proper supply of the advancing imperial armies. His finest hour came during the Second Wave; following Lord Cross' defeat at Lily-3, a gap of several systems, completely defenseless, formed in the imperial frontlines, potentially opening the path to the richest and most industrially-developed planets of those acquired by the Empire over the course of the First Wave.

Shinji's independent squadron, stationed in one of these systems at the time, was the one to stop the Protectorate's counterattack. His tenacious defense of the Lorke system held Protectorate forces long enough for the gap to be closed. By the time reinforcements arrived to Lorke, Shinji's squadron, initially numbering slightly less than forty vessels and more than a hundred thousand human and clone personnel, had been reduced to less than two thousand men and two ships - unable to propel themselves due to sustained damage, but still participating using their long-ranged artillery.

Shinji proved himself to be not only a superb tactician, but a high-class warrior as well. At one occasion, he had been separated from the rest of the Empire's forces and had to battle his way through for nearly twenty-four hours straight, killing more than five thousand soldiers and destroying over a hundred vehicles. For that, Shinji received the Imperial Bloody Ribbon, the award for personal heroism in combat - the fourth known case when it was not posthumous.

During the Third Wave, unlike the many lords busy suppressing rebellions on previously conquered planets, Lord Shinji was at the very spearhead of imperial assault.

Aside from the defense of Lorke, Shinji is also famous for conquering of the ocean planet of Poseidon, attacking the asteroid cities of the Broken Wings system, and crushing the religious revolt on Delusion.



## Taking the mining complex on Rusty Shard

A planet known under the unsightly name of Rusty Shard is located approximately 750 parsecs away from Old Earth; it rotates a very Sun-like star and is about as far away from it as Mars is away from the Sun. In official parlance, astrographical charts and catalogues, it is known as Ruthenia, honoring the Russian origins of its initial colonists; however, its common name isn't going anywhere - at least not before the abundant natural iron oxides, covering its surface, go away. Still, it's not only iron; nickel, titanium, and much rarer metals used in beacon and drive construction are plentiful on Rusty Shard as well.

Such a resource-rich planet can't escape the attention of the galactic rulers, and it is unsurprising that Rusty Shard was hotly contested many times over the course of the Dominion's history. Despite the unwelcoming conditions, there are seven large domed cities on the planet, and smaller installations are innumerable.

Rusty Shard belongs to the Buffer Zone, right between the imperial territories and those of the Protectorate. After the end of the Third Wave, planets of the Buffer Zone were changing hands quite often, acting not unlike a testing ground for both sides' armed forces.

When the Third Wave ended, Rusty Shard was partially controlled by the Empire, with lord Cross crushing the main defenses and local militia; an imperial garrison was installed. Still, there were militia squads refusing to yield, retreating to the less-explored parts of the planet. Using smaller settlements and mines as bases, they were continuing to strike at the imperial regiments.

On year 4505, three years after the Vigilant Peace, the Advisor Corps have decided to wrestle the planet from the hands of the Empire. The ones to execute the operations were decided to be Ruthenian rebels and advisor Olgerd, the hero of Velian.

Olgerd has decided not to use Protectorate forces at all, instead opting to rely on the guerrilla fighters fully. First, he hired several smuggling companies to supply the rebellion with modern weapons and, more importantly, communication devices.

Several times, he had infiltrated Rusty Shard to talk to rebel leaders in person, promising them Protectorate support and protection if they would be able to deal a significant blow to the Empire garrison. Said support was being gathered by him in a covert fashion; several regiments of robotic infantry, complete with dropships, were directed into an asteroid field, then placed in conservation mode - all in order to avoid premature detection by imperial ships.

Meanwhile, the planetary side of the plan to overthrow the Empire oversees was set into motion. Every large domed city was housing imperial garrison troops - troops unused to the cramped housing and the local air, troops that required rotation and replacement in order to keep the garrison able to perform. Every fifty days, a rotation convoy (more than a hundred transports, several squadrons of light combat vehicles and a company of walking tanks for escort) headed out from the northern pole base of the Empire - headed to each of the seven cities, replacing the tired troopers with fresh squads. Defeating such a convoy in a direct battle was not an option. The plan was to plant thermal mines on its way, which could destroy most of the vehicles and leave the troops ready to be defeated by the guerrillas, but vehicle sensors would have discovered the mines easily. But there was a scientist among the rebels, professor Rabbit - a geologist and a volcanologist. He offered a better solution.



The convoy's path laid through a region known for its frequent earthquakes and eruptions; rich in minerals but dangerous, it was never used for mining. The path was also, unfortunately for the imperials, a shortcut; if there was no earthquake coming, the convoy used it to save several weeks of travel.

Rabbit's solution was to trigger an earthquake exactly under the moving convoy using properly placed explosives; at the same time with convoy destruction, the rebels in cities would have to attack the tired garrisons.

Everything went according to the plan.

Mostly.

With the convoy moving through the region, the explosives triggered; more than a hundred vehicles and tens of walking tanks happened to be at the epicenter. Most of the convoy perished instantly, with the rest crushed under avalanches or fallen into fissures. Sadly, the exact magnitude of the earthquake was hard to predict, and the ambushers-to-be were caught by it as well.

At the same time, the city battles started; imperial line infantry and police forces suffered massive losses, not being adequately prepared for this sort of fighting. Not every city of the seven faced such bloodshed, though; in the east city of Barad-Dur, the rebels have destroyed the entire garrison without firing a shot by flooding its ventilation with nerve gas.

In under a day, two thirds of the imperial presence on the Rusty Shard were done for; it was the time to reactivate the robots and drop them.

This did not go according to the plan.

Unknown to Olgerd, the planetary garrison commander has transmitted a distress signal earlier than countercomm shielding was activated. While the dropships full of robots descended onto the planet, aiming to activate their cargo after landing, an imperial patrol fleet under the command of lord Shinji

attacked them.

The surprise fighter attack managed to destroy a third of the transports, and the cruisers fired at the ground guerrilla forces who were trying to storm the imperial headquarters fortress with their heavy weapons destroyed by a raid of fortress defenders.

For three weeks, the sides, both in space and on land, engaged in protracted skirmishes, until a speleologist team led by Rabbit planted a thermal mine under the fortress, destroying enough of its defenses for it to be conquered.

Outnumbered, Shinji has nonetheless decided to use his ships to evacuate the survivors, landing his cruisers around the fortress and firing at the rebels until it was possible to fit the remains of the garrison on board.

Olgerd decided not to pursue the retreating ships. The planet was imperial no more anyway.

## Advisor Olgerd

Advisor Hans Olgerd was born on the world of Midgaard, colonized by Scandinavian emigrants during the Great Expansion. It was among the planets that lost its technological achievements and plummeted into barbarity; for a thousand years its culture, descendant to the ancient vikings of Old Earth, was progressing in complete isolation.

Midgaard only partook of interstellar tech once again when it had been rediscovered by traders belonging to the newly-formed Protectorate; however, what happened next was not as Protectorate trade companies would think. Instead of becoming one more planet intended to supply the Protectorate with raw materials in exchange for tech, Midgaard turned into a regional center of piracy - and it was not the only such center.

Its inhabitants now knew how to sail the stars once again; the new vikings of Midgaard, unwilling to comply with Protectorate laws, were now raiding and plundering, like their Old Earth ancestors before them. By rediscovering Midgaard, the Protectorate made itself the victim of its own shortsightedness for several centuries.

An unexpectedly simple solution appeared. The planet, located at the very border of the Dominion Sphere, was among the first worlds to be targeted by the Polaris Empire when the First Wave started. Imperial lords decided that Midgaardians, deemed an unruly and dangerous nation, would not have a place in the new, Empire-ruled galaxy, and ordered a genocide.

Only a few refugee ships, carrying mostly children, managed to escape the doomed world; a seven-years-old boy named Hans among them. Some refugees moved to Protectorate planets and began to build new lives, using money from the pirate clans' reserves; however, the Protectorate couldn't allow the Midgaardians to create yet another pirate haven, especially in the very middle of the Golden Hundred and with a war taking place. They were faced with a choice: to serve to Protectorate, or to be immediately exiled onto a near-uninhabitable planet outside the Dominion Sphere. Midgaardians chose service. The Snow Wolves mercenary company was born; it later performed admirably in subsequent wars.

Unlike his kin, Olgerd took a different path. After serving among the Snow Wolves for several years, he joined the Advisor Academy.

During the Second Wave, Olgerd commanded a Protectorate rapid response squadron consisting of light space vessels; his duty was to destroy Empire supply ships. Aside from that, Olgerd participated in a number of large-scale operations, such as repelling the imperial fleet attacking the world of Felicia. During the Third Wave, Olgerd was leading an interdiction group within an army, tasked with slowing down the Empire's advance into the Protectorate. He finished the war at Velian during redeployment to another planet; alongside six other advisors, he was protecting the world from imperial troops. When open hostilities between the Empire and the Protectorate ceased, Olgerd didn't take part in fighting for some time; however, two years after the signing of the Vigilant Peace, he secretly led a flotilla of vessels tasked with supporting Protectorate-loyal rebellions on Empire-conquered territories. His involvement in the liberation and subsequent defense of Rusty Shard was the most active.

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## Lady Agatha



Among the Lords of the Imperial Legion, leading the troops of the Polaris Empire, women are quite rare; but those of them who do receive the Rainbow Ribbon of the Imperial Legion from the Emperor's own hands are undeniably commanders par excellence and reckless warriors themselves.

Lady Pyriel was like that - before her desertion. Lady Agatha is like that now - once Pyriel's friend and classmate in an army college, now her most hated foe. Rumors are that she also makes for a triangle with Pyriel and Cross.

Lady Agatha started her career as a commander of a small border garrison, and that's where she also took her baptism of fire. For several years, nightstalkers, creatures originating from failed genetic experiments, have attacked the Empire's borders, tempted with planetary resources - these were the battles with these strange enemies elevating Agatha, then a colonel, to a full-fledged ribboned legionary.

When the Third Wave had started, she became a commander of one of the Imperial Fleet battlegroups, under general command of lord Cross. Lady Agatha participated in many battles of various degree of success, including the assault on Velian, where she met her now ex-friend, advisor Pyriel. The meeting was neither warm nor friendly, to say the least.



Both women were leading significant forces.  
Both had forgotten their duties to their states, surrendering to hatred.

The ensuing battle resulted in the destruction of several city blocks and lady Agatha taking a mortal wound from her enemy - Pyriel has decapitated her with one lucky strike; only the incredible speed, with which Agatha's bodyguards delivered her head to the closest cryofreezer, saved her from inevitable death. The physicians of the Empire restored her body, and in half a year she was back again, participating in the now-unspoken war.

She had encountered Pyriel once more in twelve years after the Vigilant Peace, after the end of the Third Wave. Pyriel, together with an expeditionary force of Felician guard, was attempting to seize the planet of Teclius from imperial control; the reason for that was the discovery of an ancient nonhuman city. The attempt was a failure; the Felician force retreated, losing the majority of their personnel, Pyriel surviving solely with the Iron General's aid.

During her times as a border garrison commander, Agatha has developed a distinctive style of leadership; the nightstalkers' numeric advantage led her to resort to guerrilla methods on her own territory - and to learn the principles of skirmish warfare. Since then, she has always defeated the enemy when outnumbered; however, full-scale warfare has proven to be difficult for her, as seen at Velian.

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## The Iron General



Among those leading Protectorate troops, unusual individuals can be found.

For many years, Protectorate scientists were trying to create artificial intelligence; an important task for a military composed not only of human beings, but of computer-controlled robo-infantry as well. Robots have proven to be inexhaustible and exceptionally precise in their actions, but they could not compare with a well-experienced human in flexibility. Miniaturization was also an issue - a robotic skull could not reasonably house a computer advanced enough to rival a human brain.

Built-in computers of robo-infantrymen can only handle the most basic of functions; tactical and strategical planning is handled by mobile command centers, connected to entire robo-regiments at once. Such centers were the ones to receive brain-comparable artificial intelligence, as that would give the Protectorate a significant advantage.

One such experimental center had an accident leading to the creation of a creature later dubbed the Iron General.

It was the First Wave when Protectorate researchers were running field tests of new control center prototypes and unexpectedly encountered a similar group of imperial researchers who were likewise running field tests of a new weapon - a thunderstorm cannon, intended to counter robotic infantry by firing an electricity blast frying all electronics in a several hundred meters' radius.

So it happened that such a shot scored a direct hit on a prototype control center. The multiple layers of shielding prevented the worst, but something occurred to it nonetheless.

The battle was, overall, a Protectorate victory; however, strange behaviours were observed in robotic forces commanded by the damaged center. Sometimes they walked pointlessly to and fro, but sometimes they would direct themselves to seemingly unwinnable fights - and win; moreover, after the imperial forces started to flee, the robots pursued them, reached them, and massacred those about to surrender.

From the science team's viewpoint, the computer has undeniably gone insane. The project leaders were divided; some insisted that the malfunctioning device must be disassembled, some argued that this was a display of actual machine intelligence. The latter team won, and the Protectorate got its first and only sapient computer general.

For the newly-dubbed Iron General, a state-of-the-art robotic body was built, able to house its mind and programs.

Unlike his comrades in arms, the Iron General is machinely calculative and inhumanly bloodthirsty. "Leave nobody alive" - such is his creed, fulfilled; he is known to have ordered an entire city's population killed for the sole reason of it not being possible to find the exact Empire spies within time constraints. For such "tics", he's also known as the Iron Death.