



LIBER
XENOLOGIS

Observations from a
Blackstone Fortress



DARIUS
HINKS

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Darius Hinks



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Observations from a Blackstone Fortress

— or —

Disquisitions relating to the Matter
and Nature of the Xenos Races

— or —

Elementa Physiologiae Corporis Xenographia

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Notes for a Planned Address to the
Esteemed Genetors and Adepts of the Magos Biologis,
Inspired by my Voyages in the Western Reaches and my
Ongoing Explorations of the Dreaded Blackstone Fortress.

— By —

Captain Janus Draik

Twelfth Duke of Vexus Prime, Strategos Major of House Draik,
Bearer of the Senatorum Imperialis Seal of Exoneration
and Incontestable Holder of the Imperial Warrant of Trade.

(BY PERMISSION)

THIS VOLUME,
INTENDED AS AN AID TO INSTRUCTION,
IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED
TO THE MOST GLORIOUS,
THE LORD HIGH COMMANDER OF THE IMPERIUM,
ROBOUTE GULLIMAN,
IN GRATITUDE FOR THE MUCH WHICH,
AMID EXTREME DIFFICULTIES,
HE HAS ALREADY DONE TO PROMOTE THE ERADICATION
IN THIS GALAXY
OF THE XENOS THREAT.

Prefatory Note

Esteemed genetors and magi, since reaching the enigma that is the Blackstone Fortress, I have realised that my personal recollections are of far more importance than mere notes for another House Draik memoir. I have set aside false modesty and conceded that what began as a humble collection of observations and personal theories has evolved into a work of tactical and scientific significance.

It has been an oft-stated desire of the Adeptus Mechanicus to catalogue and codify the myriad sentient creatures that infest our Imperium. It was Magos Theta Hieronyma himself who said:

We exist in a veil of horrors. Diversities and manifestations haunt our skies and they will devour us if they are not pinned and mounted. The Imperium is a single, celestial body, wrought in tribute to the Ommissiah. It is divine in construction and perfect in design; but it is not free of flaws. Our greatest hope of victory lies in our infinite, God-Emperor-given intellect. Only by naming our foes can we defeat them.

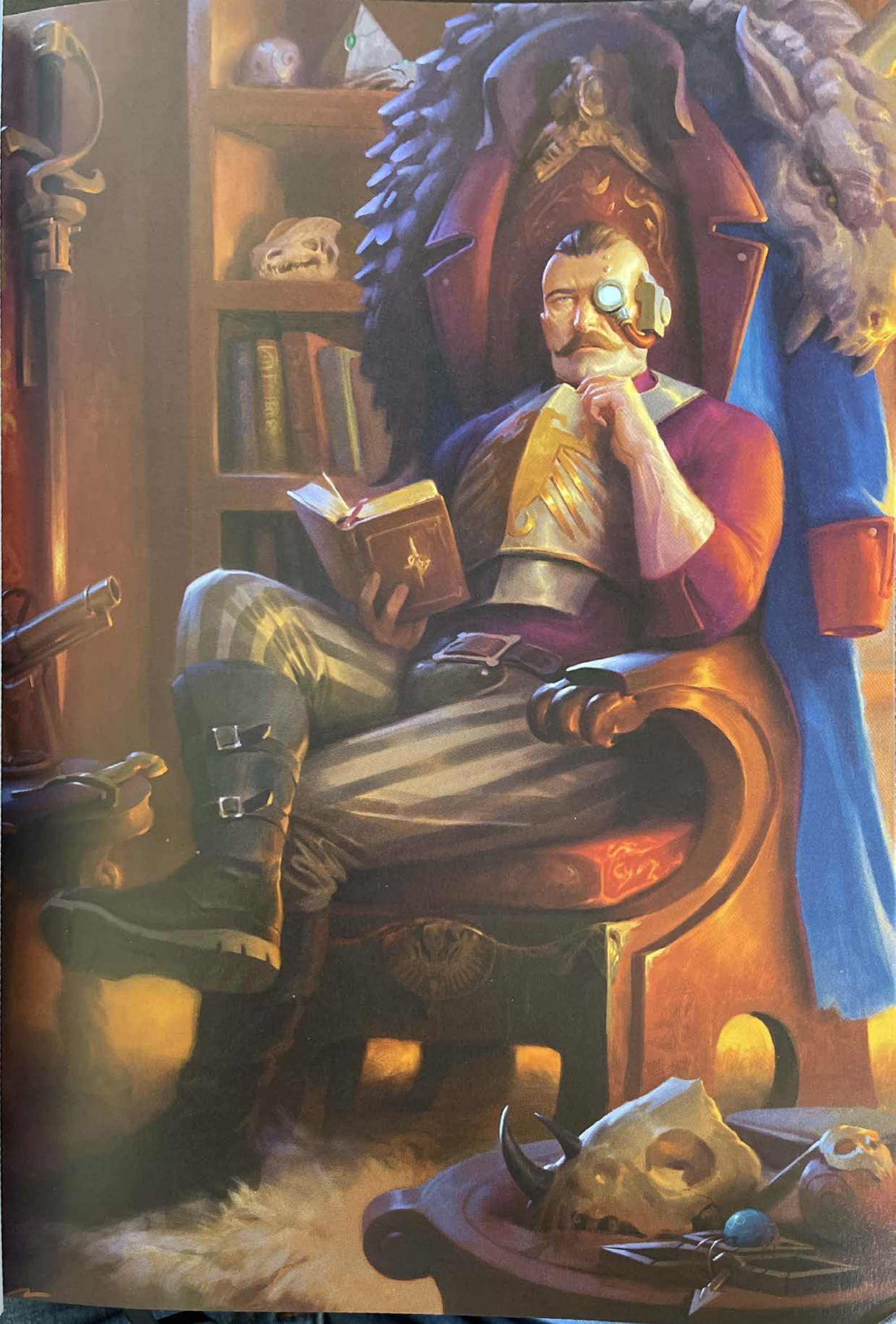
For reasons that shall become apparent in the following pages, the Blackstone Fortress – along with its orbital platform, Precipice – has given me a unique opportunity to achieve this goal of understanding the nature of our enemies. My idly collected notes have enabled me to produce the *definitive* work on xenos life forms. I believe this treatise will become xenology's defining text. I have used the rarefied, peculiar situation I find myself in to study alien organisms in unprecedented detail, and, alongside my own personal observations, I have been able to gather information from many other travellers. Our collected experiences span every sector of the Imperium, and I have learned of xenospecies so incredible I would not have given the tales credence had they not been verified by irrefutable sources, including adepts of the Magos Biologis.

There has never been a more urgent need to understand the countless xenos threats arrayed against us. In every sector and sub-sector of the Imperium, there are reports of insurrection and heresy on a hitherto unseen scale. Navigating the stars was ever a dangerous process, as you well know, but our trade routes and merchant

fleets are now in a state of complete collapse, and formerly stable Imperial outposts are battling for their existence. I do not profess to understand all the reasons for this increased violence. There is much talk of a 'Great Rift' blurring the boundaries between the material galaxy and warp space, but what *I* can say with confidence is that we have reached a crisis point. The anomaly threatening our interests has also disrupted the xenos species. Where once they might have cowered in hidden backwaters, content to plot against us, they are now emerging, emboldened by fear, daring to attack our most well-defended systems. Like rats disturbed by a flood, these forces are pouring across the galaxy in unimaginable numbers.

If we do not act quickly, the galaxy's lesser races will soon be massing at the steps of the Imperial Palace itself. This may seem like hyperbole but I assure you, the threat that once seemed vague and distant is now clear and imminent. All is not lost, however. In these carefully assembled pages I have compiled a wealth of information so reliable it will become the Imperium's bulwark against all those who would wish to challenge the pre-eminence of man.

Captain J. Draik



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Introduction to the Blackstone Fortress

As a sanctioned bearer of the Imperial Warrant of Trade, I am privy to many dreadful facts that the Imperium's general populace are spared. It is a burden I carry with pride, for it is the duty of the blessed to protect the less blessed. The galaxy is riven, set ablaze by heresy and war, but nothing I have seen, in all my travels, could have prepared me for the riddle I unearthed on the westernmost borders of Segmentum Pacificus.

As soon as I arrived in the Western Reaches, I heard incredible rumours. Through my various attachés and trade contacts I learned that an alien star fort of unusual size had been sighted to the galactic south of Galoseti. The *Draikstar* had been hounded by warp storms since sallying forth from Terra, and my contacts claimed that these same tempests had uncovered a hitherto veiled region.

The sighting of a star fort may not sound so extraordinary, especially in light of the horrors that assail the Imperium from all sides, but what piqued my interest was the claim that it was a Blackstone Fortress. Learned magi, you will no doubt be acquainted with *Ravensburg's Treatise on the Gothic War*, in which Blackstone Fortresses are described as immeasurably vast, mysterious structures that originated either in the depths of prehistory or in another galaxy entirely. It is a matter of record



that, during the time of the Gothic War, they were harnessed by forces loyal to the Throne and also by heretics, with neither side understanding what they had conquered. The Gothic War was famously brutal and the fortresses were all lost or destroyed, and they have since been consigned to the annals of military history.

I was originally dismissive of the claims that a Blackstone Fortress had been found out here at the very fringes of the Imperium. I pride myself on being a man of science and reason, but the tales were so numerous that I could not help but wonder what had spawned such outlandish claims. Then, while making an ambassadorial visit to the Comitissa of House Metastasio, I discovered a star chart that purported to show the location of the Blackstone and decided to investigate for myself.*

The people of the Western Reaches are a well-intentioned but rough-hewn breed and I knew that, if the tales were true, I had to ensure that I, a legitimate agent of the Senatorum Imperialis, be the one to secure the Blackstone in the name of the Emperor.

As we approached the region, the warp storms grew even more ferocious and we encountered a sprawling nebula of debris and wreckage that was not recorded on any star charts. The density of the cloud was so great that I was forced to abandon the *Draikstar* and proceed with a small crew in my lander, the *Vanguard*.

The passage was hazardous, but I shall not bore you with my various trials; suffice to say, I passed through the debris field and emerged to find myself facing a vision that shall haunt my sleep forever more: the unknowable face of the Blackstone Fortress. The design of the star fort is almost impossible to describe as it conforms to no natural laws of physics, but it is orbited by a ramshackle structure of more mundane proportions. The space station known as Precipice is as unique as the object it was built to plunder. It is a frontier town forged of salvaged hulls and cargo holds. I was far from the first to reach the Blackstone, and the disparate company who arrived before me had already formed a bizarre pact, swearing to maintain a ceasefire so that they could explore the fortress in (relative) peace. It is this – unique, as far as I am aware – arrangement that has enabled normally opposed xenospecies to coexist and allowed me to produce this extraordinary bestiary.

** It has been brought to my attention that the Comitissa claims I took the chart without her permission. To all those who have entertained this tiresome slander, I would suggest they compare the recent behaviour of the author with that of the Comitissa. I have braved a Blackstone Fortress, in the name of the Emperor, and produced this groundbreaking treatise at great personal expense to myself and House Draik. The Comitissa has, meanwhile, hosted several balls. These are social events which even the ill-educated natives of the Western Reaches have described as 'perverse' and 'borderline heretical'. There are widespread rumours that she has been entertaining leaders of proscribed cults and encouraging her subjects to 'explore less rigid belief systems'. It is exactly this kind of moral backsliding that has, I believe, led the Imperium to its current crisis. The governor of Hydraphur has already expressed concerns about the Comitissa's 'free-thinking' societies.*

The Denizens of the Blackstone Fortress

I shall begin by describing the various ways in which the Blackstone Fortress wards its secrets. It is my belief that the devices and weapons I encountered on my expeditions are sentient life forms, worthy of a place in this tract and just as serious a threat as the biological horrors mentioned in the later pages. They may not be xenos, as such, but they have the capacity for independent thought and they are lethally efficient hunters.

Upon entering the Blackstone Fortress, one quickly ascertains that there is no clear distinction between architecture and predator. Walls dissolve into blades and steps lash out like a storm of claws. Pillars fold into armoured, humanoid figures, devoid of features but filled with lethal intent. Obelisks interlace and form crystalline serpents vast enough to devour entire shuttles. All of this takes place in a lake of such pitiless gloom that it leaches the spirit and drains the will. Truly, it is a nightmarish realm, and were the potential spoils not so enticing, no sane person would set foot in the place.

I have to admit that on my first few forays into the fortress, I became obsessed by the idea of capturing one of these peculiar organisms. At first I hoped to secure a living specimen, and did indeed manage to entrap one in a maglev* chamber. Infuriatingly, the chamber refused to move with my prize inside it, and then, when the drone cut through its restraints, I found myself in the inconvenient position of sharing a ten-foot cube with an entity intent on removing my limbs. As fortune would have it, a drukhari privateer arrived and presented an even more enticing meal for the drone. I might have considered aiding the drukhari had I not recognised him. The arrogant wretch had referred to me as an inelegant *mon-keigh* only a few days earlier, so I assumed that he would prefer to deal with the drone in his own, more stylish manner and left him to it.

The range and mutability of the Blackstone's defenders make them hard to classify, but I have managed to identify a few recurring morphological types.

* *The transportation chambers one uses to navigate the fortress.*



Spindle Drones

*Vigilis triangulus**

I have encountered these insect-like beings in almost every vault of the Blackstone. They act like corpuscles defending the bloodstream of a healthy organism.** They emerge from the shadows, as if by an act of sorcery, to neutralise any 'foreign body' that has entered the fortress. The drones resemble metallo-organic arachnids, skittering and frenetic, with razor-sharp limbs that produce a dreadful scraping sound as they close in on their prey. They have three legs and a single, baleful eye mounted in a trianguloid, spindle-mounted head, and the light that radiates from it is able to pierce the thick gloom of the fortress.

I have only encountered them on the Blackstone Fortress and, during the course of my interviews, I have heard no mention of them existing outside this hellish place. They are remorseless and relentless, butchering anything they encounter with a chilling dispassion. They appear to make no distinction between biological and mechanical, slicing through everything with the same robotic precision. Ranged weapons are the safest method of hunting these fast-moving killers. Targeting the cyclopean eye is a tactic I have employed several times to great effect. I would strongly advise against any attempts at diplomacy.



** A quick note on taxonomy: I have employed a form of binomial nomenclature based on the systems proposed in Wolfenbüttel's Xenographia Universalis. This is not, of course, the only naming system in use, but it is to my mind the most logical.*

*** I am referring, of course, to the famous 'antikörper hypothesis' of Magos Verbum, in which he claimed that tiny, benign molecules in our blood defend the human body from malignant microbes. He later asserted that the molecules in his own blood had names and were communicating with him, and that they were to blame for his appalling crimes, but despite his later missteps I think his original ideas were sound.*

Guardian Drones

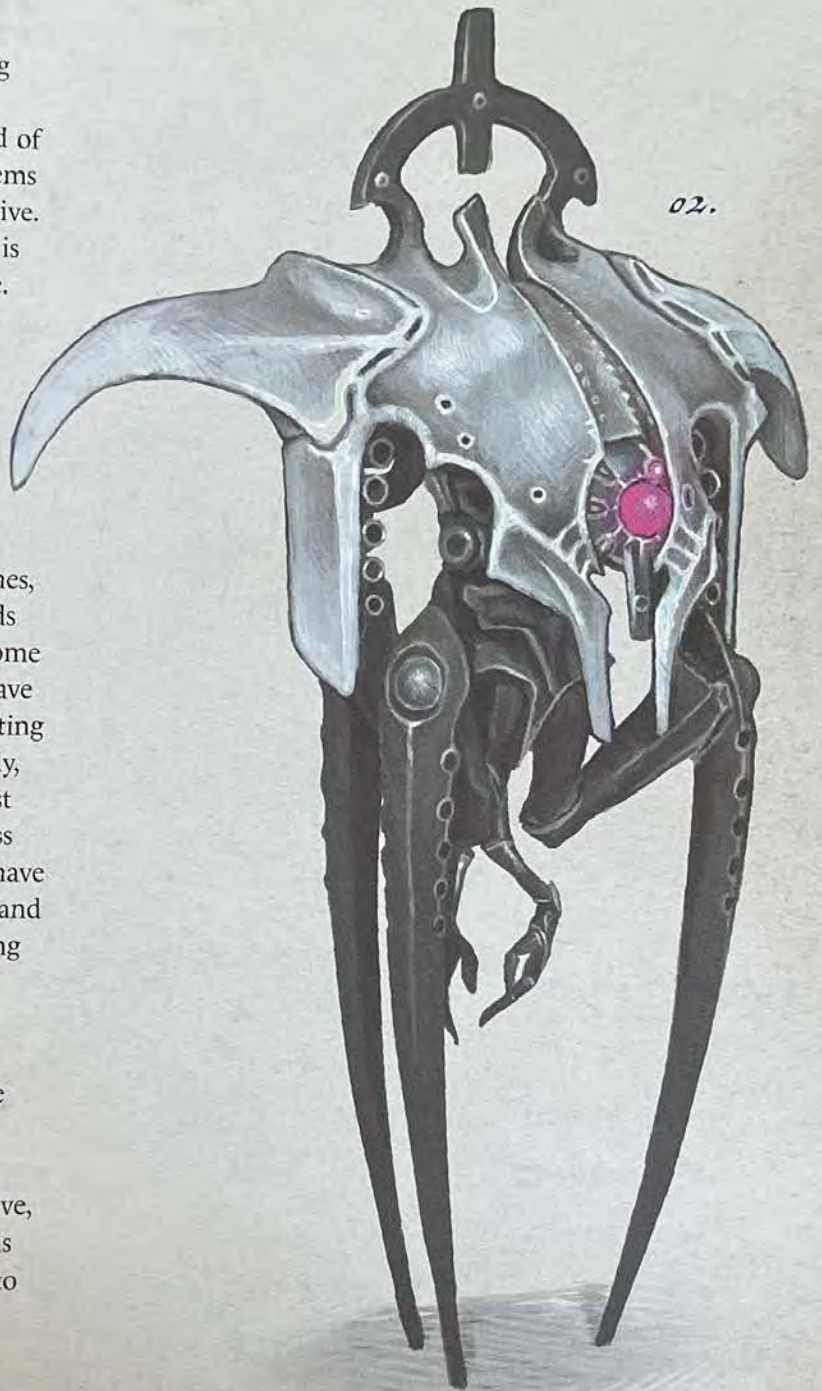
Vigilis maximus

The Blackstone Fortress is always unpredictable and protean, but during my recent expeditions it has become more so. There seems to be some kind of change taking place. The defence systems are more numerous and more aggressive. A symptom of this increased hostility is the emergence of a new kind of drone. In most respects they are similar to the previous drones I have encountered (see above), but built on a much larger scale and with armour that seems even more impenetrable than that of their lesser cousins. They often arrive accompanied by a host of smaller drones, and the presence of these goliaths sends them into such a frenzy that they become almost impossible to target. Again, I have heard no mention of these drones existing outside the Blackstone Fortress. Initially, I only encountered them in the deepest vaults but, as the changes in the fortress accelerate,* these monstrous sentinels have begun venturing into the upper levels and even attacking previously secure docking points. As with their smaller kin, they butcher anything they encounter and then 'sew' the carnage into the surface of the fortress, burying their kills in the noctilith.**

Mass-fire, heavy artillery and plasma weapons have been known to be effective, but the arrival of these colossal sentinels should be taken as a sign that it's time to attempt a different route.

** Some of the Blackstone's chambers have always been in a state of flux, but now it seems they all are, and the changes seem to be altering the fortress as a whole.*

*** See my interview with Magos Mepsus Upsilon for an explanation of noctilith and its fascinating properties.*



Kroot

One of the greatest surprises of my time on the Blackstone Fortress has been my reevaluation of the kroot species. Prior to my arrival in the Western Reaches I had dismissed them as savages of limited intellect, little more than animals with the ability to bear arms. They are commonly employed by the T'au Empire as scouts and attack dogs (cannon fodder might be a more accurate description) and this is the first time I have encountered a member of the race acting under his own auspices. Genetors and magi, let me assure you that most of our thinking regarding this species is erroneous in the extreme.

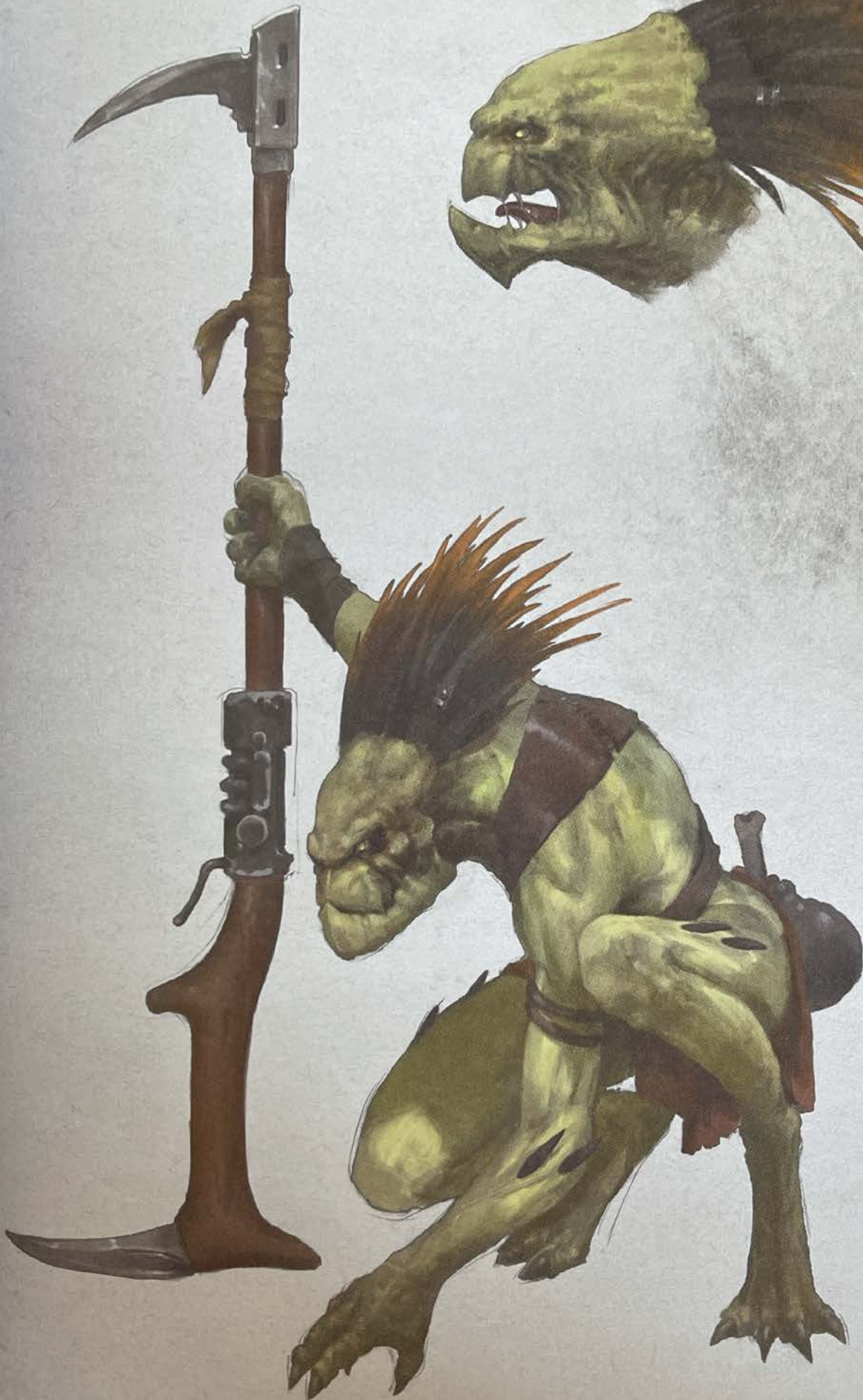
During my early days on Precipice, I encountered a specimen by the name of Dahyak Grekh. The thing was wounded and in the process of being tortured to death by a group of Andusian mercenaries. I had no particular interest in the well-being of the kroot, but the mercenaries made the mistake of impugning my ancestry and, despite my generally sanguine nature, I was unable to let the slight pass.

Once I had taught the mercenaries some manners, Grekh decided – through some quirk of his faith – that he owed me a life-debt, and swore to protect me. A Draik has little need of protection, as you no doubt recall, but over time, as I learned more about the creature, I spotted an opportunity to study the species at close quarters and, I hesitate to say, I have come to respect Grekh as a useful and insightful companion. I hasten to add that I have not forgotten the innate primacy of humankind and the inherent inferiority of xenospecies, but I have to acknowledge that Grekh has become one of my most reliable companions during

Blackstone expeditions. If he speaks at all, it is usually in obscure riddles and half-finished sentences, but he is seemingly without fear and endowed with such a fierce vitality and strength that I have never seen him flag nor falter.



03.



04.

Kroot

Krootis aviana

05.



For clarity, I will list several distinct types of kroot, even though, as I explain below, they are actually different facets of a single, but constantly evolving, race. My primary experience, through Dahyak Grekh, is of the bipedal, humanoid genus, *Krootis aviana*, often used as scouts by the T'au Empire.

Kroot are tall, agile and slender, but this belies their strength and hardiness.* There are clear signs of avian heritage in their facial features, including a wide, powerful beak. One of their most striking features is the crest of spines that top their heads. Grekh is reticent on the subject, but I am confident that the quills act as a sensory organ. Grekh's spines rattle and move just before he announces the approach of a predator, as do the small barbs that cover his skin. I would surmise that these quills and barbs work with the creature's pronounced olfactory apparatus to gather sensory information. Kroot have the ability to adopt racial characteristics (see images), so their appearance is probably more varied than previously thought, ranging from simple variations in skin colour to a completely different anatomy.

The kroot are far more widely scattered than I had realised. I once entertained an ambassador from the T'au Empire who claimed that all kroot mercenaries originate on a world called Pech in the Ultima Segmentum.

However, after talking to Grekh I have learned that there are kroot kindred (tribes) to be found across the breadth of the galaxy. The racial variations described above would appear to explain how kroot are far more widespread than we thought. Centuries of morphological appropriation may have resulted in kindred that are almost unrecognisable from the kroot seen fighting alongside the t'au. Grekh, for example, tells me he hails from a world called Akchan-Kur in the galactic north of Segmentum Tempestus. However, it would appear that most kroot home worlds fall into a similar category: primarily arboreal with the kroot kindred occupying vast hives made of regorged wood pulp. Grekh explained that by constructing homes from material they have previously consumed, his species build a psychic or spiritual bond with their hives that enables them to work as a single entity when attacked.

I was under the impression that kroot will eat almost anything, but that is far from the truth. They are able to digest most kinds of meat (preferably raw and freshly killed) but they are actually very selective regarding which animals they eat. This is because, rather than simply providing sustenance, the flesh of their prey grants kroot what Grekh describes as

* I once observed Grekh win an arm-wrestling match with an ogryn. The ogryn was not at all gracious in defeat, but Grekh responded in kind and later ate the arm. He displayed such reverence for the limb that it was like watching a priest eat a relic.

06.

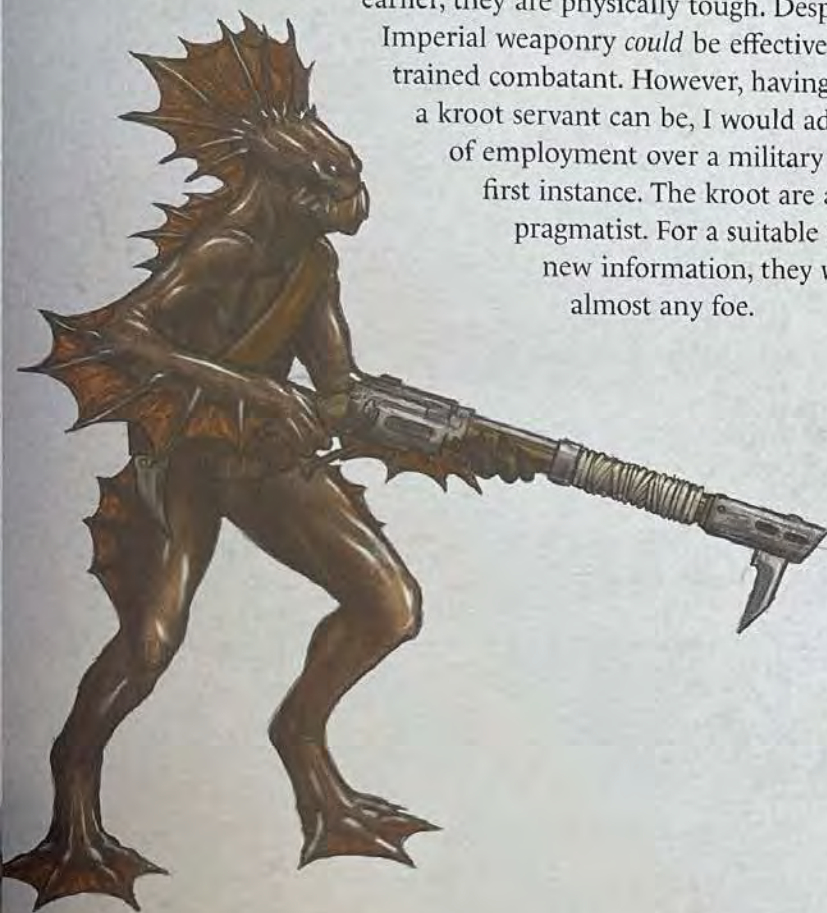


'insights'. These insights can vary from stolen memories and the ability to 'absorb' language skills, all the way to a kind of conscious evolution in which the kroot subsume the racial characteristics of their food. For this reason, they will avoid certain meats.

At first, this behaviour seems reprehensible and vulgar – kroot have absolutely no concept of table manners – but once one has grasped the cultural and tactical significance of their digestive tract, their behaviour seems almost tolerable.* I have covered the strange religious beliefs of the kroot in an interview included later in the book.

07. Generally, kroot wear resilient body armour and, as I mentioned earlier, they are physically tough. Despite this, most kinds of Imperial weaponry *could* be effective against them if used by a trained combatant. However, having seen first hand how useful a kroot servant can be, I would advise diplomacy and offers of employment over a military response, at least in the first instance. The kroot are an odd mix of mystic and pragmatist. For a suitable fee, and a chance to consume new information, they will fight fearlessly against almost any foe.

** In terms of eating habits, at least. Grekh's other peculiarities still irk me. For example, he has no concept of hygiene or taking care of his person. His skin teems with mites and insects, and he actively cultivates these infestations, containing some of the insects in tiny cages fixed to his armour. He treats them as either pets or food, depending on his mood, and converses with them in a peculiar series of clicks and whistles. He also shows no understanding of deference or etiquette, and when trying to join a conversation, he simply speaks over others, with no regard for manners. In some respects he is like an ill-bred hive-dweller, lacking deportment or social skills.*



Kroothawk

Krootis accipiter

The term kroothawk appears to cover a whole family of raptors originating from the world of Pech. Rather than being an evolution of *Krootis aviana*, I believe – from his reverence towards these birds – that Grekh is descended from them. They're found on all known kroot home worlds and are powerful, fast-moving hunters that will settle for carrion in the absence of fresh meat.

I have never encountered these creatures myself, but from Grekh's description, a good marksman should have no difficulty hunting them.

Krootox

Krootis troglodytes

For the reasons described above, the kroot family tree is a varied one. I gather from Grekh that some evolutionary branches wither while others thrive. He speaks of krootox as though they are a cautionary tale, illustrating the dangers of a diet that consists only of simple-minded, bestial creatures. But it seems to me that the krootox are an important piece of the kroot war machine, acting as transport, beast of burden and a kind of mobile heavy artillery – krootox are so strong they are easily able to carry heavy ordnance.

They resemble a larger, more heavyset form of their more numerous kin, with huge, rounded shoulders and powerful forearms that punch into the ground as the krootox barrel ape-like into battle.

They originate on the same forest worlds as their riders and lack the intelligence to act in an independent capacity, so they will only be encountered alongside 'standard' kroot.

Like their smaller, more quick-witted kin, the krootox are capable of eating almost anything, and they appear to have lost the ability to metamorphose, gaining sustenance but no 'insights' from their food, which gives them free rein to eat as they please.

Melee weapons and small-arms fire are often ineffectual against these brutal giants. Heavy artillery, deployed from a distance, would be the preferable method of attack.



Kroot Hound

Krootis canis

Ugly avian/canine hybrids, kroot hounds are the size of a large dog, with the same brutal-looking beak and crest of spines as their handlers. The quills on their flanks and spine appear to function in the same way as Grekh's: as some kind of sensory apparatus that alerts them to threats. In this respect they make excellent guards and trackers. They can also be used in the vanguard of a kroot attack force, moving in packs at incredible speeds.

The biggest threat from a pack of kroot hounds is to morale. They move shockingly fast and emit a dreadful screech. Steady nerves and a resolute nature are enough to keep them at bay – along with a decent las-weapon, of course.



Knarloc

Krootis magnus

Knarlocs are similar to the krootox in the sense that they are a mentally devolved relative of *Krootis aviana*, but they can grow to much larger sizes than the krootox. As well as mobile weapons platforms, they are used to carry building materials and other heavy loads. The smaller knarlocs are used as steeds in a form of elite kroot cavalry that is able to attack at speed over even the most difficult terrain. They are mostly placid, unless hungry or goaded into a fury by their riders.

Whilst impressively large and powerful, these creatures are the most dim-witted of the kroot species. Even the most basic traps and ruses will confound them. In terms of the smaller, cavalry species, I would suggest targeting the riders. Although, as mentioned previously, bringing the kroot onside would be a better tactic.

The Battle of Nothingsea

The more time I spend with Grekh, the more I sense that his glowering, monosyllabic nature is a ruse. I have caught glimpses of wry, dark humour in him, and I believe that the kroot only play the part of being simple savages. They carry crude rifles and dress in rags, but cross the void in ships more efficient than anything in the Imperial Navy. Grekh once spoke with pride of things called Warspheres, which are a cross between starships and vast, domed cities.

Whenever I come close to cracking Grekh's façade, however, he withdraws into unintelligible clicks and whistles, resuming his role of bestial simplicity. But on one occasion, Grekh became unintentionally intoxicated* and began singing, saying that the poison in his blood reminded him of something called 'Vawk'. The singing was so shocking and so unpleasant that it took me a moment to realise he was using Gothic, and that the words relayed some form of kroot creation myth. As Grekh screeched, clacked and even danced, I snatched a data-slate and noted down the gist of the tale:

Since before the dawn of the cosmos, Vawk the Huntress wandered alone, devising her Great Plan. Then, after countless ages of travelling, Vawk met another god, Gmork the Destroyer, in the doldrums of the Nothingsea. After being alone for so long, Vawk was delighted and approached Gmork with an offer of friendship, suggesting that they work together to discover other gods. Gmork laughed at the idea and attacked her. Thus began the Battle of Nothingsea. The gods' blows were so great that the Nothingsea began to tear. With every talon strike and punch, holes appeared in the darkness, letting light through. In this way, as the gods strived for dominance, the stars were born.

Gmork was so delighted by the savagery of the fight that he did not notice the cosmos springing into life around him. But Vawk was wiser, and as she swooped and dived, she steered Gmork this way and that, birthing the heavens in accordance with her Great Plan, using Gmork's vigour to her benefit. Twelve times, Vawk asked Gmork to see sense. Twelve times, Gmork refused, attacking with renewed fury.

The battle grew so brutal that some of the stars broke, forming into lumps of dead rock. In this way, the planets were born. Vawk saw that the galaxy was beautiful and revelled in the glory of her Great Plan, but then she despaired as she saw that Gmork meant to destroy everything she had made. She strived to defeat him, but

** I had spent a pleasant evening entertaining a troilan ambassador and, between us, we had almost finished an entire bottle of Tyrrean amasec. The ambassador seemed to be at the point of revealing some interesting discovery about the weapons systems of the Blackstone Fortress, information I had spent a long time trying to procure. While I was briefly out of the commerce lounge, Grekh caught the drunken ambassador trying to poison my drink. There was a fight, and by the time I returned the ambassador was in several pieces. Grekh had decided to use him as an early supper. I was furious until I learned of the attempt on my life. The amasec in the ambassador's bloodstream had a dramatic effect on Grekh.*

they were evenly matched and neither could best their opponent. Where Gmork was strong, Vawk was fast. Where Gmork was steadfast, Vawk was agile.

Finally, Vawk succumbed to a great rage and plunged her beak into Gmork's neck. God-blood filled her gullet. Vawk was repulsed by the flavour and spat the blood out, but one drop slipped down her throat. As the blood flowed through her stomachs, Vawk felt a great sickness in her body, but she also found that she now had the same strength as Gmork. The two gods were no longer evenly matched. Vawk defeated Gmork, banishing her enemy to regions of the Nothingsea that had yet to be rescued from darkness.

The sickness in Vawk grew fast and she realised that the god-blood had poisoned her, so she singled out the world right at the centre of her Great Plan, called Pech, and landed on its surface. She spread her wings across the land, forming mountains from her bones and forests from her feathers. Then, with a final breath, she vomited a great flock of eagles into the sky.

I have since researched the name Vawk and found that it, or one of a number of similar names, is used on several kroot home worlds. I believe this 'huntress' to be a key figure in their faith. The name Gmork is clearly reminiscent of 'ork', so I would surmise that there is a link to the various greenskin tribes. It is fascinating to wonder how this creation myth came to be. Perhaps it refers to an early encounter between Grekh's ancestors and a greenskin invasion. I think this could be an interesting area for research. Since his unintentional intoxication, Grekh has become even more reticent, however, so I fear I have learned all I can from that source.



Abhumans



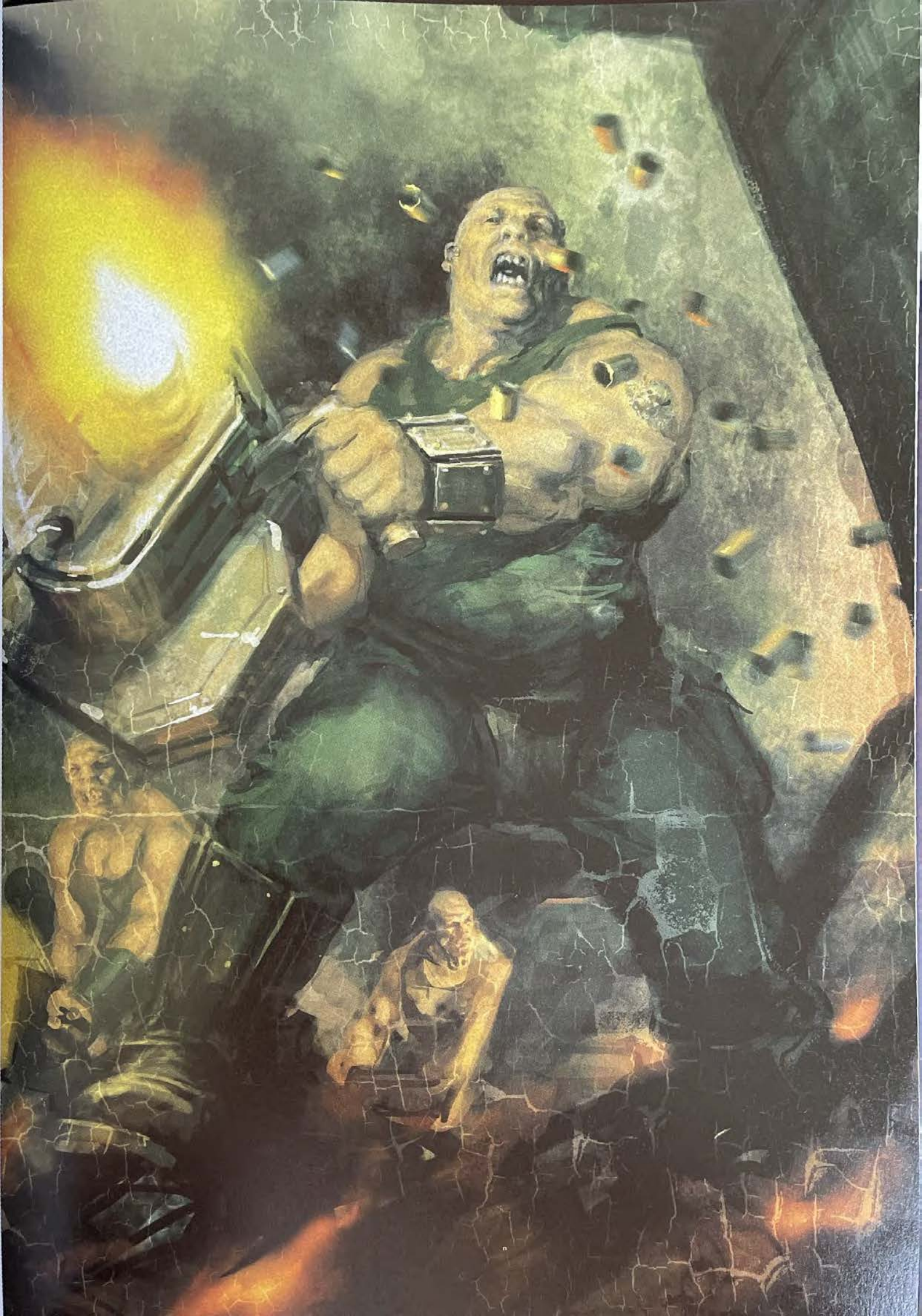
Wisdom, strength of character, nobility of spirit; do not look for these traits among our abhuman kin. The distrust and revulsion with which they are met is justified. However, in the following pages I hope to illustrate the value of these deviations from the genetic norm.

Amongst the oldest Terran houses, such as my own, there is a collective understanding of the strata and protocols that define us. This understanding breeds confidence and the ability to command. Amongst humanity's lower orders, though, confusion often leads to unnecessary fear and racial tension. The Imperium survives on its ability to adapt, and the many species of abhuman employed by the Astra Militarum and Imperial Navy are an *invaluable* weapon in its arsenal.

Unsanctioned mutation is a dangerous

abomination that will spiral out of control and destroy us if allowed to take root, but a human who has simply adapted to survive his environment can be utilised rather than feared. The determining factor is this: where unsanctioned mutation has no logic and no end, sanctioned abhumans are a stable, fixed point of aberration.

During my travels through the Western Reaches I have encountered several breeds of abhuman and, repulsive though they are, all of them have proved useful in some regard. Through my discourses with the rugged, resourceful denizens of Precipice, I have also learned that there is a far wider range of abhumans than I previously realised. I have done my best to capture all of them here, for it is only by grasping the full extent of these genetic variations that we can utilise our true military strength.



Ogryn

Homo sapiens gigantus

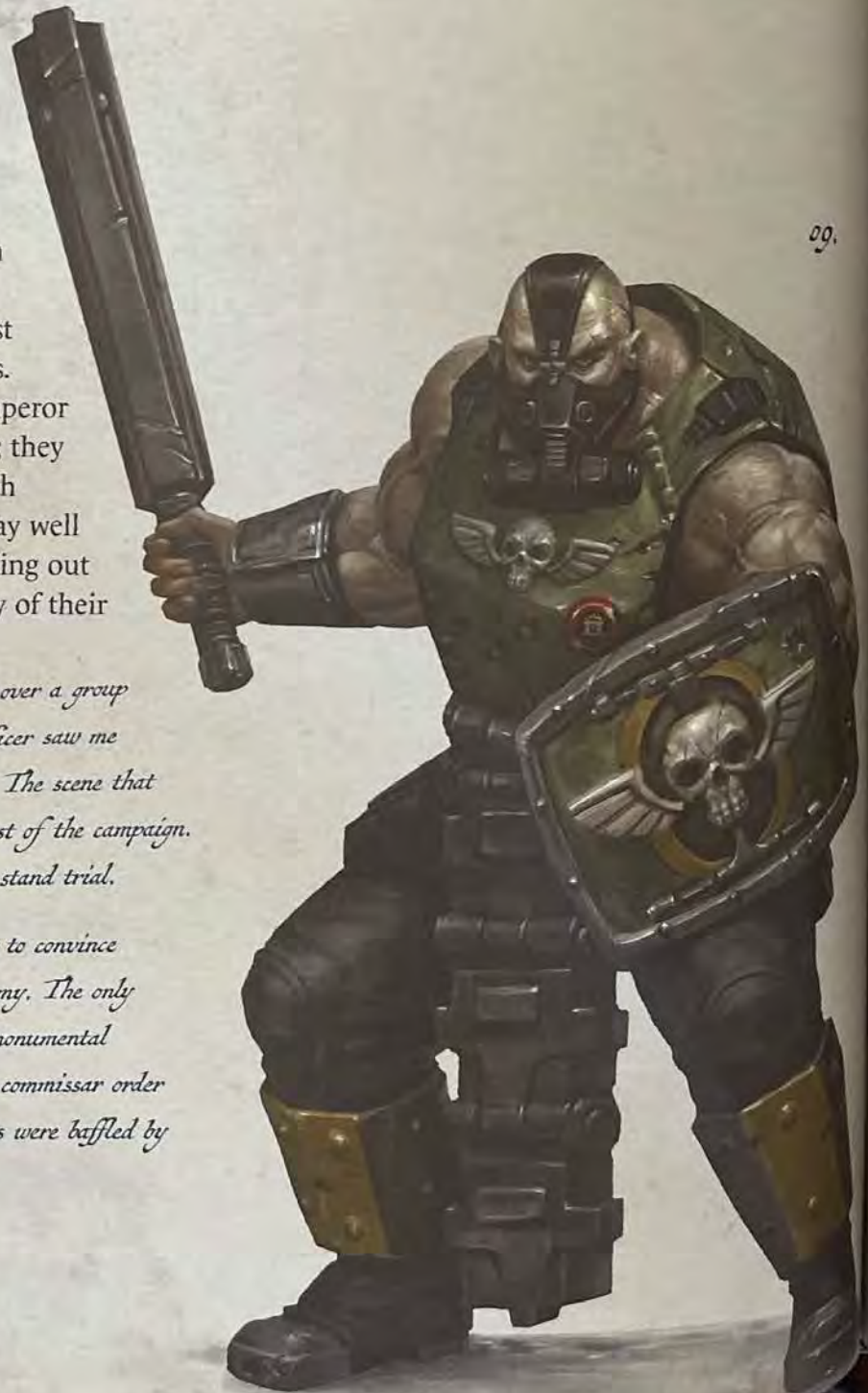
Probably the most ubiquitous strain of abhuman, these lumbering simpletons are a familiar sight in almost every Imperial battle line. Their strength is as legendary as their stupidity, and some of them are so large and powerful they wear pieces of tank tread and armoured chassis into battle. Their strength, in fact, can sometimes be their downfall. Ogryn weapons (ripper guns, slab shields and the like) have to be manufactured to the most simple, robust design so that they can survive being handled by these clumsy goliaths. Ogryns' loyalty to the Emperor is well known and they will not balk at even the most horrific foe, but one must always be careful to address them in the most unambiguous terms. They obey every order with infuriating literalism.*

There are other, more sinister risks associated with these brutal abhumans. The small mind is easily filled with faith, they say, and ogryns are undoubtedly amongst the most loyal of our abhuman warriors. They do not believe in the Emperor in a vague, metaphysical sense; they believe He is quite literally with them on the battlefield and may well appear in their mess tent handing out medals. The childlike simplicity of their

faith might make it appear that they are impervious to corruption. But even such loyal, unsophisticated souls can be perverted by heretics. Their fall is never an ideological one – they are turned from the Emperor's light through the use of mind-altering** substances, doctored combat stimulants and surgical implants. Once they are in the company of the damned, they are prey to all the grotesque spiritual aberrations that afflict every other renegade and, if anything, idolatry and irreligion leave the ogryns even more brutal and unstoppable than they were when sane.

** I once observed a unit of ogryns standing watch over a group of prisoners. A young, inexperienced Militarum officer saw me approaching and ordered the ogryns to present arms. The scene that followed was bloodier than anything I saw in the rest of the campaign. Suffice it to say, none of the prisoners survived to stand trial.*

*** With little mind to alter, it is worryingly easy to convince ogryns that their former comrades are now their enemy. The only consolation is that heretics often underestimate the monumental stupidity of their new recruits. I once saw a rogue commissar order his ogryns to 'cover him' as he advanced. The ogryns were baffled by his silence after they had piled on top of him.*



Longshanks

Homo sapiens elongatus

The ability to inhabit even the most alien environments is one of the many ways in which mankind has flourished and endured where other, less mutable empires, failed. Longshanks are unnaturally tall humans who have evolved on planets whose mass has resulted in a weaker gravity field than we are used to on Terra. Longshanks may be observed in many different Auxilla regiments and they are hard to miss, towering over their fellow

Guardsmen like giants in a children's story. If heavily armed and armoured, they can make an imposing sight, and their elevation over the scrum gives them a useful vantage point. Their long stride also means that they are able to cross difficult terrain at great speed. Their lofty position can make them an easy target for enemy fire, however, and they must be deployed with care.

Felinid

Homo sapiens hirsutus

I have to acknowledge that I have no personal experience of this particular variant. I have heard the name mentioned on many worlds but doubted that there was any truth to such fanciful tales. I once met a hunter in the Uris Sector who offered to sell me the carcass of a felinid, but when I examined the thing it was clearly a fake: a grotesque collection of human remains and animal hides stitched together and preserved in formaldehyde. However, when Grekh saw me working on my notes, he assured me that felinids not only exist but are the form of humans he

most respects. He tells me he has fought against them and found them to be the most efficient killers he has witnessed in a Militarum regiment. Apparently, they show a lethal cool in the face of even the most brutal opposition. When I asked if they were bestial in appearance, Grekh revealed that he finds it difficult to distinguish one human from another and that felinids, to his eyes, looked no different from me. He also mentioned that they had claws the length of my forearm, though, so I have decided Grekh is not an entirely reliable source.

Afriel Strain

Homo sapiens maledictus

While most abhumans have mutated as a response to environmental stimuli, some have been genetically altered in an attempt to maximise the inherent potential within the divine human form. Afriels were intended to clone the attributes of the greatest Imperial heroes. They are hominids bred to surpass normal Guardsmen in every respect: faster, stronger, more intelligent and able to face

foes that an ordinary, non-augmented human would balk at. However, altering their genetic make-up had unforeseen consequences. Afriels, still to be found in some war zones, are universally reviled by their comrades and famed for their terrible luck. It is clear to me that great men were born to inspire lesser men, but attempting to merge the two through genetics is a fool's errand.

Ratling

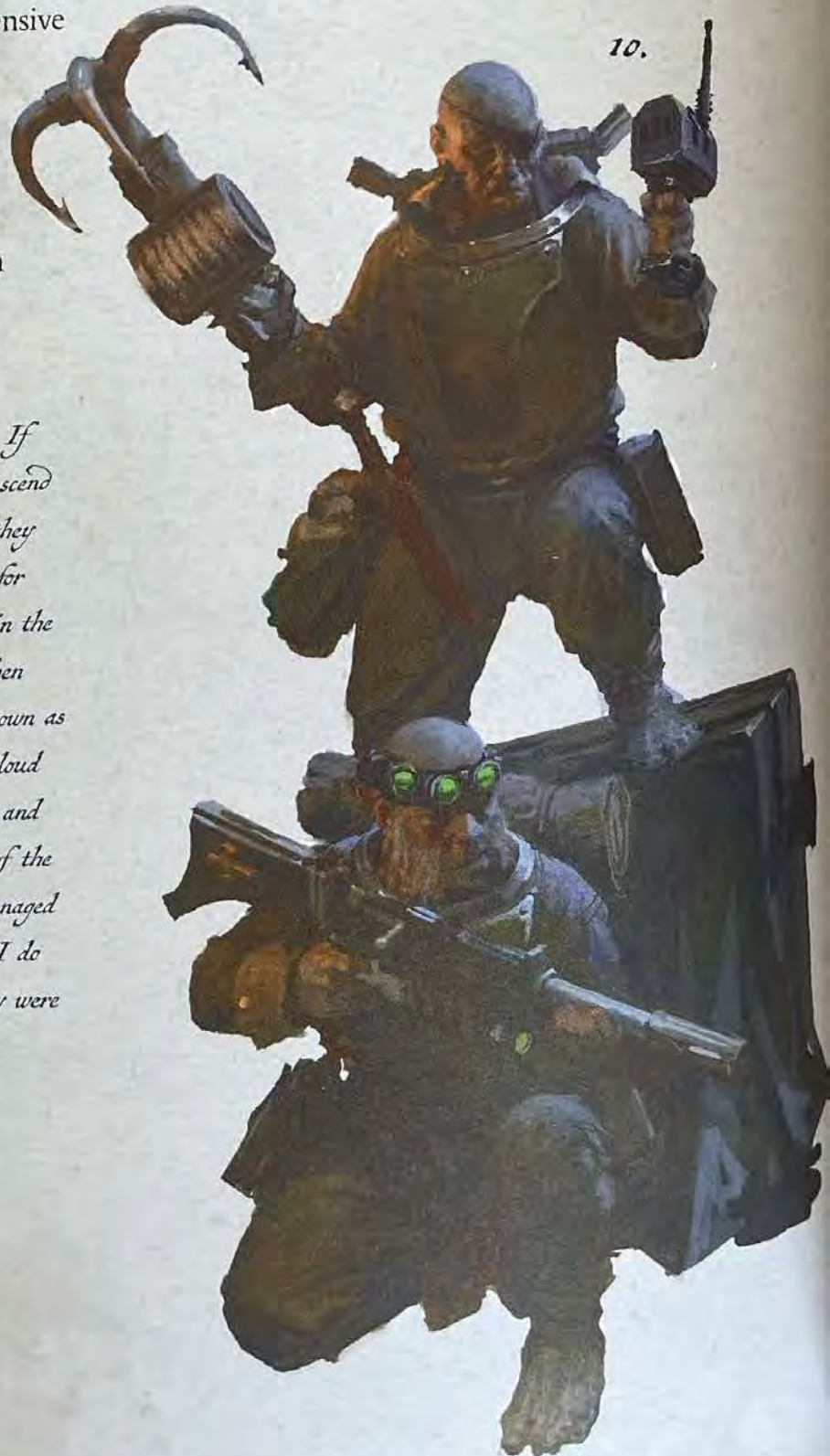
Homo sapiens minimus

I have encountered these diminutive abhumans in Militarum Auxilla regiments across Segmentum Pacificus and have always found them to be crude, ill-mannered scoundrels with no regard for sexual continence or personal hygiene. However, I have also found them to be marksmen of unequalled skill and tenacious survivors who seem capable of enduring the most hellish combat zones with bewildering ease. I have learned to suppress my natural prejudice and utilise their skills.

As well as their accuracy with a sniper rifle, they often have a comprehensive knowledge of every scam and deceit that is taking place in a warzone. In my experience, if you want to know what is *really* happening in a regiment, the ratlings can provide you with every unexpurgated detail.

** Unless there is a disagreement over rations. If there is a shortage of food, Rein and Raus descend into a near-feral state, and I am quite sure they would have killed each other years ago if not for the bewildering array of foodstuffs they keep in the pockets of their uniforms. On one occasion, when passing through a region of the Blackstone known as the Duad Vault, the ratlings encountered a cloud of toxic gas that burned away their uniforms and left their bodies badly scorched. For the rest of the expedition, despite being naked, they still managed to produce items of food every few minutes. I do not know, nor do I wish to know, where they were storing these morsels.*

I have employed a pair of ratlings on several of my expeditions into the Blackstone Fortress and they have proved useful, if boorish, companions. Rein and Raus appeared at first glance to be cowardly, self-serving wretches, but I have also observed in them some relics of humanity's finer attributes. They would each fight to the death for their brother* and, for all their grumbling, they show a gritty resolve that would put many 'normal' Guardsmen to shame.



Gland Warrior

Homo sapiens auctus glandulae

As with the afriels, gland warriors are humans that have been deliberately altered by genetors of the Magos Biologis. They have developed a whole host of organs that enhance their combat abilities, giving them increased muscle mass, aggression, pain tolerance and an immunity to many lethal toxins. However, their physiological enhancements often have a detrimental effect on their mental stability. I employed a Gland War veteran during one of my explorations of the Blackstone Fortress.

The fortress has a habit of unearthing and magnifying the flaws in one's psyche and the gland warrior, who began the expedition as a useful slab of armed muscle, quickly descended into a psychotic mess of paranoia. He attacked me after deciding that I was one of the genetors who had experimented on him, and he made for a damned fierce opponent. If it hadn't been for a timely, and brutal, intervention from Grekh, I might not have bested him.

Troth

Homo sapiens verdantus

During one of my expeditions to the Blackstone I encountered a slave trader who claimed to have visited a world called Verdant. He told me the legend of a tribal king called Nemus, whose people were isolated from the rest of humanity in the years before the Emperor's Great Crusade. According to my source, during these dark times Nemus swore an oath to protect Verdant if the planet would protect his people. As a result, Nemus' descendants, the troth, share a symbiotic

bond with the forests of their home world that enables them to 'converge' with their environment and confound invaders. Over many centuries, this has – allegedly – transformed the appearance of the troth, creating peculiar, arboreal abhumans with flesh as tough as oak and digestive systems that can extract nutrients from the earth. I will be honest, I cannot vouch for the veracity of the slave trader's story, but I include it as an interesting side note.

Neandor

Homo sapiens hyannothus

Just as a muscle wastes if not exercised properly, so may the finer attributes of mankind wither if not properly nurtured by the influence of the nobler classes. On worlds where the lower orders are left to fend for themselves, without the improving presence of high-born masters, a tragic regression takes place, both spiritual and physical, until all that remains is a primitive form of humanity

known as the neandor. These lowbrow savages would serve no purpose at all were it not for their impressive physical strength. Neandors have limited language and intellect, but some commanders have found that, by harnessing the muscle of these hunched brutes, they are able to free up their more quick-witted troops for combat duties.

Nightsider

Homo sapiens tenebris

Strange as it may seem to those of us born in the Sol System, there are celestial bodies known as nomad planets, or night worlds, that wander the galaxy alone, not bound to any stars and swaddled in darkness. These worlds are, by their very nature, hard to locate, but they are more numerous than we have previously surmised.

A sunless environment would seem to be inimical to life, but humanity is nothing if not dogged and even in these abyssal realms, men have survived and even flourished. There are other worlds on which one half of the planet remains almost constantly in darkness (the 'dark side') and here, too, man has found a way to live. Hidden from the view of void-faring invaders, some of the Emperor's earliest colonists have adapted to life without light, developing peculiar attributes.

Here are a few examples:

ECHOLOCATION – a form of biological sonar that enables nightsiders to navigate and hunt despite being utterly sightless.

TAPETAL REFLEX – reflective matter behind the surface of their eyes that enables them to see in almost total darkness.

CHEMILUMINESCENCE – blood or other bodily fluids that contain light-emitting molecules, enabling the nightsider to 'glow'.

HEIGHTENED OLFACTORY AND AUDITORY SENSES – these can be so powerful the nightsiders can locate an enemy in absolute darkness.

As a result of these mutations, nightsider Guardsmen in an Auxilla regiment are incredibly useful during underground military campaigns or night-time manoeuvres. Despite these rare skills, their peculiar appearance (oversized eyes, featureless eyes or no eyes at all; colourless or transparent skin; luminous appendages, etc.) means they are often reviled and mistrusted by the very people they endeavour to save.

Sub

Homo sapiens deformum

Some strains of abhuman are so mutated that they become repellent to the eyes of normal men: skin that resembles rusting metal, heads sunk so low the face peers from the chest, limbs that writhe like serpents, eyes that radiate dazzling light, and so on. Their existence is tolerated in some quarters, as their mutations are stable and harmless, but that does not make their appearance any more palatable to their countrymen. Subs are regularly the victims of Ministorum purges and they live in constant fear for their lives. However, during my travels I have encountered several groups of subs and, despite my initial revulsion, have found them to be devoted adherents of the Imperial creed

who are eager to seek redemption in battle. Also, their mutations, while hard on the eye, often have very practical uses on their home worlds, enabling the subs to endure local conditions in a way that off-worlders could not. Subs have nothing to lose but their souls, and as a result they have the potential to be zealous warriors, but where they are hunted and purged we steer that zeal in the wrong direction, creating an underclass of enemies that are spread across supposedly stable systems. Subs are more widespread and numerous than the High Lords realise, and I believe our priests and witch hunters are in danger of stoking a fire that may catch us all unawares when it finally takes hold.

Squat

Homo sapiens rotundus

In contrast to the longshanks mentioned earlier, these particular abhumans evolved on high-gravity worlds and, as a result, are thicker set, broader and shorter than a normal man. There was a time when they were a common sight in Imperial warzones, but during my lifetime they have become rare. I have heard rumours that many of their home worlds were devoured by xenos fleets and they are now nomads, either drafted into Auxilla regiments or offering their services as mercenaries. They are doughty, determined individuals famed for their intractable disposition, hardy constitutions and impressive engineering skills. Their ancestors were miners, and squats are particularly useful during military campaigns that are fought underground.



Pelager

Homo sapiens oceanus

In the innermost reaches of the Blackstone Fortress there is a lake of tar called the Gonsalvo Trench. Most explorers avoid it, unable to traverse the inky depths, but on one of my earliest expeditions I encountered an inquisitor by the name of Kallisto at the very edge of the lake, surrounded by various relics that had clearly been dredged from the liquid.

She was reticent to explain her success until we realised that our fathers are both members of the same fencing academy. It is wonderful how people of class and breeding can stumble across each other, even in these most uncultured regions. After this revelation, Kallisto was happy to demonstrate her method, and summoned a pelager from the lake. Belot is a youth of around, I would guess, twenty years old, and hails from a world that is submerged almost entirely underwater. His ancestors evolved the ability to breathe almost any

liquid. The most striking thing about him, however, is not his gills or scaled skin but his musculature. His people live deep beneath the surface of the sea, where the pressure would crush a normal man.

As a result, Belot is a hulking mass of iron-hard muscle, more akin to an ogryn than a normal human. When, at Kallisto's suggestion, I struck him with my sword, it was like attacking an armoured car. Belot clearly has other forms of mutation, but before I could investigate further, the fortress underwent one of its violent transformations and we were separated. I am keen to learn more about this fascinating form of abhuman, but this event occurred several weeks ago and, if the rumours are true, Inquisitor Kallisto has failed to return to Precipice.

11.

Beastmen

Homo sapiens variatus

As I mentioned earlier, the distinction between heretical transmutation and acceptable strains of abhuman rests on the stability of the genetic deviance. A standard abhuman is no more likely to deviate from its genetic norm than a standard human. Despite that, genetically stable abhumans may fall out of favour.*

While in the Western Reaches I have heard that the abhumans known as beastmen are on the Register of Proscribed Citizens (Class A-G worlds). Perhaps this was always the case, but I previously understood beastmen to be a tolerated if mistrusted part of our Auxilla regiments. Being placed on a proscribed citizens register is a sure sign that *Homo sapiens variatus* will soon be removed from the abhumans category altogether and reclassified as Xenos Horrificus.** I have to admit, the idea does not vex me. My encounters with these goat-headed, cloven-hoofed creatures have always left me troubled. I endeavour to see the use in all of the Emperor's subjects, but beastmen have no sense of propriety or decorum, to the extent that many of them refuse to use cutlery in the mess hall and converse with each other in what I can only describe as modulated belches. I have, on several occasions, been forced to call out these wretches for their appalling manners and demean myself by confronting them in single combat. Duelling with such creatures is clearly inappropriate for a gentleman of my position, but these boors are so ill-mannered I have repeatedly found myself facing one down the blade of my sabre.

It is perhaps symptomatic of this coarse nature that so many of these abhumans are to be found fighting for heretical cults, worshipping false gods and indulging in depraved rituals in the company of sorcerers, rogues and inhuman warp entities. I have observed many of these vile creatures during my explorations of the Blackstone Fortress. Some, perhaps, are simply seeking to escape persecution, but others are clearly doing more than roaming the shadowy vaults. Many are gathering in large numbers and are openly hostile to right-minded servants of the Emperor. I have locked horns with them myself, several times, but am yet to ascertain why they are here in such droves.

As beastmen have not yet been declared Excommunicate Traitoris, it may be useful for me to identify the differences between beastmen who purport to serve the Emperor and those who are outright heretics. Beastmen of any allegiance are shockingly mutated, having merged with animal strains at some point in their ancestry. In general, they have cloven hooves, digitigrade legs (legs that appear to be backwards jointed, like the hind legs of a goat) and faces that resemble animals. Their arms and hands are usually similar to those of a standard human, which enables them to utilise normal weapons and tools.***

* Recent examples include the sickle-headed drepanes of Azetium IV, the shape-shifting amphi of Lampra, the blue-skinned lazul of Garganus Prime, and the thrix, with their famed lethal plumage.

** An Ordo Xenos classification signalling that a race is a threat to the safety of the Imperium and must be eradicated.



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**** Despite their coarse demeanour, I have to say that I think they are cannier than they are often given credit for. I have seen beastmen act with a deviousness that belies the 'moronic savage' label they have been given. In the presence of Ministorum priests, they claim to be contrite and eager to atone for their grotesque mutations, but in some of the specimens I have encountered, I sense an obdurate pride and even arrogance, as though they consider themselves somehow superior to the men they are fighting alongside. I believe they have a culture and faith that they keep hidden from their superiors. I am only beginning to scratch at this theory, but I wonder if it is this hidden arrogance that leads some beastmen to idolatry and heresy.*

Efficacy of Diplomacy with the Less Savage Races

As you may know, I have a strict physical regimen and keep Commissar Frenna's famous maxim in mind at all times: *Weak of body, weak of mind!* I practise daily with both foil and sabre, and even in the confines of the *Vanguard*, I maintain peak physical fitness through the use of combat servitors and the like. But it was very early on in my career that I learned an unassailable truth: most conflicts are decided long before they reach the arena of battle. Alliances and pacts are the most potent tools of war, and only a fool relies on strength alone. The rule applies just as much when dealing with xenos as when dealing with any other enemy, perhaps more so, for their motivations are often so strange that new tactics have to be employed. However cruel or inhuman your foe, you will have far more success if you can learn something of their nature *before* you face them in the field. To know your enemy is to have power over him. If you will indulge me, I will illustrate my point with a recent example.

I had been on Precipice only a matter of weeks when I learned of a chamber in the Blackstone's southern hemisphere called the Hall of Strife. My attention was drawn to it by members of the xenospecies known as the drukhari (see subsequent pages). These vile, sadistic creatures take a vampiric pleasure in the torture and murder of enemies and allies alike. An extremely high-ranking drukhari noble, or 'archon' as he referred to himself, by the name of Xylus Vhorzum had been quizzing anyone on Precipice who had information regarding the location of the chamber.

I mounted an expedition to find the Hall of Strife with another rogue trader, Ava Victrix. I had my doubts about Victrix from the start, but she claimed to know the location of the chamber so I accepted her offer of partnership and a fifty-fifty split of the proceeds once we'd discovered the vault. The chamber was heavily guarded, in the first instance by heretical cultists and then, as we got closer, by the Blackstone's own peculiar defence systems, including a particularly ferocious form of spindle drone. We were not to be waylaid, though. I had a large contingent of Draik House Guards with me, and Victrix proved herself to be an able, if cavalier, fighter.

We had almost reached the entrance to the chamber when Victrix played her hand and entered the Hall of Strife alone, using a choke grenade to disable me and my men as she accessed the vault through a hidden entrance. Victrix was lacking in funds and could not have reached the vault alone, so she had tricked me into acting as an unpaid escort.

Victrix had shown cunning and nerve, but by failing to learn the nature of the drukhari, she had committed a fatal error. When the smoke cleared, Xylus Vhorzum emerged from the shadows, flanked by dozens of lean, ashen-faced warriors, all clad in barbed armour. Rather than attacking me, he handed over the payment we had agreed and headed into the vault.

To enter the lair of a drukhari would usually be the act of a suicidal lunatic, but I had spent the previous evening on his ship, the *Blade's Caress*. Prior to our meeting I fed information to Vhorzum, via my contacts and agents in Precipice, hinting at the secrets I had acquired since reaching the Blackstone and making myself seem a person of great interest and an invaluable guide. Without this initial ruse, I have no doubt I would have been taken captive and flayed alive before I had chance to begin a dialogue.

As a secondary precaution, I revealed to the archon that I carried on my person a hidden explosive device controlled by cerebral impulse. Should I be in danger at any point, or should I die, the drukhari vessel would be destroyed along with the archon and his crew. He seemed to delight in my duplicity and we spent several hours in fruitful, if tense, conversation. As we spoke, it transpired that the vault he sought was *not* a treasure trove of priceless archeotech but a slaughterhouse – a gladiatorial arena crowded with xenos creatures who fought constantly, and savagely, in an eternal battle for dominance. The drukhari endlessly seek crueller forms of violence in the way an obscura addict is ever seeking a new high. Vhorzum had not come looking for the chamber because it contained a prize; he was already wealthy and powerful beyond belief. He had come seeking a new kind of foe on which to try his weapons. A new charnel house in which to play. I knew all this only because I had taken the time to learn his nature and convince him that I could be of use. The treasure he sought was not wealth, as Victrix thought, but a chance to feed on agony.

As the drukhari entered the chamber I had led them to, a chorus of screams and curses emerged, and raised above it, filled with pain and outrage, I discerned the voice of Ava Victrix.



Aeldari

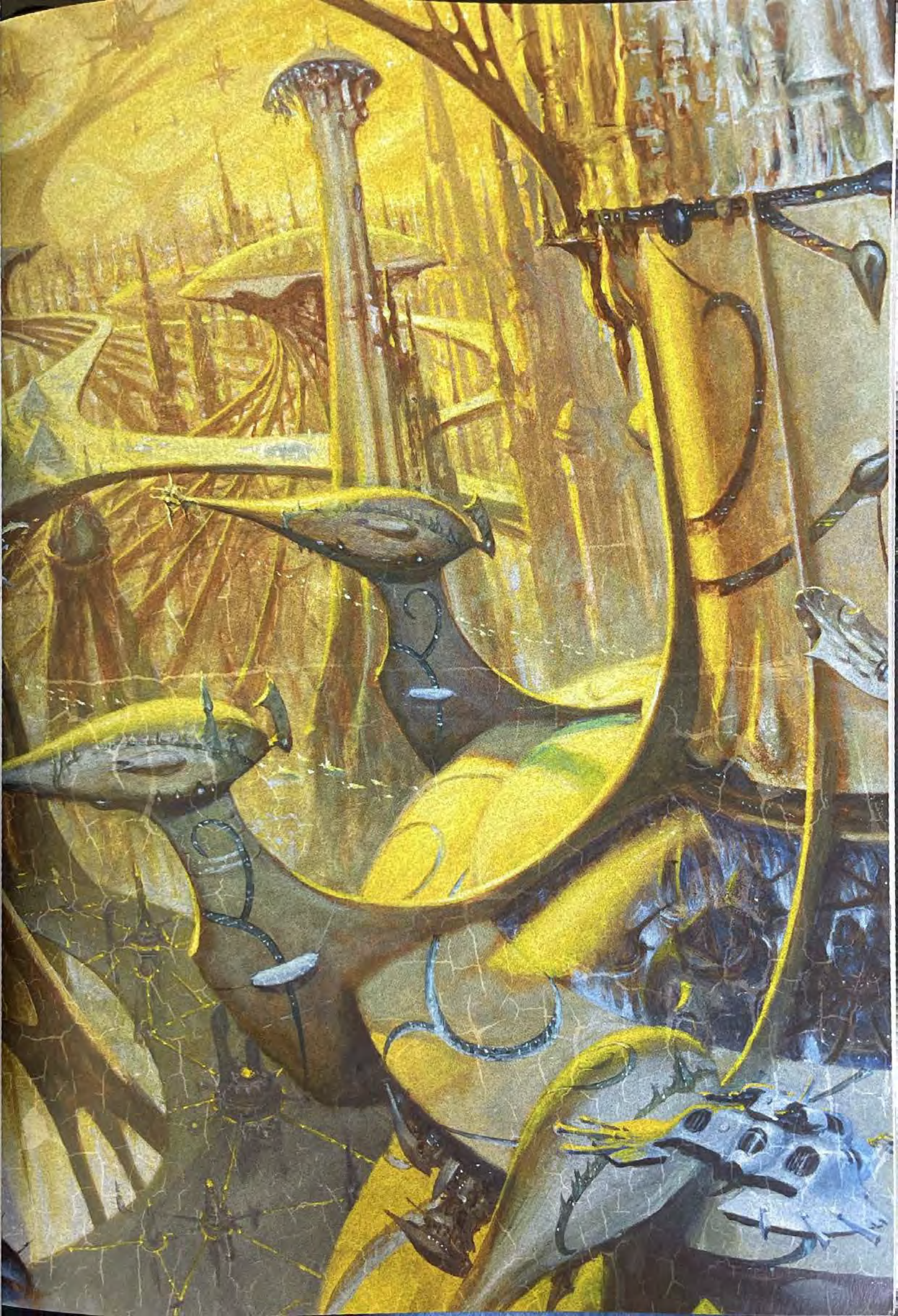
The pre-eminence of the human race has been asserted, fervently and convincingly, by the Adeptus Terra, the Adeptus Ministorum and in the edicts of the God-Emperor Himself. The galaxy is rightfully ours. And it is only by the preservation and expansion of the Imperium that life, of any kind, will persist. Beyond the empyric veil, denizens of the warp boil and teem, preparing to subsume all that is natural and right. Countless civilisations had risen and fallen in the millennia before the Emperor rose to power* and all of them failed where He has succeeded. Despite this failure, or perhaps because of it, many of these elder races view the Imperium with arrogance and disdain, clawing at us from the dark like a withered corpse that has been reanimated by hate.

Perhaps the bitterest and most deranged of these prehistoric species is the aeldari. Long ages before the emergence of humanity, these conceited, vain creatures destroyed themselves in a bitter civil war. The details of the conflict are known only to the aeldari themselves, but the resultant schism is still visible in the tattered remnants of their race. Contrary to the most commonly held opinion, there is not one single strain of aeldari but three. In the heat of battle, it is impossible to discern the distinct types, but through my skills as a diplomat and ambassador, I have been able to observe these beings up-close and even converse with them.** First, let me share what I have learned about the sadistic strain known as the drukhari.

** We see their echo in the bizarre architecture that litters so many worlds and the fragments of legend that filter down through our outlying colonies.*

*** As I have explained, repeatedly, to Inquisitor Arzen and other members of the Ordo Xenos, these communications have only ever taken place with the express purpose of learning how better to defend ourselves against this bitter, poisonous race. I am not one of those xenos apologists who wishes to work alongside these creatures as allies; I merely see the value in knowing what drives them.*





Drukhari

Aeldarix malum

In drukhari society there is no respect for breeding or ancestry; they pride themselves on the supposedly meritocratic nature of their culture, in which only the cruellest, bravest and most cunning rise to the top. Rather than hiding their court intrigues and treacheries, they have made them a basis for governance. As a result, they have developed murder and deceit into a fine art.

Like all aeldari, these cruel warriors are preternaturally fast and agile, moving with a speed beyond the comprehension of even the most athletic human. All of them are tall and slender, but they are not gangly or willowy – their limbs are like knotted steel and they are masters of a martial art that appears almost sorcerous at close quarters. Perhaps more terrifying than their speed and strength, however, is the array of weapons they carry: projectile weapons that fire toxin-coated splinters and blades edged with poisons that induce agony as they kill. If there is a weakness in these whipcord-thin killers, I would say it is their desire to savour the torment of their victims. They are addicted to pain and suffering, and their strategies are often engineered with cruelty in mind more than victory.

14. During my incredible, disturbing meeting with Vhorzum, I was able to engage with a being few humans are ever likely to encounter, even on a battlefield. I am still haunted by the metallic stink of dried blood that leaked from his armour, and the whole encounter seems like a half-remembered nightmare. Vhorzum wore an ornate bone mask as we spoke, so I never saw his face, but after years of diplomatic and ambassadorial work I have learned to gauge a person's nature by such subtle indicators as body language and tone of voice. Vhorzum's pre-eminence was immediately apparent. I would surmise that the rank of archon is equivalent to that of Lord Commander of the Astra Militarum, or perhaps even higher. His mind was a polished blade – cold, precise and lethal. But I also sensed something else in him: a kind of desperate mania. It was as if besting his rivals and achieving untrammelled power was not enough; he seemed hunted and distracted, as though seeking something he would never find.

During our exchange he alluded to a 'dark city', a hidden realm to which the drukhari can return when they wish to pursue their perverse interests in safety. Before redirecting the conversation, he whispered the name 'Commorragh', but I could not tell if he was referring to the city itself, or a regent





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who rules there. One thing I gleaned was that the dark city is a slaughterhouse. The archon spoke of murderous, acrobatic gladiators who feed the appetites of their masters with displays of wanton cruelty, fighting in vast, purpose-built arenas. This chimes with the actions of drukhari I have observed on the Blackstone. Even in the most Stygian pits they fight as though performing for an audience – pirouetting through shadows with a flamboyance that would be beautiful if it did not elicit a chorus of agonised screams.

On a previous expedition I thought I had discovered a form of winged drukhari on the fortress, having observed aeldari figures soar from its angular vaults to slice through my guards, but Vhorzum laughed at my naivety, explaining I had fought normal drukhari who had submitted themselves to brutal surgery. Vhorzum's breath quickened as he described the flaying of skin and the cracking of bones that was required.

The archon clearly considered me beneath contempt but, despite their oft-repeated claims of superiority, it is apparent to me that aeldari are far too degraded to have ever stood a chance of thriving. The winged creatures I saw are only one example of the race's corruption. Here, on the crowded walkways of Precipice, I have glimpsed drukhari whose bodies have been butchered and remade into mindless, faceless, chemically enhanced brutes. What future could there have ever been for a race that so delights in torturing itself?

The archon was surrounded by sycophants and flatterers who would clearly have slit his throat, given half a chance, but he showed no sign of concern, lounging decadently as though surrounded by honest, trustworthy subjects (which they clearly were not).

I wondered how he kept his grip on power, but then my attention wandered to one of his attendants. As with all aeldari, her features were fine-boned and delicate, with flawless alabaster skin, and she had clearly taken great pains over her appearance, wearing sables and silks that were of exquisite quality. Every member of the archon's court was at pains to avoid her, not standing near her or even meeting her gaze. Here was the archon's power, I realised. She made no outward show of command, however. There was an almost feline beauty to her. She seemed more like a courtesan than a warrior and, each time she spoke, her words caressed and enticed me, making me wish I could talk to her alone, even though I had no doubt she would delight in killing me, given the chance.

As the talk ranged from topic to topic, I began to notice a peculiar quirk of the archon. Each time I steered the conversation towards a potentially sensitive area, Vhorzum glanced at this velvet-toned adviser, at which point she would give a slight nod, or her expression would harden in disapproval. Even *he* deferred to her. Eventually, I deduced that the balance of power lay more in her favour than with the supposedly omnipotent archon. I sensed, for example, that it had been her decision to come seeking the Hall of Strife and





18.

her suggestion that I be allowed aboard the *Blade's Caress*. As I had this revelation I happened to meet her gaze, and in her eyes I saw a mysterious flash of hunger. This intriguing look made me all the more desirous of a private interview with her, and I was on the point of inventing a ruse to enable such a meeting when I noticed something strange that Grekh was doing. The kroot had taken one of his caged insects from his body armour and was feeding it, piece by piece, to an arachnid he had taken from another cage. Grekh is as unknowable as the masked archon, so I have no idea if he intended to give me a warning,* but as I watched the spider devour the insect, I realised how close I was to being consumed by the complexities of the drukhari court. I recognised, in my desperate eagerness to be alone with the courtesan, the same mania I had sensed in the archon. I made my excuses and left the drukhari vessel as quickly as possible. Even now, when I recall the hungry look in her eyes, it is with a peculiar mix of revulsion and longing.

** It's quite possible he was just bored. His mind seems to wander at the most inopportune moments. I once observed him trying to converse with a rat while we were being fired upon by a horde of cultists.*



19.

Asuryani

Aeldarix dolosus

I have gleaned from my research that one aeldari subspecies inhabits vast, void-faring sanctuaries, like city states capable of plying the stars. These colossal vessels have been observed by both Adeptus Mechanicus explorators and the ships of the Imperial Navy. There can be no question that these vast star craft exist, but we can only speculate as to their purpose. Some reports name the aeldari who dwell there as the asuryani and, if anything, they are even more of an enigma than the drukhari.

It is my fervent belief that the drukhari are driven by singular, if grotesque motivations – they are roving corsairs who take pleasure in pain and feed on the death of others; it is this rapacious need to induce suffering that drives them to attack the fleets and worlds of the Imperium. But the asuryani cannot be so easily delineated. They are equally lethal and callous, but they display such bewildering changes of strategy that their campaigns appear to be conceived by lunatics. I have studied their tactics at length, but every time I feel as though I am on the verge of glimpsing their plan, it slips away from me. They have been known to slaughter millions of innocents, seemingly on a whim, and then, in the same conflict, intervene to save equal numbers of lives; but the more I discover about them, the more I believe they are not insane, rather they are working to the precepts of some labyrinthine scheme that only they can comprehend.

The asuryani are anathema to human life, that much cannot be disputed. We occupy the realms that they squandered. In their eyes, we are mites carpeting a corpse, but that does not make them any less of a threat. With this in mind, I have recorded all I have learned about the asuryani.

For all their perversities of spirit and vacillations of temper, the asuryani are uniquely graceful physical specimens. They stand taller than a human, with long, elegant proportions and the gait of a skilled dancer or acrobat. To see them move is a fascinating experience: they are both languorous and fast, outstripping even the most quick-footed opponents with a fluid grace. So that their natural nimbleness is not limited by heavy, armoured plates, the asuryani wear a bodyglove of what appears to be animal hide. This covering is supple enough to allow acrobatic moves but hardens in response to attacks, deflecting many kinds of low-calibre projectiles. I have encountered asuryani several times on the Blackstone Fortress and I can attest to their incredible dexterity and refinement. I find it a troubling thought that a society so skilled in warfare still lost an empire.

In the peculiar melting pot that is Precipice, I have been in the unusual position of observing one of these aliens at such close quarters I was able to make a small character sketch of her. I have been accompanied on several expeditions by an enigmatic creature called Amallyn Shadowguide. She describes herself as an exile who lives apart from the void-borne city states I mentioned earlier, but it is hard to



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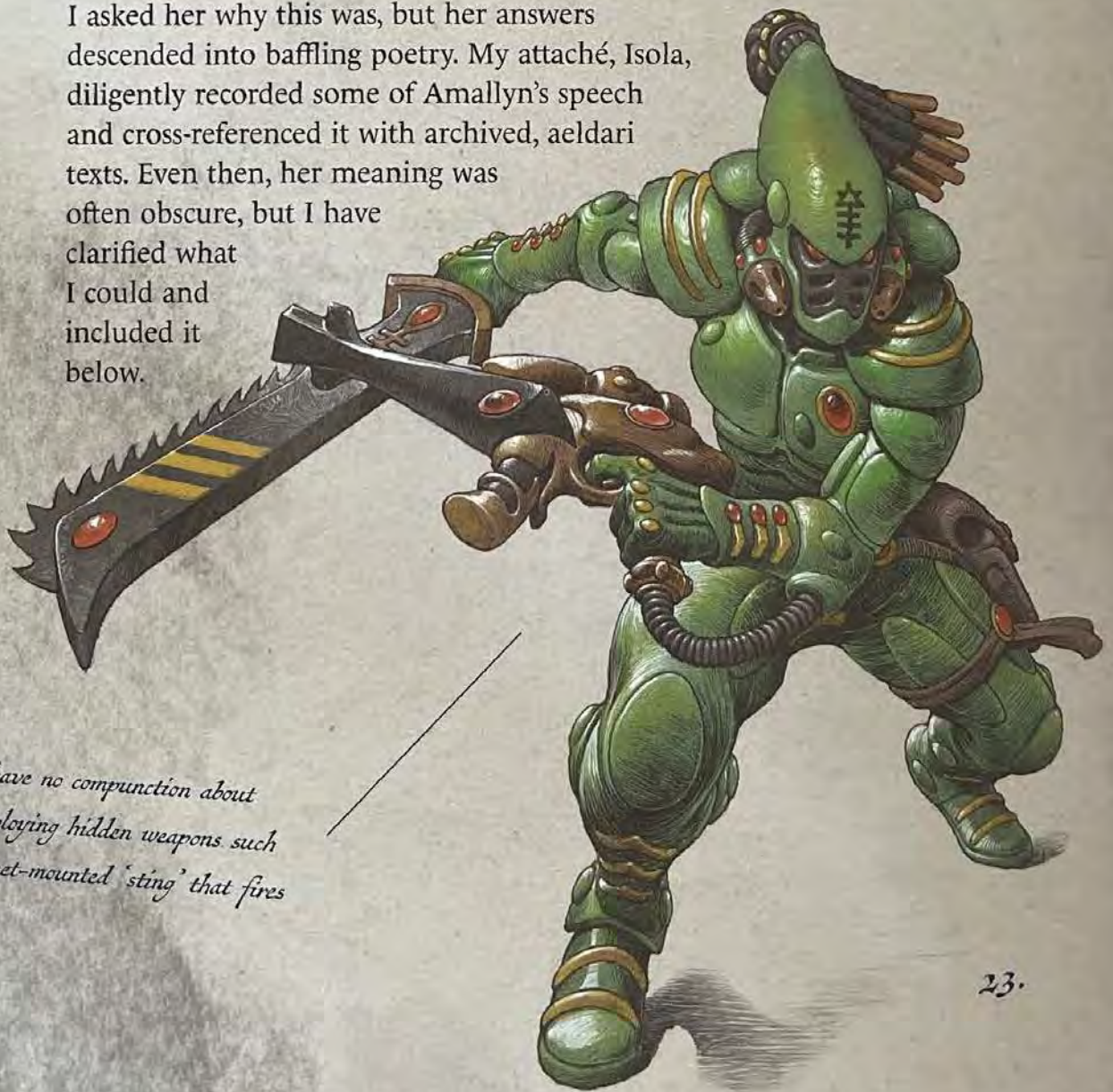


21.

know how literally to take this. She answers my questions with parables that are beautifully clear until I try to write them down, then I find that her words slip through my fingers and leave me more confused than I was to begin with. She surveys me with the same magisterial disdain as every other aeldari I have encountered, but I sense that the years she has spent alone, amongst non-aeldari, have softened her view of humanity. Certainly, we have been able to understand each other, and even trust each other to some extent, enough to survive several expeditions to the fortress at least. She is an enigma, but I shall do my best to paint a picture of her.

There is a tragic quality to Amallyn's demeanour, as though painful memories are always close to the surface of her thoughts, but she is steely rather than maudlin, as if her personal agonies only make her more determined to succeed. Physically, she is so light and graceful on her feet that she seems to melt into the fortress' shadows, flitting in and out of view like a spectre. Indeed, when she draws her long cloak around her she seems to disappear completely. If I were a superstitious man I would swear she is half spirit. She faces every horror the Blackstone throws at her with impressive nonchalance and she is the finest shot I have ever seen, picking off enemies with her sniper rifle before I am even aware that we are under attack.

As far as I can tell from her gnomonic riddles, Amallyn is not a typical example of her kind. She lives in a state of self-imposed exile, travelling the galaxy alone. I asked her why this was, but her answers descended into baffling poetry. My attaché, Isola, diligently recorded some of Amallyn's speech and cross-referenced it with archived, aeldari texts. Even then, her meaning was often obscure, but I have clarified what I could and included it below.



Aeldari warriors have no compunction about fighting dirty, employing hidden weapons such as a fiendish, helmet-mounted 'sting' that fires explosive shards.

It would appear that not all the asuryani dwell in vast star craft. When I spoke of Terra's architectural wonders – because, I confess, I was irked by her haughty manner – she dismissed our temples and cathedrums as tasteless follies, claiming that instead of labouring over plasteel and rockcrete, her people have spent centuries nurturing and growing paradise worlds that she called 'Lilaethan' or 'maiden worlds'. She told me that were I to see the wonders of her home I would believe I had entered a wonderful dream, conjured by the untrammelled vision of a god. I tried to match her cool disdain, but I confess a hankering to see such wonders, if they truly exist.

As we spoke, I had the unnerving sense that she was peering into my soul and, indeed, the curse of psychic mutation seems particularly prevalent in the aeldari. If I have managed to grasp Amallyn's meaning, every single member of her doomed race carries a mental link to the empyric energies of warp space. Perhaps it is this flaw that led to their fall from grace. If that is the cause then the aeldari are blind to it, seeing psychic mutations as a blessing to be prized rather than a curse to be feared. The most psychically charged individuals amongst the asuryani are not purged with holy fire, as they would be in the Imperium, but elevated to a senior rank and allowed to influence the decisions of generals. Amallyn described them with great reverence, as prophets and mystics who are able to read the future like a poem and even direct its course with their minds. Some of these warp-tainted souls have managed to transform themselves into living weapons that can unleash the horrors of the immaterium. Others channel the warp through fearsome war masks that emit a horrific, mind-numbing din. I experienced this sound first-hand on the Blackstone Fortress and it filled me with a peculiar paralysis that left me feeling sluggish and confused for several hours. And their screams were not their only weapon. Their appearance was as intimidating as their battle cry, with stylised helms that sported wild, unkempt manes and with curved glaives that cut through my guards' armour like it was cloth.

24.



Just as devious as their male counterparts, female aeldari often wear masks that emit a mind-numbing shriek, making dignified combat almost impossible.

Solitaire

During one of my expeditions to the Blackstone, I found myself unexpectedly benefitting from the peculiar, capricious nature of the aeldari.

I was crossing the Cortice landing deck when it was assaulted by heretical cultists. Each time I encounter these damned wretches they arrive in larger numbers and on this occasion, I am ashamed to say, they had me on the back foot.

I was down to my last few guards when something happened that was unusual, even by the standards of the Blackstone Fortress. A prismatic smoke filled the embarkation deck and the heretics began to metamorphose, dissolving into gaudy fumes. The obscene sigils on their flak armour boiled like liquid and then, to my disbelief, they came to life. The landing deck erupted with hideous, winged monsters that roared and turned on the heretics. At the same time, more visions blossomed from the architecture and a haunting, mournful tune filled my skull, causing me to stumble and fall to the ground. It sounded like hundreds of dulcimers, harmonising with such complex modulations that my sanity began to fracture.

I cried out in dismay as the menagerie tore through the heretics, slipping past las-fire and cutting through armour. As the cultists fell, the music grew louder until I cried out, attempting to drown out the deranged harmonies.

As the last heretic died, the song reached such a terrible crescendo that I clawed at my skull, spilling blood down my face. I and my remaining men fell to the floor. Then, through the blood, I saw that one of the phantasms had vaulted up to the platform I was on to stare down at me.

I was so crippled by the music that I struggled to move. The spectre padded closer, and through my torment I discerned amusement in its eyes. I reached for my splinter pistol and fired.

The creature shimmered and, for a moment, I saw not a winged horror but a slender humanoid in a leering, rigid mask. Through the eyeholes of the mask, I saw the same look of wry amusement.

I fired again, but the masked figure had vanished.

I dragged myself to the edge of the platform, still howling at the song in my head, and saw that the monsters had all vanished, snatched up by the smoke as it withdrew. Then, as the last tendril disappeared, the music ceased.

Even though I only glimpsed my saviour briefly, I feel sure he or she was some manner of aeldari, so I described the incident to Amallyn, asking if she could explain why I was saved. She laughed, but the sound was brittle and I sense that my tale had unnerved her. She whispered the word 'solitaire' but refused to elaborate.



25.

*This was the mask worn by my aeldari saviour
on the Cortice landing deck. Amallyn referred to
its wearer as 'Solitaire'.*

Pleasures and Pastimes of the Aeldari

Through my conversation with the boastful Xylus Vhorzum I have managed to learn a little of how the aeldari fill their long centuries of life. On their void-borne city states, the asuryani have entire castes of artisans, musicians and dancers who create songs and performances of such passion that they have been known to entirely consume audiences, possessing them like an addiction and robbing them of their senses. The asuryani build vast auditoria in which to perform works that have been laboured over for thousands of years, pieces that are breathtaking in their beauty, scope and poignancy.

Vhorzum sneered at these creative endeavours, claiming that his kind, the drukhari, long ago abandoned such ephemeral forms of entertainment. His long fingers brushed against the barbs on his armour as he explained that pain was the only symphony able to stir his heart. Whether it was through physical anguish or mental torment, he required a crueller form of art. He spoke again of the dark city he called home, and explained that amongst its greatest wonders are the gladiatorial arenas of the wych cults. The female warriors of the cults have wealthy, powerful patrons who enable them to build vast slaughter temples – skyscraping tributes to the glory of suffering and murder.

Vhorzum leant forwards in his chair as he described the arenas, his eyes flashing behind his mask. No expense is spared, he explained. Legions of slaves are worked to death, over countless decades, producing beautiful citadels of pain. The wych cults ensure that every detail of the design enhances the visceral thrill of watching trained, chemically stimulated warriors tear each other apart. Every part of the buildings, from the pit to the terraces, is designed to move and engage with the action, wrong-footing the combatants even as they appear to be gaining the upper hand. Beneath the fighting there are huge, subterranean caverns and cages housing predators from across the galaxy, each one stranger and more savage than the last so that no two fights are the same.

Vhorzum closed his eyes, savouring the memory. ‘There is no greater act of creativity,’ he whispered, ‘than an inventive death.’



Extract from the *Pharmacopolium Xenomalium*

The Blackstone Fortress is littered with an incredible wealth of relics, both religious and secular, human-made and xenos-made. The reasons for this are hard to explain. The fortress has a siren call that summons explorers such as me, but it also has a physical magnetism. I have seen the hulks of entire ships buried far beneath the fortress' surface.

Amongst my own finds was a complete set of Archmagos Hekhten's *Pharmacopolium Xenomalium*. Many, myself included, considered this obscure work to be a myth but there, in the gloom of the fortress, I laid my hands on this incredible piece of history. I believe many of his claims to be absurd in the extreme, but amidst all the chaff there are undoubtedly some invaluable truths. Here is a representative example, taken from the start of the first book:

*Lords Temporal, Martial and Ecclesiarchical of the Most Divine and Righteous Imperium of Mankind, may I present to you, with the utmost humility, a record of my investigations into the various tinctures, chymical powders, tablets and distillations that may be extracted from the corporeal matter of the lesser races, along with a detailed analysis of their effects. I shall commence by describing the beneficial parts that may be procured from the carcass of a Donorian fiend.**

Firstly, one should remove the ocular apparatus. This consists of a tough, leathery 'mask' studded with numerous eyes. Remove the eyes, being careful to avoid puncturing them, and then store them in ice until such time as they are needed. If one is to consume the eye of a Donorian fiend, swallowing the orb whole, the organ has a dramatic effect. An hour or so after eating, one's vision is enhanced in the most extraordinary way, revealing spectra that are usually invisible and allowing clear sight in almost total darkness. The effect only lasts two to three hours but in that time it is an invaluable asset to combatants facing xenos foes, allowing them to discern attackers that would normally remain hidden.

Secondly, the claws of the Donorian fiend may be levered from the ends of the fingers. This procedure must be performed with great care as the claws are unnaturally sharp. Once removed, the tip of the

** I believe this to be an early reference to the clawed fiend I have described elsewhere in the book.*



HAVE YOU BEEN OFF-WORLD? KNOW YOUR CONTAGION!

Lacuscular Malady or 'Freethinker's Disease'

Liquefaction of facial tissue. Common amongst the faithless. An increased regimen of prayer is usually the most efficacious treatment.

Bulgepox

Excessive bloating around the midriff. Harmless until the swelling develops limbs and attempts to extract itself from the sufferer. Spread by rodent infestations in holds of void craft.

Dwindle Fever

Withering of the extremities. Spread by avian xenos in the Budorgis Sub-sector. Fatal.

Gibberbones

Limb-loosening contagion. Arms and legs become disjointed and eventually mutate into puckered tentacles. Fatal.

Agglutinate Sickness

The sufferer's skin excretes a powerful adhesive, leaving them covered in unwanted objects. No known cure.

Fluviatititis or 'Sarnaca's Tears'

Noxious discharge from the eyes. Usually contracted in the sumps of Hive Profontis on Lebrusa Prime.

Effulcholia

Luminescence of the skin. Caused by prolonged exposure to xenospecies.

**SUFFERER SHOULD REPORT TO AN
ASTRA MILITARUM OFFICER
FOR IMMEDIATE TREATMENT.**

*Have developed a powerful compulsion to itch.
I don't think it's contagious but I'll seek an
inoculation upon returning to Precipice.*



27.

blade may be sewn into the fingers of a glove, allowing the wearer, at times of danger, to push the blades through the glove's fingertips and employ them as a shockingly effective weapon.

The fangs of the serpent known as the sslyth may be ground down into a fine powder which when diluted with water becomes an utterly colourless poison that kills in seconds without leaving any trace of foul play. One must take care to dispose of the receptacle used to transport the poison, however, as it will melt within the hour and contact with the contents kills the poisoner as effectively as the intended victim.

The lower pole of an ambull's kidney can be safely eaten if boiled for several hours. Once consumed, it will induce a state of near-feral mania. This unnatural rage may be useful in times of desperate need, as it endows one with almost superhuman strength. It will also inure the user to pain, however, which can lead them to unwittingly sustain terrible injuries, gaining victory over seemingly insurmountable odds only to find they are mortally wounded as a result.

28.



Ur-ghuls

Ghāla troglodytes

The origins of the Blackstone Fortress are an unfathomable mystery. My own, personal theory is that it belongs to a reality other than our own – either another galaxy or another plane of existence entirely, ruled by different physics and logic. I have found elements of recognisable architecture on the fortress, both human and xenos, but it seems to me that these are merely signs of the Blackstone consuming and mimicking its invaders, almost as Grekh evolves through diet. I think the glimpses of recognisable shapes in the Blackstone are misleading. The fortress is an exiled fragment of a netherworld. The parts that seem familiar are symptomatic of its attempts to coalesce with our dimension.

Whatever the truth of its origins, the Blackstone has wandered so widely and for so long that its vaults are infested with life forms that appear to have adopted it as home, or become trapped by its ever-shifting chambers. Some of these are lone specimens, wandering the darkness in isolation, keening and howling for their lost kin, but others are breeding and even thriving in the gloom, well suited to this brutal space.

One of the most commonly recurring threats I have encountered on the fortress are the ur-ghuls. For my sins, I have faced them several times before during my career, but familiarity has certainly not softened my opinion of them. They are repugnant and highly dangerous creatures that seem to have crept from a fever dream. Essentially humanoid in appearance, they are grotesquely hunched and cadaverous, like flayed, reanimated corpses. Despite their wiry frames, they are preternaturally strong. I have seen them tear a man apart in seconds, snorting and slaving like attack dogs. In place of eyes, they have an abundance of olfactory

orifices which they use to track their prey across great distances. They have used this to their advantage on the Blackstone Fortress. In a place where vision is limited and appearances are deceptive, the blind ur-ghuls have thrived, massing in greater numbers than I have seen anywhere else. On several occasions I have heard the snorting, breathy sound of their approach and known that my expedition was in terrible danger.

Hekhten's *Pharmacopolium Xenomaliium* claims to have an answer to the ur-ghul threat. He states, in the second chapter of his treatise, that the teeth of a drukhari archon, worn as a necklace or bracelet, will instil terror into an ur-ghul and leave it fawning like a whipped cur.* The ur-ghuls haunt my every step on the Blackstone and I would dearly love to test Hekhten's theory. In the trading auditoria of Precipice almost anything may be found, for a price, and it may be possible for me to acquire the teeth. To test their efficacy, however, I would have to allow an ur-ghul to come within a few feet of me, which is *not* an experience I would relish.



29.



31.



30.

* My experiences on Precipice would appear to support Hekhten's hypothesis. During my conversation with Xylus Vhorzuun, I mentioned my hatred of ur-ghuls, intrigued to see how the archon would respond. He nodded to one of his attendants who, to my amazement, fetched one of the wretched creatures into the saloon of the ship. The archon gave the creature a command and, incredibly, the ur-ghul responded, hunkering down near Vhorzuun. The archon sneered and boasted that humanity lacks the true spirit of command. We are too

squeamish to rule, he claimed. Seeing that I was unimpressed, the archon patted his repulsive pet and whispered in its ear. It leaped across the saloon and ripped a guard's throat out. The next few moments were filled with a hideous snorting and gulping as the creature fed. The drukhari leant forwards in their seats, watching the display eagerly until the ur-ghul dragged its meal away. The violence was clearly intended to shock and impress me, but it only reaffirmed my belief that the aaldari are a tragic, deluded race in thrall to their addictions.

Ptera-squirrel

Skiouros vampyr

The ptera-squirrel can be found across the length and breadth of the Imperium. These small, apparently harmless rodents usually inhabit forested regions and are so tame they are sometimes kept for pets. They are able to fly, after a fashion, through the use of a fur-covered membrane that stretches from their forelimbs to their hind parts. I had heard rumours, even before reaching Precipice, that there was more to these creatures than meets the eye, but it was not until I saw some in one of the station's trading auditoria that I learned the shocking truth. The squirrels were locked securely in a cage, and for good reason. They were deformed by surplus muscle and they were attacking their cage in a violent frenzy, revealing long, lethal-looking teeth and claws. The trader explained that through a process of accelerated evolution, the squirrels sometimes mutate into this feral, carnivorous state.

Perhaps the most reprehensible of my Precipice contacts are the ratlings Rein and Raus. I would surmise from their weapons and combat fatigues that they have absconded from a *Militarum* regiment, and I work with them only at great need. They are cagey, to say the least, regarding their past adventures.* At the sight of the ptera-squirrels, however, the ratlings proved to be useful, supplying me with invaluable information on how dangerous the creatures can be. I was able to record their words through the vox in my ocular implant and, in the interests of accuracy (rather than good taste), I have recorded their answers verbatim.

** Save for the fact that they occasionally mention an Auxilla organisation called the Longhorns that they seem unduly proud of.*

*I can only garner that they hold some significant emotional or even familial connection to their former *Astra Militarum* comrades, for when pressed about them Rein and Raus would say nothing further and became morose, even aggressive. I have chosen to let the matter drop.*

I did, during one drunken evening in the Helmsman, manage to prise a sliver of detail about the ratlings' previous exploits on and around the Blackstone. The stories they imparted were so preposterous as to defy belief – ur-ghuls at large on Precipice, psychic interrogation and the like – but on reflection, perhaps they are incredulous enough they might harbour some grain of truth?



32.

CLASSIFIED

PTERA-SQUIRREL REPORT

Rein: We've been previously acquainted with the tree rats, ain't we, Raus?

Raus: We have, Rein. We have indeed. They saved us from a terrible death.

Rein: Our rations were meagre, Captain Draik. That's what you have to understand. Dreadfully meagre. Horribly, dreadfully meagre.

Raus: [nodding] And we never got enough.

Rein: And in those situations, Raus and me have always found it best not to pester the officers. They're always so busy with strategic thinking and the like. They don't want to hear about our bellies, do they?

Raus: They do not, Rein. [pats stomach] Remember that time we tried to show them?

Rein: [grimaces and touches a scar on his jaw] Brother, I do. That's why we always deal with matters ourselves. No need for the top brass to know. Besides, our mother didn't raise us to ask for handouts.

Raus: [gesturing to his small stature] She didn't really raise us at all.

[They laugh]

Rein: She taught us to look out for ourselves, Captain Draik, so that's what we did. The indigenous trackers always looked so well fed, see, so we asked them where they was getting all their food.

Raus: They didn't want us to know, but there aren't many as can keep a secret from us. Turns out there was a hidden swamp infested with a kind of squirrel that tastes incredible with plenty of salt.

[They sigh and close their eyes]

Rein: So, while the other troopers kicked their heels, waiting for more orders from high command, Raus and me started going on hunting trips. But after a while, the rest of the regiment started to wonder why we was so plump and they looked like sticks. [raises his eyebrows, as though recalling something of great profundity] It was then that we had our great idea, wasn't it, Raus?

Raus: [nodding sagely] Great idea.

Rein: There were more of the squirrels than we could eat all by ourselves.

[Raus frowns]

Rein: Without making ourselves unwell.

[Raus gives a grudging nod]

Rein: So we thought, like we always do, what would the Emperor do? He would want us to make sure the rest of the men had food too, wouldn't He? The Emperor is famous for wanting His men to have food. It's one of His holy tenants. So, we began giving squirrels to the other men too.

Captain Janus Draik: You gave them away?

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[The rattlings glance at each other]

Rein: For a nominous fee.

Raus: [nodding eagerly] Nominous.

Rein: The problem was, when word got round about the squirrels, every bugger wanted some, didn't they, Raus?

Raus: [nodding] We didn't anticipate the demand.

Rein: So that's when we had our other great idea. There was no way we could meet the demand for squirrels if we had to keep nipping off back to the swamp, so we began a breeding programme.

Captain Janus Draik: Breeding programme?

Rein: Exactly. We bred the ratty little vermin in the barracks. Easy to do. What with the regiment being not what it used to be, half the blockhouses were unused and we kept the squirrels in old ammo cases and promethium cans. [smiles wistfully]

Raus: Good times, Rein. More food and money than we could shake a squirrel at.

[They both drift off into a reverie until I interrupt them]

Captain Janus Draik: And the story ends there?

Rein: [waving a dismissive hand] No, not really. I think you'd say the story ended when the squirrels ate our sergeant. Turns out they were just biding their time. Killer squirrels. Who ever heard of such a thing? Flying killer squirrels. I feel bad about it.

Raus: [patting his brother on the back] Rein, you can't blame yourself. You never can tell how these things will pan out. The sergeant would understand.

Captain Janus Draik: The squirrels ate him?

Rein: Not exactly all of him. Most of him, though.

Raus: Enough that he wasn't going to do any more shouting.

Rein: So after that we thought it best to close down shop. Luckily, we were able to mix the sergeant in with the rations, so no one ever knew what we had done, and there was a bit more food to go round. But we didn't think it wise to sell any more squirrels. You know what the officers are like. They take that kind of thing pretty seriously.

Captain Janus Draik: How can you speak so calmly about this?

Raus: [grins and lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper]

Don't worry, captain. We're no fools. We kept some of the squirrels. [gives me a sly grin] We've brought them with us.

Date: [REDACTED]

Time: [REDACTED]

Official Signatures:

Raus

Rein

Captain J. Draik

Denizens of the Death World

In one of Precipice's drinking dens, I once observed a glowering, savage-looking Guardsman by the name of Lead-boot Kircher, holding court in one of the large booths that line the main saloon. He was dressed simply, with only a cursory nod to an Astra Militarum uniform, and his chest and arms were uncovered, revealing a hyper-muscular physique covered in the most incredible collection of scars. It was these old wounds that had drawn the crowd as the drunken mob quizzed Kircher on each of them. He demanded drinks as payment for each brutal tale and, by the rows of empty cups arrayed before him, I deduced that he had already explained several of his battle trophies.

Spotting a chance to learn more about xenos predators, I took a seat nearby and triggered the vox in my optical implant. I am glad I did. The copious amounts of alcohol Kircher consumed seemed to have no impact on him and he proceeded to give an accurate description of many fascinating xenos life forms that inhabit his home world of Catachan.

Once I returned to the *Vanguard* I was able to turn his gory reminiscences into a list of several species I have never heard mentioned before. Seeing them recorded here, Kircher's claims may seem fanciful but, having heard the man speak, I have to say that he was not the boastful sort. He was only telling his tales to get more drinks and he had a tragic air about him. I would guess that, like many people on Precipice, he had been run aground by the Blackstone and now found himself penniless and unable to leave.

Catachan Devil

Catachanus scorpiones maximus

The Catachan Devil is a scorpion-like arachnid that grows up to a hundred feet in length. It has a barbed tail with a venomous sting and a maw that bristles with poisonous tentacles. The Catachan rainforests are teeming with them and the local Guardsmen consider it a rite of passage to slay one. Kircher described his first encounter with one of them, explaining that he had fought it with nothing but a combat knife, as tradition dictated.

After several injuries (he pointed out horrific scars) he had been unable to get close enough to land a killing blow. Then, tapping his metal leg, he revealed in a nonchalant tone that he had deliberately allowed the Devil to lock its mandibles around his leg, so that he would have a chance to punch his knife through a weak spot in its carapace while it was feeding on him. He knew this ploy would cost him his leg but thought that a worthwhile sacrifice to gain entry into the regiment.

Catachan Devils are fiercely territorial and Kircher claimed this can be used against them. According to Kircher they can easily be defeated by simply placing the discarded carapace of another specimen nearby as a decoy. The Catachan Devil becomes so fixated on attacking the carapace that it becomes a simple matter to kill the beast. Kircher considered this a cowardly ploy, but had the gall to suggest I might need to employ it if I ever found myself in the jungles of Catachan.

33.



Catachan Face-eater

Catachanus fyto paracitus

Even by the standards of an Astra Militarum veteran, Kircher was an ugly man. The bone structure of his face was brutal and angular, as though hammered rather than grown, and his features did not seem to quite fit. This turned out to be because a replacement face had been grafted onto his skull after being removed from one of his fallen comrades. His own face was destroyed by a creature called the Catachan Face-eater (see image opposite).

Face-eaters are fauna that disguise themselves as flora and are found right across the jungles of Kircher's home. They usually resemble a large, pallid leaf or a thin bracket of fungus, but they have been known to adopt the appearance of other forms of vegetation such as vines and creepers. They wait patiently for months or even years between meals, hanging from the boughs of trees or floating on the surface of pools, then pounce when prey comes nearby. They begin the digestive process as soon as they connect with a face, and block air holes to suffocate the victim before planting larvae in the body.

Kircher had seen the creatures in action and knew what lay in store when one latched on to his face as he stooped to drink from a stream. Knowing he had only seconds to live, he used his combat knife to cut away his face and throw it back into the stream with the parasite still attached. He did not seem overly concerned by the loss, stating that he preferred his new face.

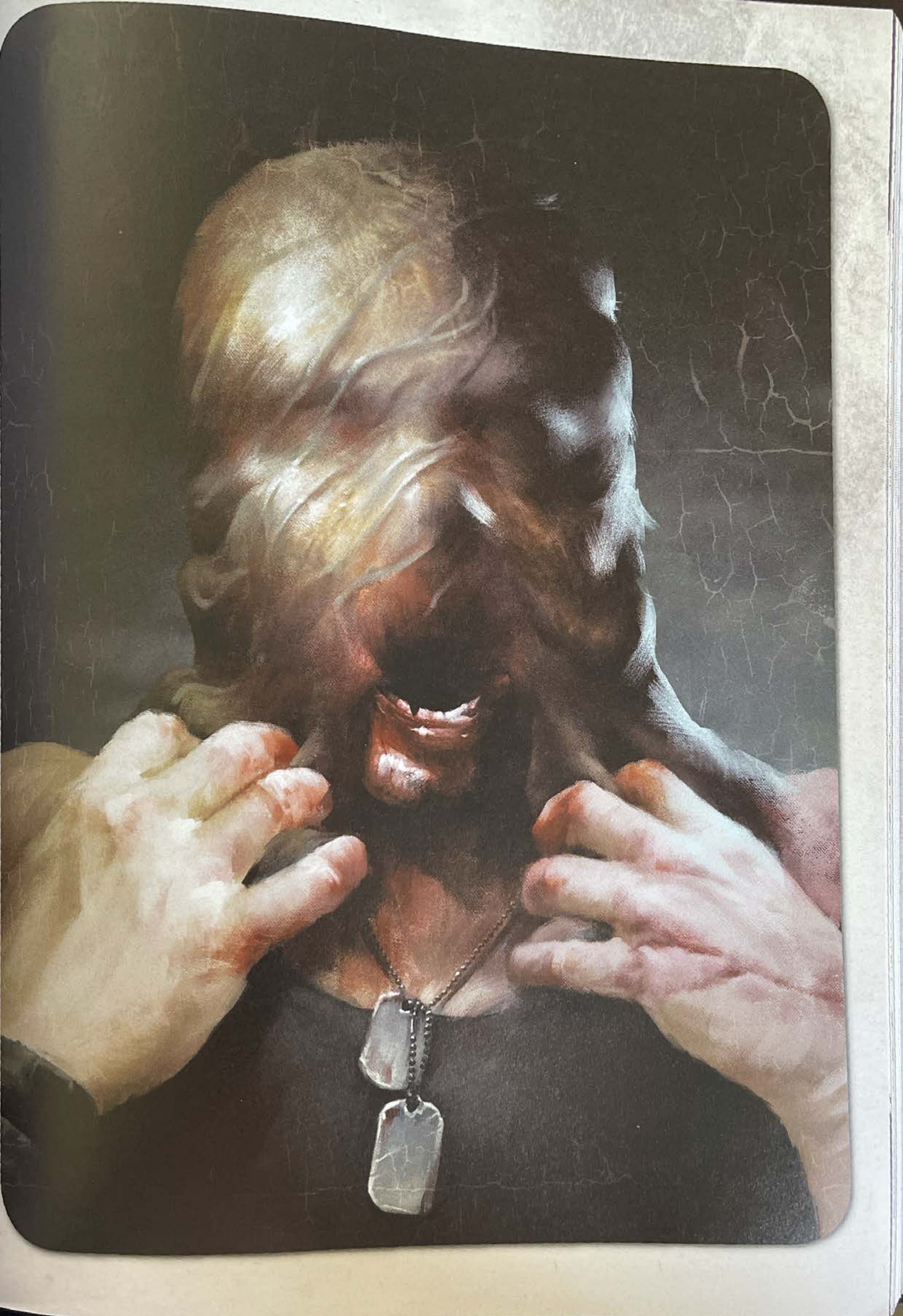
The Great Barking Toad

Catachanus bufo moribundus

The Great Barking Toad appears to be a normal amphibian, sheltering in dark, damp places and showing no sign of the lethal claws and horns that adorn most of Catachan's wildlife. It is, in fact, a particularly timorous creature that is dangerous by virtue of its mental and physical instability. If the toads are surprised, they explode.*

Kircher explained that the burns over his right-hand side were sustained when the rest of his squad disturbed one of the toads. He was scouting a perimeter, half a mile away from his comrades, and he was the only one to survive the blast. He was wearing what looked like a piece of weathered leather around his neck, and he said that was all the toad left of his sergeant.

* *I have since researched the matter in more detail and found that the toads perform a form of autothysis – an internal rupture triggering an explosive gland known as the crepitus. There have been several attempts to weaponise this creature, but their innate nervousness makes the process hazardous.*



Extract from the *Plantorum Mortiferum*

The *Plantorum Mortiferum* is an obscure text, not attributed to any particular author, but it is a useful guide to xenoflora. I do not have time in this book to include every chapter, but the section on Catachan jungle flora gives a good indication of how alien plant life can be just as lethal as alien fauna.

Brainleaf

Vinea catachanus dominari

The leaves of the brainleaf tree are able to fling themselves through the air with a method of propulsion that is similar to that of a bird. The leaves are seemingly harmless until they land on a living body, at which point they use barbed tendrils to attach themselves to their prey's flesh. The leaves are almost impossible to remove and, once in place, spread the tendrils deeper into the body, meshing them with the victim's nervous system.

From this point on, the victim becomes a mindless slave of the leaf, able to perform only the most basic motor functions. That is unless there is a threat to the leaf, at which point the mindless host lurches into action, fighting desperately to defend it. The leaf will inhabit the (often human) host until it wastes away, and will then look for a new home. Incredibly, members of various Catachan Astra Militarum regiments race through brainleaf groves as a rite of passage. Although, I have heard it said that a Catachan Guardsman whose mind has been numbed by a brainleaf plant would probably still be as articulate as his comrades.



34.

Spiker

Spina transformatio

The means by which life perpetuates itself are as varied as they are shocking. The spiker is a large, spherical plant coated in sharp, needle-like spines. The vibrations caused by a passer-by are enough to trigger the plant's attack mechanism. The spiker fires its spines in every direction, and should even one of them pierce the skin of a creature, it is doomed. Mutagenic toxins flood the victim's bloodstream and begin to alter its anatomy. If the victim happens to be human, he may manage to stumble around for an hour or two, sprouting spines from his flesh, but the toxins are so fast-acting he will



35.

not be able to seek help or even understand what is happening to him. By the next day he will have undergone a complete transformation and will be indistinguishable from the plant that poisoned him.

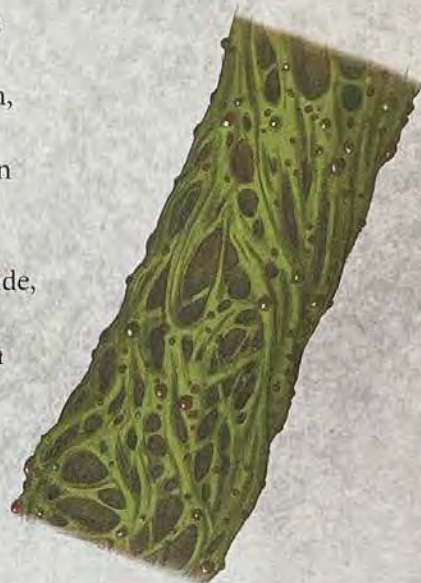
Breathweed

Parasitus respirare

It is unclear if the breathweed is a true plant or a form of fungus. It grows on the side of tree trunks and resembles a vine. However, if an animal or person brushes past the weed, it dissolves into a cloud of airborne spores. If even a single one of these spores lands in a mouth, it attaches itself to the tongue. At this stage of its life cycle, it would be possible to remove the spore, but as it appears to be no more than a small blister, it is often overlooked and in a day or two has been absorbed by the host's tongue, vanishing from sight.

Over the subsequent weeks, the spore eats the tongue from the inside, growing as it does so, until it has eventually taken the place of the original tongue and is indistinguishable from it. The host has no idea that its tongue is actually a hungry, growing parasite that absorbs most of the nutrients that pass over it while producing more spores. The host gradually wastes away and dies; as they take their final breath, the pseudo tongue dissolves, releasing the spores it has grown and seeding new weeds.

36.



Venus Mantrap

Vinea malum

This large, carnivorous plant is a good example of how on Catachan the natural, predatory attributes of flora and fauna have been magnified to shocking extremes. Like its namesake, the Venus flytrap, the Venus mantrap is able to snap its barbed leaves closed like jaws, trapping anyone foolish enough to stray within reach. Unlike the Venus flytrap, however, this plant is not content to simply wait for passing prey – its tendrils and leaves are able to lunge and attack victims that are many feet away from the main part of the plant, dragging them to their deaths with the strength of a large predator. Some Catachan Jungle Fighter regiments require their Guardsmen to snatch a petal from the heart of the mantrap before being promoted to the rank of sergeant.

37.





On the Trail of Chensu

I once asked the wretched Jungle Fighter Lead-boot Kircher what form of xenos he considered to be the most dangerous.

His reply was like tank treads grinding rubble. 'The Last Enemy.'
'The Last Enemy?'

'Chensu. She hunts down in the Salvus Delta. Always has. There have been stories of Chensu since the very first settlers arrived on Catachan. Killer of killers. Queen of the jungle. There's no hunter more deadly.'


'More deadly than any other alpha predator? I've faced quite a few.'


'You can't imagine her, Terran. The biggest of the big cats. Armoured in bony plates, like a lizard.' He made a strange, involuntary growling sound that seemed to emanate from his guts. He seemed unaware he was doing it. 'And she's black as pitch. If you see her, you only see her eyes. Unless you live long enough to see her insides.'

'And one of these creatures found you? Attacked you?'

'I found her. The Salvus Delta is guarded by the Catachan Twelfth. Or it's supposed to be. The Twelfth manned it for three centuries and nothing ever broke through those stockades. But as I took my squad back to the Ilaro Barracks, we heard that the Salvus Bastion had fallen. The Last Enemy had finally tired of their presence in her lands and butchered the lot of 'em. We were closest so I went to see what we could do. Without the bastion to stop it, the jungle would take back control of the whole delta. It was a bad situation.'

'We were nowhere near the bastion when we began to see that it was already too late. The jungle attacked us with even more confidence than usual - mantraps, strangleplants, mamorphs, blood wasps, everything it had. They took us down one by one, crushing, burning, eating, until every one of my men was gone. I realised there was no way I would be able to take back the bastion alone. HQ called me back to Ilaro to wait





for reinforcements.' He leant across the table, eyes burning. 'But I wasn't going back. Not after what she had done. Every one of my men, dead, because of *her*. I was going to make Chensu pay.'

'I headed down the banks of the Scythe and that was when the grox began to stampede, ripping trees up like the world was ending. They broke my ribs and my jaw and took off one of my ears, but I got in the water before they did anything serious. The damned scourge eels took half my blood, but I had enough stimms to keep my heart going. I reached the opposite bank and headed down into the valley where the bastion was.'

He paused for another drink and made the strange grunting sound again. 'I knew pretty quick that something didn't add up. There were burn holes in the jungle – great strips of forest gone. Only explosives or burners could have done it. Then, when I started to find the corpses of the Twelfth, I spotted something else that didn't make sense. Chensu will tear your guts and eat your head, but she don't shoot. Half of the bodies I found had been hit by explosive rounds and the others had wounds that looked like they came from chainswords rather than teeth.'

'I told HQ they'd better bring a lot of men and then I headed on to the bastion, keeping my head down as I got near the walls.'

The anger was back in his eyes, but I sensed it wasn't directed at me this time.

'I walked right into them.' He glared at the empty cups.


I handed him my drink. 'Who?'


'Greenskins.'

'Orks?'

He nodded. 'It wasn't Chensu at all. The reports said she had been spotted in the region, but I walked straight into a dozen greenskins who were busy stripping a Chimera for parts. They opened fire as I started shouting at them.'

'You shouted at them?'





'Damn right. I was furious.' He waved at a mess of puckered scars across his chest. 'I took some hits but I was too angry to notice.' He lifted a necklace from his munitions belt. It was a string of huge, yellow incisors. 'I was too mad to kill them properly. I should have made them suffer. But I wasn't thinking straight. I gunned them down like I was hunting grox.'

'You killed them all?'


He made the strange rumbling, growling sound again, and I realised it was laughter. 'No, I didn't kill them all. Thought I had. Like an idiot. So I walked out into the middle of the bastion's landing platform and started looking around. Then I figured out how the greenskins had made such a mess of the place. As I walked past a trashed lander a whole mob of them attacked.'


He twisted around to show me his massive back. It was covered with even more puckered scars. 'Took a few more hits before I got in cover. Once I was hunkered down by the lander I started landing shots of my own, but there was so damned many of them. I made an impressive pile of bodies but I was nearly out of ammo. And the whole time I was fighting I kept catching sight of someone watching from the other side of the river, hidden in the trees. I guessed it was the leader, waiting like a coward for me to go down before he came out to make the final kill. Seemed spineless for a greenskin, but I guessed it was one of the runty ones.'

Kircher paused, looking into the middle distance. 'And then it happened.'

'What?'

'I fired my last few rounds and the orks started climbing up onto the platform, jeering and banging their weapons on their scrappy armour. I'd given them quite the run-around so they were baying like dogs as they came for me. I had one last trick though.' He grinned, revealing a mess of broken teeth. 'I had a frag grenade in my fist with the pin out and the





lever down. 'Once they got close, I'd see how many I could take down with me.'

I leant nearer, gripped by the man's story. 'But you didn't use the grenade, or you wouldn't be here now. What did you do?'

He slumped back in his chair with another grumbling laugh. 'I did nothing. It was her. I was moments away from being shrapnel, when she leapt from the trees and butchered the lot of 'em.'

'Who?'

'Chensu. She was glorious. As big as the Chimera. Scales glinting in the muzzle flashes. Barbed tail lashing like a serpent. Jaws gaping and...' He paused, his eyes wide. 'And that *roar*. I've never heard anything like it.'

'So this... this reptilian cat killed the greenskins?'


'Every last one. She didn't even notice their shots. It was carnage. Then, once she'd ripped them apart, she padded over to me and stared into my eyes. Right into my eyes. Like she was looking into my soul.'

I've been face to face with apex predators and I could picture the scene so vividly my heart was racing. 'So she saved you. She watched you fighting and decided you were worth saving.'

He kept looking into the middle distance, nodding vaguely. Then he registered what I had said. 'Saved me?' He laughed. 'Are you joking? On Catachan? Of course she didn't bloody save me.' He held up his metal hand. 'She ripped half my arm off. Then started to eat me.'

'But you're alive.'

He nodded, looking around the bar. 'The grenade was still in my hand. Once she'd bitten my hand off the lever popped. I rolled clear but there was no need. Her armour trapped the blast in her body. Didn't help her innards though. The stuff that sprayed from her nostrils looked worse than my rations.'



Greenskins

The dreadful truths on the preceding pages are, of course, hidden from most. If the general populace knew such a nightmarish host of predators was waiting to devour them, we would have widespread panic and rioting.* The greenskin menace, however, is so pervasive that even the High Lords cannot keep it hidden. Barbarous tribes of orks have been plundering our worlds since before the dawn of the Imperium. They are so numerous and savage that their presence is known everywhere. There are Imperial cultures too remote to know of Holy Terra that have still heard of orks. They may go under a multitude of names, but they are all part of the greenskin menace.

Most of the species arrayed against us desire to accrue wealth, seize political power and build empires; not so the orks. Greenskins have no interest in politics or territories. They desire only one thing: to satisfy their destructive urges in the most spectacular fashion. The orks do not wish to build, they only wish to tear down. Their barbaric nature drives them into an endless, meaningless, frenzied war and, if they are lacking a foe, they will happily turn on each other for the sheer joy of killing.

There are countless military records concerning the orks, but little in the way of xenological study. The nature of the subject matter precludes any kind of interaction beyond violence. The various species of greenskin

are unified by their lack of intellect and primitive language, so even if one were to capture a specimen, its snarled gibberish would usually be of no scientific interest. However, in the rarefied atmosphere of Precipice, the impossible is often made possible. In its drinking dens and cargo holds, almost anything may be found if one looks hard enough, and for my sins I have done something I never imagined I would – I have procured information from a greenskin.

Skarburn Zapdakka is a hulking, heavily armed monster who refers to himself as a 'flash git', boasting incessantly about the size and quantity of his weapons. He has mastered a rudimentary form of Low Gothic, but maintaining any form of dialogue with him is surreal, to say the least. He resembles a savage, overgrown infant with terrifying mood swings. He is bent almost double by the mountain of scarred muscle that covers his upper body, but he is still as tall as I am. I imagine if he were able to stand upright he would tower over me. His biceps are as thick as a man's chest, his body makes a peculiar

38.



* *More widespread panic and rioting.*



wheezing, gurgling sound as he moves, and he smells like rotting fungus. I have forced myself to endure several audiences with the thing, however, (though not on the *Vanguard*, Throne forbid) and, as a result, I have broadened my knowledge of this brutal species.



39.

40.

Orks

Orkus vulgus

A survivor of an ork attack* would think the rabid horde consisted of a uniformly deranged rabble, but, as I struggled to tease intelligible answers from Zapdakka, I was shocked to learn that the greenskins have a clearly delineated society ordered by a brutally simple hierarchy: strongest and largest at the top, weakest and smallest at the bottom.

Zapdakka spoke of mobs and warbands, and it would seem that multiple warbands** are called a tribe. He also mentioned clans, but I am not sure how they fit into the hierarchy. I would theorise that the clans may be more of a cultural or religious affiliation.

Warbosses and warlords are the most powerful of all the orks, ruling by virtue of their size and ferocity, and the amount of 'gear' (weapons?) they own. Zapdakka became worryingly agitated when he said that the 'flashiest gear' was always taken by the 'boyz in mega armour'. When I asked for an explanation of the term, Zapdakka became even more irritated, clenching his enormous fists and grunting about 'boyz who got

* *Something of a rarity.*

** *Perhaps equivalent to squads and regiments?*

too big for their boots'. I sensed by Zapdakka's fury that this may have been the reason he now travels apart from other greenskins, proudly referring to himself as a 'freebooter'.*

To my surprise, Zapdakka implied that there are orks capable of doing things *other* than fighting. Zapdakka grimaced at the idea, as though it were the strangest perversion imaginable, but he claimed that some orks are born with the ability to build things or fix them. Some of them apparently understand how the insides of a body work and are able to repair sections that are 'broken'. Others are able to repair and even build complex machines.

Zapdakka grew agitated again when he mentioned orks whose heads conduct some kind of warp current. He said that all the 'fun' of battle builds up in their heads like water crashing against a dam. Sometimes it makes them sick,** but if the excitement grows too great, their heads explode, killing them and anyone near them. He described them as walking warp bombs.

Of course, this may all be the ravings of a simpleton, but several xenological texts have suggested that some greenskins might be psychic resonators, able to absorb battle rage and convert it into a psychic weapon. If this is true, it would add a troubling dimension to the greenskin problem, implying that they are somehow linked to the etheric forces of the immaterium.

As Zapdakka veered from topic to topic, he mentioned a subspecies – or perhaps just a rank – of greenskins that live for the joy of setting things alight. He explained that the powerful flamers they carry are great fun in battle, but that these kinds of ork are hard to keep on track as their primary focus is igniting as many things as possible. He laughed as he recounted tales of orks forgetting their orders as they watched their victims dancing and twitching in the flames. It was chilling to watch him talk like this. There is something about how he described the deaths that, to my mind, captures the very essence of the greenskin race. They are not evil, as such, they merely delight in wreaking carnage, like a small child laughing as it pulls an insect apart. Somehow, this thought makes them seem all the more horrific.

** I asked Zapdakka to explain what he meant when he referred to himself as a freebooter. From his bellowed response I deduced that the name describes an ork that has eschewed tribes and clans, seeing himself above such things, and struck out on his own, acting as a free-ranging corsair.*

*** Zapdakka described this as a useful close-quarters weapon, so I would hazard a guess it is not vomit as we understand it.*



41.

Gretchin

Orkus nasus

Zapdakka became even more amused when I asked if orks were the lowest rank in greenskin society. He explained that there were many kinds of inferior orkoid living in fear of the mighty boyz. Gretchin, he claimed, are a diminutive ork subspecies that lack the impressive muscle mass of their kin and only grow to half their height. From what I can discern* gretchin are not a great deal of use in battle, other than as a dispensable tide of bodies that can clog up the enemy lines before the larger orks attack. Zapdakka referred to them as sneaky and cunning, and I wondered if that might mean the gretchin make up for their lack of size with greater intellect. If Zapdakka is a good measure of ork intelligence, gretchin would not require much brainpower to gain the upper hand.

* Zapdakka's bucket of a jaw is so teeth-crowded that he struggles to articulate anything clearly.

Snotlings

Orkus serverum

When Zapdakka began talking about snotlings, I thought at first he was describing a kind of morsel of food. Then he mentioned using them as ammunition and, finally, talked about the snotlings' role as slaves. It seems that the tiniest member of the orkoid species fulfils all three of these roles, depending on the whims of its larger kin. I initially dismissed them as being of little interest, but when Zapdakka mentioned their 'squig-herding' duties I pounced on the word 'squig', having encountered it in various texts without ever pinning down its meaning. After agreeing a further payment, he was able to offer a great deal of information on the subject.



Squigs

One of the more outlandish xenological theories concerning greenskins is that they are not animals at all, but a form of ascomycota (fungi) that reproduces asexually through the distribution of spores. I would not deign to mention it here were it not for the subspecies we shall discuss next. If my orkoid informant, Zapdakka, is to be believed* there are countless forms of the xenospecies known as the squig and, from the sketches I have procured here on Precipice, they *do* appear almost like a kind of animated, feral fungus. Could it be that orks are a hybrid of the animal and fungal kingdoms? Perhaps at some point in their ancestry the orkoids became host to a fungal parasite that now exists inside them in a more symbiotic manner – granting them strength and regenerative powers while devouring their minds? I am only scratching at the beginnings of a theory, but if you look at the illustrations on the following pages I hope you will at least understand my interest in this peculiar ork subspecies. Here are just a few of the species of squig Zapdakka described:

* *And I find it very hard to credit him with the wit to be duplicitous.*

Attack squig

Orkus ferocitas

These savage creatures are used as a mixture of pet and weapon by the larger greenskins. They have a very simple morphology: essentially a gaping, teeth-filled mouth on a pair of muscular legs. Zapdakka spoke fondly of his own attack squig, talking proudly of the carnage it wreaked whenever it was let off the leash. I asked him what became of the animal. 'I ate it,' replied Zapdakka cheerfully, giving me the impression that any kind of squig is considered edible at a push.



42.



Squiggoth

Orkus prodigium

As well as variations in anatomy, squigs vary massively in size, ranging from small 'snack'-sized creatures to enormous squiggoths. Some of the squiggoths are only slightly larger than the attack squigs, but Zapdakka implied that some of them grow to such a colossal size that orks are able to build howdahs on their backs and ride them to war, laden with heavy weaponry. Even the most modestly sized greenskin has a tough hide, but these walking mountains have skin like armour plating and are able to smash through redoubts and gun emplacements as easily as trampling a hedge.*



Squighound

Orkus canis

Some squigs are a hybrid species combining orkoid pseudo-fungus with the anatomy of recognisable animals. (See my symbiosis theory at the start of this section.) The squighound resembles a cross between an attack squig and a ferocious dog. Zapdakka described a creature with four legs and matted hair, along with the ubiquitous gaping mouth found on almost all squigs. According to Zapdakka, squighounds are mainly used as a form of entertainment, inflicting small acts of cruelty on the smaller species of greenskins such as gretchin and snotlings.

Targeting squig

Orkus scopum

Some squigs rarely leave the bodies of their masters, perching on shoulders or heads to perform a simple task. Targeting squigs have a single enlarged eye that fills most of their face, and when an ork marksman** takes aim, the targeting squig seems to assist him in some way. Some xenologists have suggested that this is due to a form of psychic link that stems from the gestalt, fungal nature of the greenskins. I am more inclined to believe that something more mundane is going on – the squig probably talks to the ork, or perhaps even nudges the gun.

** The acclaimed xenologist Magos Calx witnessed one of these behemoths in action during the fall of Hydrus Ulterior and his reports describe the carnage it created stomping through one of his research facilities. Calx had an impressive skitarii force at his disposal, but they failed to stop the squiggoth's advance. It would have destroyed the whole base if it had not inadvertently broken through a plasma generator and become trapped in the current. As the squiggoth began to cook, surrounding greenskins rushed to assist, trying to shove the monster to safety. They too became trapped by the current, but that did not deter other orks from attempting the same thing. As more orks became trapped with the squiggoth, a huge bonfire of ork flesh began to form. Calx ordered his skitarii troops to withdraw, and they watched from a distance as the orks and squiggoth melted into a single, hideous mass. Calx included a sketch but I have decided to omit it from this work for reasons of taste.*

*** I am stretching the term 'marksman' here. Orks achieve success through numbers and the savagery of their attacks rather than through any specific martial skills. Having observed them in action I do not believe they undergo any form of training or drills before engaging their enemy.*

Squigeon

Orkus aerium

The squigeon is a small, winged form of squig. They have little or no attack capabilities and would be harmless had the greenskins not struck upon the idea of using them as messengers. This may sound absurdly archaic but, in a strange way, the simplicity of the greenskin tactics can sometimes be to their advantage. In Magos Calx's reports from Hydrus Ulterior he describes, with obvious frustration, how the orks used winged messenger squigs to communicate with each other when his own, more advanced methods (vox, etc.) had been knocked out by the destruction of the plasma generator. He sent one of his archaeopter up to try and shoot the squigeons down, but only grew angrier as he realised he was wasting his valuable resources on a fruitless chase.

Eating squig

Orkus consumit

The name squig covers a bewildering array of creatures that accompany the greenskin tribes. When I asked Zapdakka how they transported this peculiar menagerie to the worlds they invaded, he became confused. He told me that the squigs live in cesspools, implying that they emerge somehow from the orks' waste.

With that in mind, it is particularly grotesque that the next form of squig Zapdakka described was the so-called 'eating squig', which appears to be a kind of oversized mollusc bred entirely for its meat. Zapdakka spoke enthusiastically about the many different kinds of eating squig and said that he was starting to feel hungry just thinking about them.

Squigs appear to grow from greenskins' bodily waste, which makes it somewhat surprising that they are used as food.



Bomb squig

Orkus tumultum

It is testament to the might of the ork tribes that they manage to pose such a threat while being so monumentally dim-witted. They use (or have bred?) a particular type of squig to carry incendiary devices into battle, even though the creatures have little or no sense of direction. As a rule, squigs are prone to chasing after things, so their ork handlers have deduced that they can strap a bomb to one and it will charge after the first moving vehicle it sees. A person of even limited intellect would see the flaw in this plan: the bomb squigs often chase the wrong targets, including members of their own tribe.

This absurd method of war encapsulates the baffling nature of the orks. They are crude and idiotic, and yet they do win, again and again, even when facing enemies of vastly superior intellect. There is something in the way they delight in destruction and carnage that makes them almost unbeatable. If a bomb squig inadvertently destroyed one of their own armoured vehicles, the orks would find it amusing rather than demoralising. They would almost be comedic if it were not for the shocking horror of seeing an ork cheerfully laughing while butchering innocent civilians.



Razorwing

Raptor rigidium

During one of my visits to the Dromeplatz* I witnessed a creature I had not seen since my journey to the Koronus Expanse many years ago: a razorwing. The creature appeared to be the property of a drukhari noble and was behaving like a tamed pet, but even so I was surprised to see it there. Razorwings are formidable predators, and if it had decided to attack there would have been slaughter.

Razorwings are large birds of prey with a wingspan of nearly thirteen feet when full-grown, and feathers so hard and sharp they make good hunting knives. They combine their lethal feathers and beak to punch through almost any form of armour or hide. These vast raptors drift on thermal currents until they have their prey in sight, then dive at such incredible speeds that escape is usually impossible. This makes them successful apex predators right across the Koronus Expanse and in other parts of the galaxy too. Even heavily armoured vehicles are not safe from their predations, and once the alpha predator has thrown its prey into a panic, more razorwings join the feast, descending like a storm of dark, monoblade knives. The birds devour every part of their kill, seeming to take a particular delight in eating the bones.**

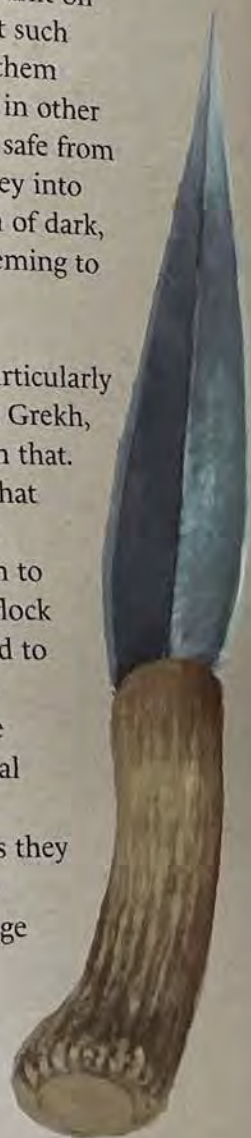
Prior to my time on Precipice I believed they were simply a particularly lethal bird of prey. However, my usually taciturn kroot tracker, Grekh, told me a tale that would appear to suggest they are more than that.

When Grekh saw me working on my sketch he announced that he once encountered razorwings on the hive world of Tankari Prime. Grekh rarely, if ever, talks about his past, so I asked him to explain more. He told me he was hired by guilders to hunt a flock of raptors that had been harrying crawler convoys as they tried to navigate the deserts around Hive Sabinium. It is testament to Grekh's hardy nature that he would even consider braving the wastes, but he described his hunting trip with the same neutral tone he describes everything.

He travelled on foot, keeping a wide berth of the crawlers as they lumbered across the wastes. They were only a few miles from Sabinium when the razorwing flocks started to circle. The huge vehicles were laden with valuable cargo, but the birds were only interested in one thing: the drivers. As Grekh climbed to a cliff edge for a better view, he saw the birds start to dive, punching through the plasteel-armoured cabins with

* *The largest trading auditorium on Precipice. A market so vast and crowded one can easily become lost amongst the many wonders and horrors on display. I have learned more about the nature of xenospecies in the Dromeplatz than I have in years of void-faring.*

** *Some scholars have claimed that this hunger for bones is linked to the iron-hard nature of the birds' wings, talons and claws.*





47.



48.



49.

ease and dragging the crews out into the ash storms. As Grekh watched through the scope of his rifle, the birds devoured their prey, shredding flak armour, skin and muscle before consuming the bones, leaving nothing but bloodstains on the ash.

I asked Grekh what happened when he opened fire, but he frowned and said that he did not shoot. The birds were acting in an intriguing way, almost as if they were signalling to each other and employing tactics. Grekh waited patiently until the raptors had finished eating.

I reminded him that he had been employed to protect the convoy.

He shrugged and said that the guilders had not impressed him, but that the razorwings had. As he described them rising from their kills, Grekh used a word that I would not have imagined was in his vocabulary: beautiful.

As the raptors departed, Grekh made a note of their trajectory then began climbing down towards the now abandoned crawlers. He had not gone far when he saw a group of nomads approaching and dived for cover.*

To Grekh's surprise, the man leading the nomads was the underling of the guildler who had employed Grekh to protect the convoy – a guildler by the name of Arracan. Arracan directed the nomads to different points on the crawlers and then, once the nomads had inspected the cargo, they returned to Arracan and handed him something. Grekh's magnoculars revealed that the nomads were paying Arracan.

Arracan then headed off into the storm flanked by armed guards. Grekh guessed that the guildler had betrayed his master and was behind the raids on the crawlers. He was clearly giving the nomads details of trade routes and then receiving payment for his treachery.

The guildler climbed into a small, ten-man crawler and, rather than heading back to the hive, headed several miles in the opposite direction, through some nearby foothills to park up a mountain crevasse. Grekh followed in his own vehicle and watched Arracan from a cave mouth as he stumbled out into the ash storm.

After several minutes, the razorwings began circling again. Grekh presumed he was about to see another brutal massacre, but the raptors landed and a particularly huge specimen approached the guildler. Grekh struggled to see clearly through the banking ash clouds, even with magnoculars, but he had the sense that the bird was communicating with Arracan, nodding its head and clacking its beak. Grekh also swears that he saw the bird pass something to Arracan with its beak. Incredibly, Arracan then bowed to the bird before heading back towards the hive. Grekh remained hidden until the birds had left.

Grekh's interpretation of these events seems fanciful – he believes that the razorwings were manipulating the (inferior, as Grekh sees them) humans and setting them against each other. I find this hard to countenance, but one thing is clear: razorwings have a troubling subtlety about them.

** The Tankari Wastes are as lethal as the deserts of most hive worlds. Grekh surmised, quite correctly, that anyone braving the storms was apt to be dangerous.*

Sslyth

Serpentes vindicum

Evolution takes many strange and meandering paths. I have heard of humanoids descended from canines and crustaceans, ursidae and equines, but one of the most successful species seems to be the *Serpentes* order of reptiles. I have encountered several species displaying serpentine attributes. The colossal sea serpent known as the acyra so terrifies the people of Petros that they build houses on inhospitable mountainsides, never venturing to the lowlands for fear of encountering a leviathan. The sytalis of Matapan V, on the other hand, are revered by the local populace as a benign priesthood, despite their clear predilection for human flesh. And the technologically advanced serpents of Laeran, in the Ultima Segmentum, are said to have been so skilled in combat that even the Emperor's Space Marines were hard-pressed to defeat them.

During my own travels, I have more than once encountered the reptilian humanoids known as the sslyth. Their thick scales form a natural and almost unbreakable armour, and their four arms allow them to attack in a blinding frenzy of lunges and jabs, making them fierce close-combat opponents. They are able to fire a gun, reload another and attack with a blade simultaneously. As far as I can tell, they are immune to pain and prepared

to face any opponent. They have been observed fighting alongside aeldari raiding parties, but it is thought that they work as hirelings rather than for any ideological reasons. Their weaponry and armour appears to match the design of their aeldari masters, so I do not believe they are a technologically advanced species. They are clearly intelligent, though. Various reports describe them taking and giving orders in the barbed, complex Drukhari language, and they are known to employ subtle tactics that belie their savage appearance.

Through my meetings on Precipice I have learned of a relatively simple way to overcome these seemingly invincible creatures. Their one flaw stems from their cold-blooded nature. In extremely low temperatures they have been known to slip into a cryogenic stupor, not dissimilar to a coma. I have heard several accounts of an arms dealer who almost escaped a sslyth attack by donning an envirosuit and plunging his ship into sub-zero temperatures. He might have survived the attack had he known the sslyth were only comatose. Unfortunately, he mistook their inactivity for death and returned his ship's environmental controls to normal. His data-log survived the subsequent slaughter, but he did not.





51.

Psychneuein

Insecta cerebellum



When Magos Hieronyma referred to the diversities and manifestations that haunt our skies, he was referring to much more than just physical predators. Scholars far wiser than me have failed to fathom the nature of the immaterial universe, and we can only guess at the true nature of the warp. I have spoken with academics and intellectuals from the great families of the Navis Nobilite, who, in service of the Imperial Navy, have stared into the spaces between spaces – the worlds between worlds – and even those elevated individuals could not truly give a name to the great ocean they navigate, or the horrors therein.

Psychneuein are a well-documented example of a threat that does not originate in the physical realm. They are large, wasp-like insects, sometimes larger than a man, that can wreak enormous havoc upon a world. They have been known to strip a planet clean in a matter of years. They are quite unlike natural swarming predators, however. Rather than hunting for biological matter, they are drawn to the untrammelled power of psykers. Sanctioned psykers have no fear of the creatures, but for unwarded, heretical sorcerers, psychneuein are a death sentence. These warp-spawned insects have a grotesque method of reproduction: planting eggs in the heads of psykers so the larvae can feed on the etheric currents of the dying victim's brain. The host becomes mindless and eventually perishes as a result of the parasite's presence.

Aboard my own ship, the *Draikstar*, I have had lengthy discussions with a Navigator called Espern Locarno. He is as private as all his kind, remaining veiled and illusive during our discussions, but he once shared a story that gave me an inkling of what a dreadful threat these warp entities are.

In the years before he was sent by his House to the Blackstone Fortress, Locarno served with Inquisitor Kreuzer of the

Ordo Malleus. At one time, Kreuzer and his entourage were on a feudal world in Segmentum Pacificus by the name of Xymethrus. Some of the locals had failed to meet their Imperial tithe requirements, and as Kreuzer was already on the planet, he went to investigate. He discovered that the rogue fiefdom had been ravaged by a swarm of creatures known as psychneuein.

It was not their destructive tendencies that most alarmed Kreuzer, it was the nature of their prey. Psychneuein are drawn to areas of high psychic activity. If the psychneuein had come to Xymethrus, reasoned Kreuzer, there must be unsanctioned psykers present in significant numbers.

Locarno and Kreuzer headed to the beleaguered fiefdom to see what they could uncover. The planet was at a pre-industrial stage of development and the local militia were poorly equipped. Kreuzer was arrogant in the extreme and presumed he and his well-armed entourage would have no problem dealing with the psychneuein. His main interest was hunting down the rogue psykers that had drawn the insects.

Things did not go as planned. The insects attacked Kreuzer in such numbers that many of his troops were killed, and he and Locarno, along with the remaining soldiers, were driven back to the capital – an ancient fort on the coast. Kreuzer ordered aerial bombardment of the surrounding areas, but the psychneuein were relentless, determined to break into the stronghold.

With his heavily armed retinue manning the walls, Kreuzer was able to hold the psychneuein back, but they kept massing along the coast until there seemed to be a second ocean, one made of abdomens, wings and antennae.

Days turned into weeks and, as the endless drone of the psychneuein grew louder, the defenders in the fort began to starve. Inquisitor Kreuzer, zealous to begin with, began executing the locals. The insects were drawn by psychic mutation, so Kreuzer concluded that he simply needed to root out the abomination in their midst and the insects would move on, looking for other prey.

Locarno described the scene to me in gruesome detail: people either dying in the streets or being executed by an increasingly deranged Inquisitor Kreuzer as the dreadful droning sound filled the air.

Finally, Kreuzer began to wonder if the problem might lie with Locarno. The Navigator must have failed to ward his warpsight sufficiently, Kreuzer claimed. Once he had focused on Locarno, Kreuzer became increasingly convinced that the Navigator was the corrupted soul drawing the warp-entities to the fortress. Only the political power of Locarno's ancient Navis Nobilite blood stayed Kreuzer's hand.

The following morning, the insects breached the outer walls and drove the defenders back. Locarno was forced from his chambers as the psychneuein broke through the walls of the inner keep.

Surrounded by scenes of bloodshed, Locarno emerged onto the battlements and saw the extent of Inquisitor Kreuzer's lunacy. Hundreds of crucified bodies filled the courtyard. He was horrified. These people were innocents. Kreuzer was more of a monster than the psychneuein.

At that moment Locarno saw the inquisitor, ranting at his men. A great rage rose up in the Navigator and he drew his autopistol.

Kreuzer saw him and charged, drawing his own gun, but Locarno fired first, shooting several times, until the inquisitor lay dying on the steps below him.

Locarno felt a rush of dread as he realised he had killed an inquisitor, but at that moment the psychneuein swarmed into view, and every one of them made for Kreuzer.

As the insects massed around the inquisitor's corpse, Locarno realised that it was Kreuzer's soul that was corrupt, *his* mind that had drawn the warp plague.

Locarno fled the fortress, leading the other survivors in his wake, sure they would be hunted down. But the psychneuein made no attempt to follow them, and with the death of Kreuzer, the planet was freed from their infestation.

Theologica Xenodoxus Naturalis

It is a peculiar quirk of human nature that we sometimes idolise the very things sent to destroy us. It is natural and right that lesser men should show respect and deference to those of a higher social sphere but, over long centuries of isolation, some Imperial societies have developed a perverted form of obsequiousness. Cut off from their forebears and left alone in the darkness of space, some of our most far-flung colonies have sought other forms of leadership to fill the gap.

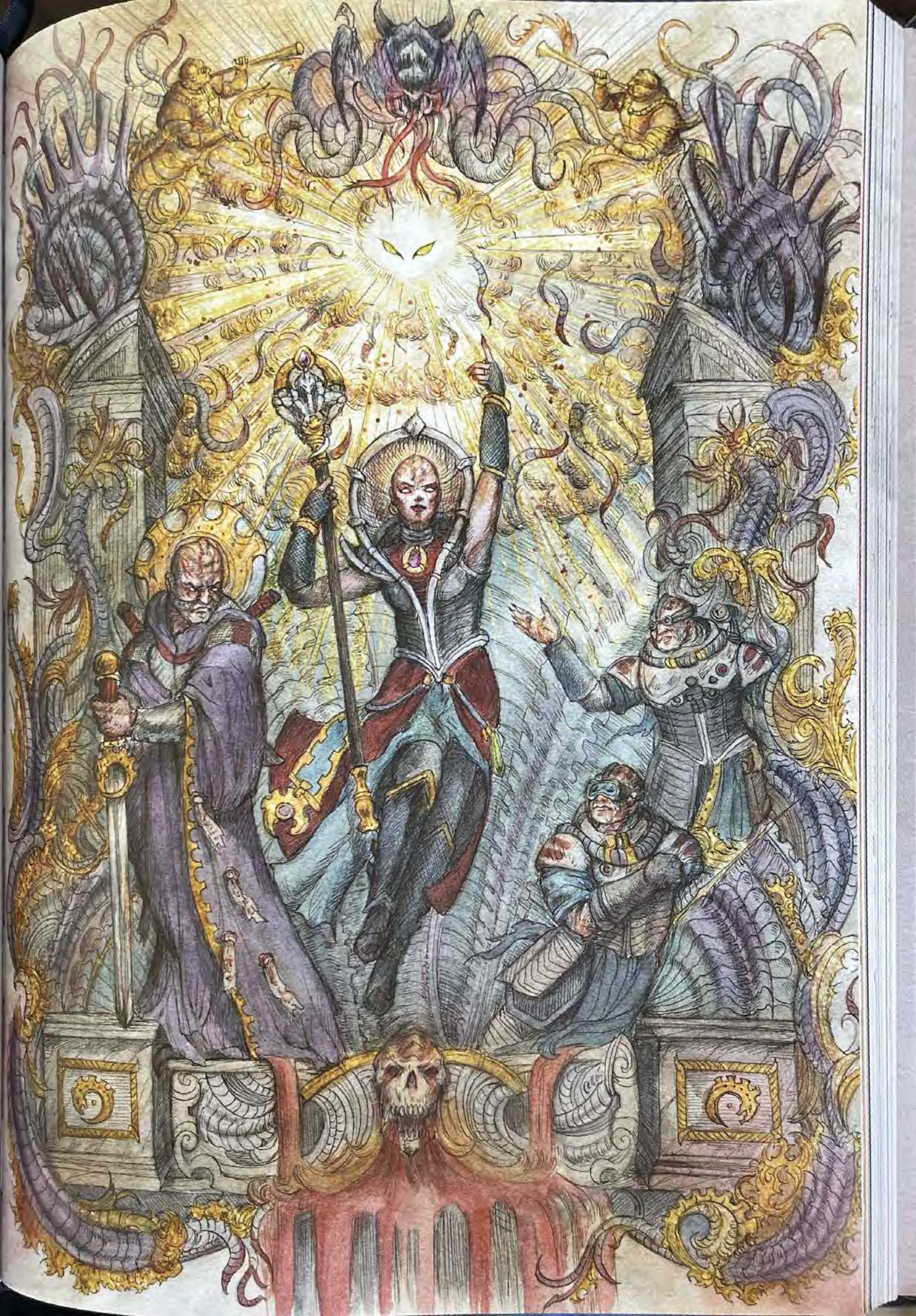
During my stay on Precipice, I have become acquainted with a Ministorum priest by the name of Taddeus the Purifier. He is devout in the extreme and fiery of temperament, but in his quieter moments he has shared some interesting tales with me. He has crossed the galaxy, believing he has a personal mission to rid it of misbelief, and during his various missionary engagements he has encountered some shockingly debased belief systems. Here, on the Blackstone Fortress, we are facing cultists who have devoted themselves to the worship of the Ruinous Powers that inhabit the warp, but from talking to Taddeus I have learned the myriad ways in which humanity can fall from grace.

One of the most shocking tales Taddeus shared concerned his time in the Grendl Stars.* While there, he encountered a whole subsector in which the local humans were devoted to the worship of beings called barghesi. At midwinter solstice, they erected vast plasma beacons that would signal their presence to their gods. Taddeus was not concerned until he discovered the next part of the ceremony. Waves of ferocious creatures (the barghesi) would pour from the surrounding forests and devour the entire congregation. There were conflicting reports as to their physical appearance, so I cannot provide a definitive description. Taddeus tells me that he saw a piece of devotional art portraying them as mantis-like humanoids with flat, triangular skulls – like arrowheads – and long, scything forelimbs, but he could not say if the image was accurate. Everyone agreed on one thing, however: the barghesi were intensely violent, killing in a savage frenzy.

Taddeus calculated that, in a few more years, these willing victims would have made themselves extinct. He toyed with the idea of educating the locals in the true faith of the Imperial creed, then decided that the Emperor had no need of such moronic subjects and left them to their fate.

Impressed by my interest, Taddeus showed me a page from an ancient holy tract, explaining that it showed a far more troubling heresy that he hoped to investigate once he finished his work on the Blackstone Fortress. The people of Thunis Majoris have spent centuries of isolation worshipping a mysterious figure known as the Patriarch. He has promised his followers that a great day of revelation is coming, and judging by the illuminations on Taddeus' document, the traitors of Thunis are on the cusp of a dangerous revolution. (See opposite.)

** Located on the eastern fringe of the galaxy, as far from Precipice as it is possible to imagine, giving me an idea of how zealous Taddeus has been in his pursuit of heresy.*



Jokaero

Pongo ingenio

The jokaero are a species of simian savants, similar in appearance to the long-extinct, orange-furred primates known as orang-utans. Currently, they have avoided Xenos Horrificus status due to being no more than animals, and apparently harmless ones at that. Their affinity with technology is thought to be a neurological glitch rather than true, intellectual understanding. According to Espern Locarno, they are used as a mixture of pet and technician by some Inquisitorial retinues* but I had never encountered one myself until I came to the Blackstone Fortress.

On Precipice, they appear to be acting under their own auspices, having arrived in a peculiar ship of their own manufacture and showing no sign of deferring to any Imperial agents. This is a suspicious state of affairs, with no one knowing exactly what has brought them here, but the jokaero have stifled any awkward questions by making themselves invaluable. They are able to repair seemingly anything and, beyond that, can refine and enhance any equipment they lay their hands on. Their own technology is subtle and ingenious, and I can see why the creatures are so valued. One jokaero in particular, named Tinkerer by some of the Precipice drunkards, became something of a mascot, to the extent that there was uproar when the thing went missing on the Blackstone.

My first impressions of a jokaero did not endear me to the species, however. After a particularly gruelling expedition to the fortress, I was attempting to return to my lander, the *Vanguard*, while laden with several heavy crates of archeotech. My attaché, Isola, was with me but the rest of our party had been killed by spindle drones. We made a miserable pair as we neared the *Vanguard* – limping, wounded and exhausted. The only consolation was that the archeotech would be of great value and interest to the Adeptus Mechanicus.

We emerged from a maglev chamber only an hour's walk from the *Vanguard*** and picked up our pace a little, keen to put the sorry episode behind us.

Then, as is its wont, the Blackstone decided to play a little game with us. An elevated walkway I have traversed several times had vanished, replaced by a narrow corridor. Our lumens struggled to pierce the gloom within and, after the catastrophe with the drones, we were hesitant to enter another unknown vault. We scoured the area but every other direction was barred, so we reluctantly entered the corridor. It was arrow-straight for the first few minutes, but we then reached a

* Locarno tells me that Inquisitor Kreuzer kept one of the creatures during the years before he went to Xymethrus. Apparently, despite being a simple ape, the creature was able to repair Kreuzer's weapons and comms devices with shocking ease.

53.



** One can never be entirely sure of journey times on the fortress, as the rest of this tale illustrates.

crossroads, some paths heading up, some down, and some keeping to the same elevation.

Our frustration mounted as we realised we were in a maze. Isola pointed out that there were unreadable characters, like hieroglyphs, scored into the walls, but she was unable to discern their meaning. Guilt over the deaths of my men was no doubt hampering my decision-making, so I picked a route at random and stumbled on, bowed by the weight of the archeotech.

From there on the nightmare only worsened. We staggered for hours, then days, with no hope of plotting a route. To make matters worse, the auspex array on Isola's cogitator informed her that we were being stalked, presumably by another drone. As I say, I did not entirely have my wits about me and I turned to face our pursuer head-on.

As a figure approached through the shadows I held my fire, realising that it was a person. Then, as it reached the beams of our lumens, I saw it was a jokaero. The creature was alone and I realised it might be the so-called Tinkerer that everyone was so concerned about. The creature bared its teeth and performed a series of forward rolls, seemingly very excited.

We tried to communicate with the thing but it was infuriatingly idiotic, rolling back and forth and snarling cheerfully, so we staggered on, close to collapse, with the ape loping after us, a puzzled frown on its face.

Finally, we became so weak that we had to start abandoning our finds, leaving behind priceless pieces of archeotech just to keep walking. Hours later, even though we had discarded everything we could, Isola and I collapsed at another crossroads, unable to continue. I believed we were going to perish in the gloom, as so many before us had.

I railed at the darkness, demanding that the fortress let me reach my ship. The darkness, of course, did not reply, but at my words the confused expression fell from the jokaero's face to be replaced by another eager snarl. It turned to the nearest wall, traced a long finger over the runes and nodded. Then it took a piece of small, silver jewellery from its fur and pressed it against the runes.

To my amazement, the maze reconfigured itself. Walls slid away like well-oiled engine parts. When the movements ceased there was a single path ahead of us, and at the far end I saw the *Vanguard*, just thirty feet away.

I demanded to know why the creature had not helped earlier, before we began abandoning our haul, but it seemed to have lost interest in me and was practising its forward rolls again. I confess, had it not been for the restraining words of Isola, I might have gunned our saviour down out of sheer frustration.

Jokaero delight in producing technical marvels, but they seem to have a particular penchant for anything tiny, such as these crystalline spy-flies.



The jokaero obsession with miniaturisation means that some of their digital weapons can be disguised as items of jewellery.



The Firmament Prism

In the years before I came to the Western Reaches, I travelled widely across the galaxy, establishing several new trade routes and broadening my knowledge of the Imperium. During my journeys, I encountered several artefacts that were, or at least claimed to be, products of an alien intelligence. Some of them, such as the drukhari pistol I carry to this day, have been incredibly useful. Others have been obvious fakes, the work of crooks and scamsters preying on the ignorance of others. And some that seemed insignificant at the time have come back to haunt me.

I was being entertained by Governor Sarmat of Cursus Prime when I mentioned my interest in xenos esoterica. Sarmat had been distant all evening, clearly uninterested in the business opportunities I had presented to his officials, but his eyes lit up at the mention of aliens and, after dinner, he led me to his private chambers in the east wing of the vast municipal palace he inhabited, Trelovouni Ravette. I would class myself as neither puritan nor radical, but I have to admit I was shocked by the extent of Governor Sarmat's collection. He had whole rooms devoted to xenos weaponry, and floor-to-ceiling cabinets that were lined with specimens such as alien skulls and unborn horrors drifting in liquid-filled jars.*

I was about to leave when an object of extraordinary beauty caught my eye. It was a crystal, about the size of my fist, of such clarity and lustre that I could not help but stare at it. I asked the governor which alien race had produced it. He admitted that he had been unable to ascertain its origin, beyond that it once belonged to a man called Trazyn, a collector of curios who had died many centuries ago. Sarmat took a childlike glee in explaining that the prism was not simply an ornament, but a mechanical device. He told me it was a thinking machine, similar to our own logic engines and cogitators, only far more elegant. The species who made the thing produced it with a single task in mind: to play out various tactical scenarios as a way to hone their armies and prepare for conflicts.

The governor urged me to look closer and when I did, I was delighted to see a miniature recreation of a battle. Viewed at the correct angle, the wall of the prism magnified its microscopic contents, revealing them to be thousands of tiny warriors and war machines locked in an

** I should like to state clearly that I entirely disapprove of such xenophilia and the only reason I spent so long in those rooms, and made such detailed notes, was to ensure that I could accurately describe Sarmat's collection to agents of the Inquisition should they express an interest in investigating the governor.*



endless battle. As one side gained ground, the other struck back with a counter-attack and so on. Neither side could best the other, but as the simulation played out it revealed a wealth of strategies and tactics that any general would have been fascinated to observe. Governor Sarmat had spent years producing a military treatise based on the simulations in the prism, with a plan to eventually publishing the book. I offered him my support in that area, but he seemed to mistake my offer for an attempt to capitalise on his work and became suddenly (and quite unnecessarily) angry. He hurried me from the chambers with an embarrassing display of poor manners and I have not been invited back to Cursus Prime since.

It was nearly a year later that I stumbled across an old folk tale that mentioned the same collector Sarmat had named: Trazyn. In the legends of an aquatic, warlike race called the kor, there is a story of two proud generals who both claimed to have reached the pinnacle of martial prowess and weapon design. They both claimed to have produced armies that were functionally immortal and would be able to conquer every other species in the galaxy. A stranger by the name of Trazyn often visited their oceanic home world of Deultus and had provided much of the technology that made the armies so invincible. He heard the boasts of the two generals and proposed to settle the feud. He offered to be an impartial judge if the two armies would face each other in battle. He also showed them a beautiful object called a firmament prism, described it as the ultimate weapon and offered it as a prize to the victor, placing it in the centre of the battlefield.

The two armies charged, but as their front lines collided there was a flash of light and the vast hosts vanished, leaving no trace of the armies, Trazyn or the prism.

As I read this tale I recalled the microscopic armies I saw clashing inside Sarmat's prism that day, and wondered if they were living, imprisoned creatures trapped in an endless war by the treachery of the man called Trazyn.

I have pored over countless texts in an attempt to find another mention of Trazyn, but so far he has eluded me.



*I took the liberty of sketching some of the esoterica and
arcana in the governor's collection from memory and a discreet
bionic retinal pict capture.*

Loxatl

Varanus dracones

The staterooms of my void ship, the *Drakstar*, are lined with hunting trophies, as are, to a lesser extent, the cabins of my lander, the *Vanguard*. My prowess as a tracker is widely known and I am happy to encourage my reputation as a formidable xenos hunter.*

One of the more impressive specimens on the *Vanguard* is the hide of a reptilian xenos commonly known as a loxatl. I killed the beast while travelling through the Synossa region of Ultima Segmentum.

Loxatl are large – sometimes up to ten feet long – quadrupeds that appear to have evolved from a species similar to monitor lizards. They are fiendishly quick-witted, dextrous enough to clamber over sheer walls, and often seen bearing lethal projectile weapons (fixed to their torsos). They also have a peculiar ability to sense the whereabouts of their enemies at a great distance, using some kind of rudimentary organic sonar.

When I killed the one that now hangs in the *Vanguard* it was fighting on the Blackstone Fortress alongside a disparate collection of mercenaries that included Grekh's kin, the kroot. Its intelligence was matched by such a fierce hunger for violence that I would be happy not to face one again, but I was able to employ a method I had learned many years earlier from my father's notes on the species. The echolocation gland used by loxatl to locate their prey is incredibly sensitive, able to detect movement several miles away. This makes them very efficient hunters, but it is also something that can be used against them.

Extremely high-frequency sounds are a torment to loxatl, inducing agonising visions, disrupting their auditory systems and leaving them highly disorientated. I am referring to frequencies beyond the threshold of human hearing. During my travels I had procured a high-frequency tone generator and when I triggered it, the loxatl became immediately disabled, thrashing on the ground as though attacked by unseen foes. As a result, I was able to dispatch the beast with ease. However, I should note that when I tried to repeat the technique on a second specimen, it acted as a sonic beacon, drawing a whole swarm of the creatures towards me. In the ensuing confusion I lost the transmitter, but I am determined to acquire another one and continue my experiments.

Loxatl appear to be as old a species as humanity itself, perhaps even older. While flicking through my dog-eared translation of Tytheron's *Strangers in the Stars*, I stumbled across what appears to be a reference to a loxatl** in one of its parables.

** Some scholars have suggested that loxatl is an inaccurate translation and that Tytheron was actually referring to another reptilian creature, the equally lethal crotalid. Having been unfortunate enough to encounter both of these vicious carnivores, I am sure that Tytheron was talking about the loxatl.

* I do not, however, hunt for pleasure. Empress J... that I ever be associated with that most miserable breeds, the sportsman... a galaxy beset by terror only a fool would spend time chasing kills that no purpose and prey that no threat.



56.



57.



58.



59.

The Tale of the Proud Man

The governor of Arzum was called Castus and he was a proud man. He had inherited his position and sought always to prove his worthiness for the role. He cleansed the Arzum System of aliens and secured the safety of his people through five long, bloody wars. He was determined that his people would never submit to an alien threat. Only one outsider was permitted to enter his halls without censure. The wise sage called Aun'tava came from the people calling themselves the t'au. Over many years, Aun'tava proved himself an invaluable advisor to Governor Castus, aiding him in so many victories that Castus came to see the alien as his brother.

One day, as the two friends walked near the governor's palace, Aun'tava gave Castus a warning:

'You have proved yourself a worthy ruler. The Five Wars have left your people poor but, unlike so many in the galaxy, they can sleep at night without fear of invasion. That is true wealth. Your zeal has served them well. But you must promise me one thing – that you will never seek to defeat the lizards of Propia.'

Castus was confused. 'The loxatl? What do I have to fear from lizards?'

'They are more than simple lizards,' replied Aun'tava. 'They are mighty warriors with powerful weapons on their backs. You have bested every foe you have faced, but on Propia you would meet your doom. The lizards have no interest in you or your subjects, so it would be a mistake to enrage them.'

Castus could not sleep that night. Aun'tava had never led him wrong before, and he could see the sense of his words, but the idea of a powerful threat, left to fester on the borders of his system, was abhorrent. As the days wore on, the



idea became a torment to him, leaving him unable to eat or sleep or think about anything else. Finally, he could bear it no more and ordered his generals to muster his forces and prepare his ships. Aun'tava's pleas fell on deaf ears as Castus set out to war.

Aun'tava's warning was proved to be justified. The war was long and disastrous. For the first time in his life, Castus suffered terrible defeats. The loxatl were fierce and determined and, over several years, they ground Castus' armies down until there was nothing left. Castus was so grieved by his failure that he would have happily died on the battlefield, but his generals tended his wounds and took him home.

When Castus returned to the capital of Arzum, he was amazed. The poor, crumbling city he had left behind was gone, replaced by a forest of gleaming white towers and domes. A new, advanced technology was visible everywhere, from fleets of sleek ships to soaring transitways.

Aun'tava's kin, the t'au, were now living alongside Castus' people in what looked like a kind of paradise. Aun'tava rushed to find Castus and begged him to resume his role as governor, but the city officials and courtiers were horrified by the idea. Enamoured as they were by their new, wealthy city, they refused to accept any ruler but Aun'tava. Aun'tava smiled sadly and said that, if it was the will of the people, he would rule Arzum in the name of the T'au Empire.

Castus was a broken man and spent his final years alone, shunned by those he once led, as they embraced the glorious utopia they had built.



Instrumenta Letalis

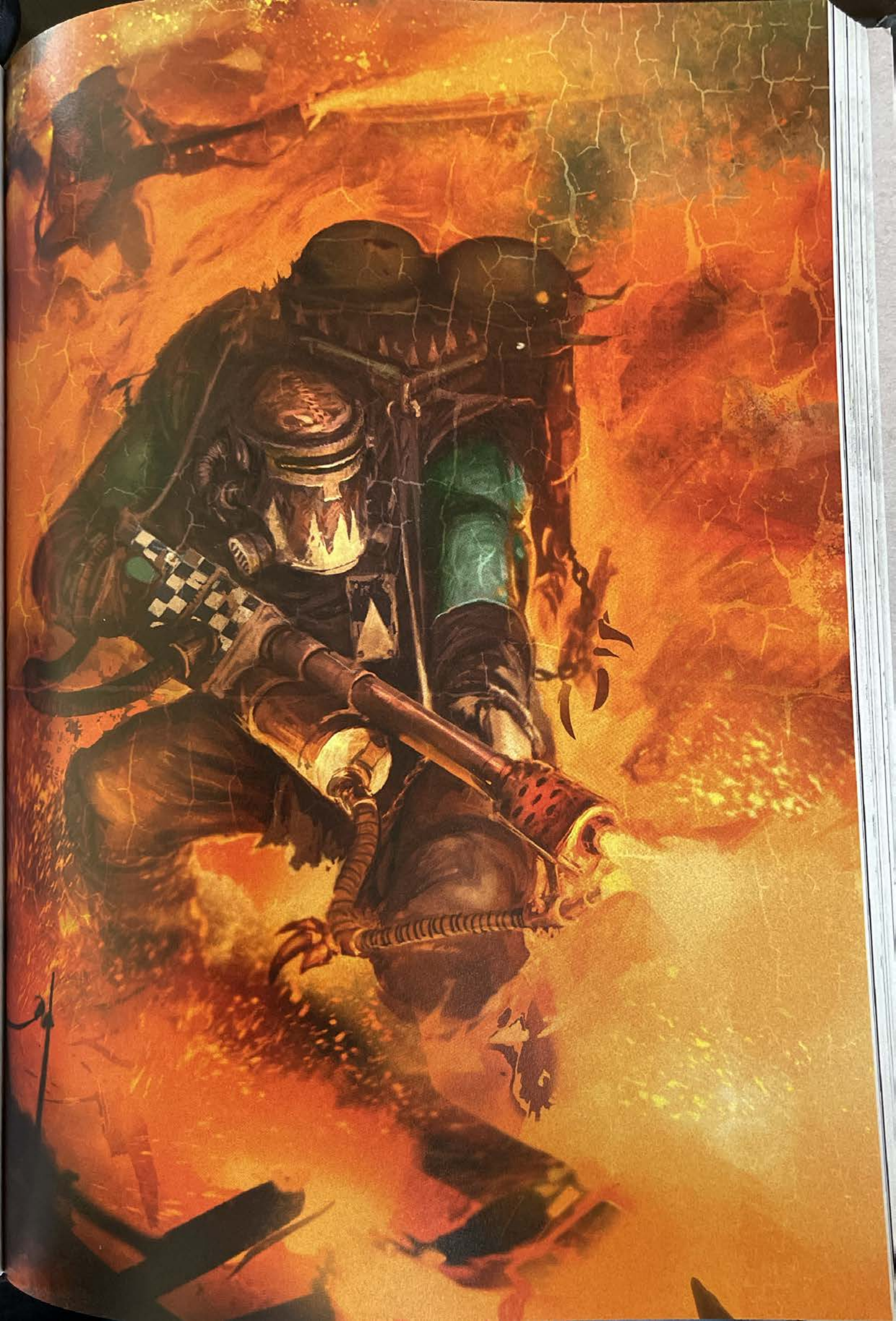
Within the Imperium we are, rightfully, cautious of advancing our technology beyond its current, Emperor-sanctified status. History shows us all too well what can befall a species that becomes enamoured of technological marvels. Through the auspices of the Adeptus Ministorum and the Adeptus Mechanicus we have learned the appropriate level of awe and respect for the creations of our forebears. The lesser races are not so enlightened. They push scientific boundaries with no consideration of the consequences. In the short term, they make advances that can be a thorn in the Imperium's side, but in the long term, a race that indulges in unfettered advancement is doomed to extinction.

As with their morphological methods of attack, we must take seriously the threat from these manufactured weapons and codify them to the best of our ability. The following descriptions are all culled from my own notes. Details are hard to confirm, but I have tried to give an overview of the chief dangers.

Greenskins

Ork weapons are a shambolic, jury-rigged mess. They invariably consist of parts salvaged from the greenskins' enemies, and the most impressive thing about them is that they work at all. Any sane species would be afraid to use such unreliable weapons as they are just as likely to kill the wielder as the target. The orks show absolutely no regard for their own safety, however. In fact, they seem to relish the unpredictable nature of their own attacks. Their main objective seems to be to create as much chaos and destruction as possible. As a result, they tend to employ projectile weapons, rocket launchers, flamers, explosives or whatever they can keep together long enough to create a big enough bang. They can construct lethal weapons from almost anything, favouring brutality over subtlety – they will happily face heavily armoured foes with nothing more complex than a meat cleaver hammered from a shard of broken metal. As long as it is noisy and makes an impressive mess, the orks will be happy to use it. Strangely, it is their lack of concern for tactics that makes them so hard to defeat. How does one outwit an opponent that has no plan?





Drukhari

As with every other aspect of this race, the efficacy of the drukhari's weaponry is hindered by the rapacious, sadistic obsessions that drive them. Rather than designing their weapons to be the most effective killing machines possible, the drukhari have designed them to maximise suffering and prolong agony. They delight in barbed whips, flails and toxin-laced blades that pierce muscles and nerves as a way to elicit pain. The drukhari seem to treat war as a form of perverse entertainment and their weapons have been created to work as props in their grotesque performances.



Asuryani

The asuryani employ weapons that are crafted with all the skill and artanship of beautiful works of art. They are elegant, refined and shockingly effective. Many of their ranged weapons fire what look to be tiny bladed discs. These projectiles can pierce many forms of armour, and the weapons are so accurate that the asuryani can easily target weak points, despite the dizzying speed of their attacks.

Asuryani also use bladed weapons and, having faced them in battle, I have found them to be most peculiar. I consider myself a swordsman of considerable skill, but the blades used by the asuryani seem to guide the wielder to an opponent's weak spot, much as a predator might sniff out a wound. As is their wont, the aeldari have many elaborate, mystical tales regarding this, claiming that such blades are haunted in some way. What the scientific explanation is I have yet to ascertain, but whatever the reason, aeldari armed with these weapons make for fearsome opponents.



Use of xenos weapons

There are differing schools of thought regarding the use of alien technology. The more puritanical decry the use of xenotech as heresy, while others point out that we should use the best weapons at our disposal to defeat our foe. I have erred on the side of pragmatism. When I found myself unarmed and under attack during the Siege of Zircan, I grabbed the first weapon I could reach, which happened to be a drukhari pistol. It is a marvel and I have carried it ever since. It uses some kind of magnetic impulse to fire shards of neurotoxin at immense speeds. The thing is flawlessly accurate and never jams or overheats. Also, like most aeldari weaponry, it is incredibly light – presumably so as not to hinder their impressive battlefield acrobatics.



Horrors of the Sump

Hive worlds are amongst the most industrialised and heavily polluted planets of the entire Imperium, so one might not expect them to harbour any life beyond the teeming masses of hivers who eke out their lives there. However, life is there in abundant, if unsavoury, forms. Beneath the mangled wreckage of the underhive, in the toxic slurry known as the sump, creatures have not only survived but evolved, mutating into nightmarish simulacra of natural fauna. I have personal experience of some them. After losing a bet with a Necromundan noble, I found myself hunting for sumpkrocs with little more than a combat knife and an envirosuit. Suffice it to say, the experience is not one I wish to describe in detail.



60.

Sumpkroc

Crocodylinae deformum

Sumpkrocs are large, crocodilian reptiles that have become grotesquely oversized and mutated. They are also extremely aggressive. Despite being such ferocious predators, they are sometimes used by the underhive gangs as a form of pet or weapon. Unlike some of the reptiles mentioned earlier in this work, I do not believe this creature has developed any form of advanced intelligence. During my sojourn in the sump, I managed to confound one of the creatures with a simple trick I learned in the swamps of Beta Azaum. I simply wiped a sheet of plasteel clean and polished it until it resembled a mirror. Then, when the sumpkroc attacked, I wedged the mirror in front of it. The moronic, highly territorial beast then busied itself attacking its own reflection until I landed the killing blow.

Caryatid

Homo sapiens caeruleum

Though they are more commonly found up-spire, I spotted one of these peculiar, blue-skinned cherubs fluttering overhead as I waded through the filth of the sump. They are small, humanoid creatures, similar to the cherubs shown in devotional art, and they are borne on a pair of leathery wings. According to hive legend, they are drawn to individuals of great potential or power. They are reputed to have psychic abilities with which they can foresee future success and glory. For this reason, they are considered extremely auspicious. I would dispute these claims, however, as the one I encountered seemed uninterested in me as I passed by. I had been led to believe that the creatures were little more than animals, but the specimen I observed had painted its thick, hide-like skin with complex patterns, almost like tribal markings, and they showed the kind of artistic ability I would associate with human intellect. I wonder if, rather than true xenos, they are simply an obscure form of abhuman that has evolved in response to harsh hive world environments?



Cyberachnid

Arachnida mechanica

Many of the underhive gangs seem oddly preoccupied with spiders, giving them prominent positions in their belief systems and portraying likenesses of them in their heraldry. Some gangs have even utilised the larger mutant breeds as living drones and insectoid servitors, grafting sensory equipment and armour onto their abdomens and legs. Such behaviour may sound peculiar, but in the underhive, where life is a constant fight for survival, the gangs have learned to weaponise almost everything.

Ash clams

Bivalvia squalore

I was once travelling through a hive sump when my foot became trapped in a vice-like grip. At first, I thought it was a mantrap of some kind, but then I realised I had been caught in the jaws of an ash clam. These ugly little molluscs have adapted to life at the bottom of a hive by evolving an ability to eat almost *anything* that falls from above. They manage to filter nutrients from the toxic slurry and if an animal scurries past, the vibration triggers a mechanism in the clam's bivalve shell, enabling it to snap closed on its prey. The clams have an incredibly long lifespan, living for many centuries, perhaps even thousands of years. This, combined with their ability to strain toxic particles from their food, means that the meat of the ash clam is one of the most nutritious* meals to be found anywhere outside of a Terran palace.

There are all sorts of absurd myths about hivers starving in the sump after being trapped by an ash clam, but I found it an easy enough matter to unfasten my boot and slide my foot out. Then, moving carefully through the filth, I managed to gather three more of the clams and stash them in my bag. I would have brought back a fifth, but I was inconvenienced by some plague-addled wretches who tumbled from an overhead waste pipe.

* *And revolting.*

Sludge jellies

Gelata toxicus

These sightless, gelatinous horrors inhabit the lakes of toxic sludge that form in some regions of the sump. They have limited mobility but, when sensing ripples in the water, they are able to reach out for hundreds of feet with their tentacles, and once they have a grip on their prey they will proceed to sting it to death.

Icrotic slime

Muco somnium

The sump is so awash with chem spills and pollutants that it can be hard to distinguish animal life from discarded matter. The wisest course, in my experience, is to tread with care but always keep moving. Some of the hives' more seasoned sump explorers have been foolish enough to try and sleep there.

Icrotic slime appears to be just another lump of glutinous liquid, but it is a form of animate life that will slowly ooze towards the head of a sleeping human. Once it reaches its intended destination, it releases a euphoriant neurotoxin that fills the victim with such a sense of rapture that they do not wish to stir, even if they notice the icrotic slime settling over their head. With the victim incapacitated, the slime dissolves the skull over a period of hours, sinks into the brain and, once there, releases its eggs so they can feed and grow, a process that eventually kills the victim.

It is a sign of how miserable hive life is that some desperate souls *deliberately* place icrotic slime on their heads, seeking the blissful high it will induce, trusting one of their acquaintances to remove it in time.

Phyrr cat

Tigris toxicus

Given a hazardous environment, man will invariably find a way to make it even more dangerous. In their battle for dominance and status, hive gangers develop an absurd range of affectations and idiosyncrasies, and some of them deliberately smuggle lethal xenos predators into their already hellish homes in an attempt to harness them as exotic weapons.

One such creature is a member of the felidae family known as the Phyrr cat. These enormous carnivores are ferocious in the extreme and have such powerful jaws they have been known to bite through flak armour. They are also fast enough to outrun almost anything else in a hive, so once one is on your trail, flight is not an option. Due to the exotic flora on their home world, the Phyrr cats often have very striking pelts, so the more flamboyant gangs treat them almost as fashion accessories.

This is a hazardous pet in the extreme, however. The world of Phyrr is a paradise, one of the most beautiful, untainted jewels in the galaxy, crowded with incredible flora and fauna; but its beauty hides a secret. It has survived mass extinctions and planetwide industrialisation because every aspect of it is inimical to human life. Alongside its powerful bite, the Phyrr cat carries a host of gene-toxins in its blood, sweat and saliva. Even a single cut from one of its claws is enough to induce madness and death.*



* During my encounters with the drukhari archon, he mentioned that combatants in the drukhari gladiatorial arenas sometimes wear Phyrr cat pelts into battle, having found a way to ward themselves against the ill-effects of the gene-toxins. The pelts are prized as a status symbol and as a useful weapon. It is a sad irony that this beautiful creature's natural defences are the very thing that have seen it stolen from its paradisiacal world and flung into some of the galaxy's most hellish pits.

Milliasaur

Scolopendra gigantea

This is a species of carnivorous arthropod-maximus, similar in appearance to a centipede but huge in size, often seven feet long.* The cocktail of pollutants in the sump have a petrifying effect on the species, turning its carapace into extremely hard, rock-like plates that are resistant to most bladed weapons and even some forms of lasweapon. Like many sump-dwellers, they prefer an ambush attack, lying in the mounds of effluence and industrial waste until they sense the approach of prey. One of the most disturbing aspects of these creatures is their peculiar call. Once they have seized a victim, the milliasaurs announce the meal to their pack with a mournful, keening wail that sounds almost identical to the cry of an abandoned child. I have heard the sound echoing through outlet pipes several times and it never fails to chill me.



*One of my trade contacts, Carventana, claimed to have once encountered a centipede-like monster of even larger proportions while he was travelling in the Calixis Sector. He referred to it as an *osedex* and suggested that it was nearly seventy feet long, but that he still bested it in combat. Carventana later cheated me at cards, however, leaving me no honourable option but to face him in a duel. No Draik has ever lost a duel, so Carventana was unable to tell me any more about his *osedex*. I asked his aides, but they took the matter of the duel badly and were unwilling to talk. Having seen how feebly Carventana fought in the duel, I have to say, I cannot imagine him besting even a normal-sized centipede in combat.

Giant rats

Rattus suprema

In the polluted depths of the underhive, rats are prone to countless mutations. Everything from spines, scales, multiple heads and even wings has been observed. Many grow to the size of a large canid, but there are rumours that in the foetid depths of the sump they grow far bigger, and even develop a form of intelligence beyond that of their lesser kin. Some of the more outlandish tales actually suggest that they have managed to use tools and weapons. I find that hard to countenance, but, in the shadowy realms beneath a hive, who knows what kinds of horrific subspecies may be evolving.



64.

Spine crystals

Crystallis toxicus

These beautiful, coral-like life forms are found around the edges of sluice gates, refuse pipes and anywhere that noxious waste pours down from the levels above. They resemble crystals and are sometimes hunted for jewellery. Like everything else in the sump, however, they should be approached with caution. The poisons that flow constantly over them (and perhaps form them?) mean that even one cut from their razor-sharp edges can result in horrific mutations and disease.

Carrion bats

Chiroptera infectio

Not all the dangers in a hive are immediately recognisable. Carrion bats are small, winged rodents that appear to be harmless and would never choose to attack another creature. They feed on the corpses that crowd the sump and scatter at the first sign of a threat. Despite this, they are one of the most feared creatures in the underhive. If a hive-dweller unwittingly stumbles into a carrion bat colony, thousands of the creatures will be forced into action, thrashing their wings and lashing out with teeth and claws to defend their home. The attacks in themselves are not a problem – it is an easy enough matter to knock the creatures aside and withdraw – but the bats' diet of corpses means that they carry a dreadful cocktail of contagions, including the much-feared zombie plague, which leaves its victims trapped in a ghastly borderland between life and death.

Gas fungus

Boletus sporaeticus

Coming into close proximity to this innocent-looking fungus can trigger a cloud of hallucinogenic mycotoxins that will leave one horribly confused and unable to evade the sump's myriad predators. After emitting the spores, the fungus will remain dormant for an indeterminate amount of time as it replenishes its supply. As a result, some hive-dwellers take it upon themselves to try to harvest the fungus with a view to using or selling the spores once they return to a safer level. I need hardly explain how likely they are to carry their fragile, lethal prize back through the sump's various obstacles and predators to the underhive successfully.

Slopjaw

Reptilia digestum

Like everything else in a hive, the sump is built on an enormous scale. Its acid pools are like vast lakes and there are swamps that spread for miles. Some of the swamps that appear to have navigable, perhaps even deliberately made, paths are actually formed over the bony carapaces of colossal reptiles called slopjaws. These creatures have no limbs, mouths or even heads, and they digest their food through thinly covered openings in their shells. A traveller may wade through a bog for hours thinking they are treading on rock or refuse, but are instead walking across the shell of a slopjaw, feeling no premonition of the danger they are in. Then, upon reaching one of the openings, they will sink knee- or waist-deep into what seems like quicksand. If they are travelling in a group, their companions might, with great effort and care not to fall in themselves, be able to pull them out. A lone traveller, however, will more than likely sink slowly into the digestive enzymes of the slopjaw.

Giant spiders

Arachnidae maximus

Arachnids in general, and spiders in particular, thrive in every level of the hives, but it is only in the sump that these predatory killers grow to enormous sizes. As with some of the other sump species, they are also rumoured to have evolved an unnatural intelligence that far outstrips their smaller kin. Gangers and guilders from the underhive occasionally try to stalk these goliaths through the sump, drawn by the jewels that form on the creatures' abdomens, legs and eyes, but they are rarely heard from again.



65.

Psychic and Divinatory Companions

With so many horrors arrayed against us, one could easily overlook the fact that some species act in a beneficial manner towards humanity. The devotion of a loyal pet can often surpass the constancy of a trusted friend, and so it is with those rare xenospecies that form symbiotic bonds with their human masters. The *Xenographia Universalis* records several examples, but I have chosen only to make mention of the two species I have personal experience of.

Gyrinx

Felis anima

The gyrinx is a large member of the felidae family, around four feet long. They are not physically striking – larger than a common domestic cat and a little closer in appearance to a wildcat, but otherwise unremarkable. Nevertheless, it is immediately apparent, upon encountering a gyrinx in the flesh, that they are a unique species.

The peculiarity rests in the bond they have with their owner. Their gaze, movements and manner all seemed so linked to that of their keeper that it is quite unnerving. It is as though a fragment of the human's soul has splintered and formed a new vessel in which to be contained.

I had heard the name gyrinx before, but had little understanding of them until Inquisitor Scalona landed on Precipice and summoned me to her lander. Janus Draik is not accustomed to being summoned anywhere, but where the Inquisition is concerned, one must always tread carefully. To my surprise, Scalona asked me to play a game of Covenants.* As we began, I gave no thought to the fact that her cat had lain down behind me with a clear view of my hand. I consider myself something of an expert at Covenants, and as Scalona won hand after hand, my mood soured. The inquisitor had an infuriating glint in her eye that made me sure she was cheating. I could not see *how* she was cheating, however, and I am always reluctant to fling accusations at inquisitors. We chatted as we played, but my answers became increasingly barbed and brittle.

After an hour or so, I had lost enough to place a serious dint in my finances and I could hold back my annoyance no longer. I suggested that something untoward was happening and demanded that she admit her guilt or give me the satisfaction of a duel. She laughed and pushed all the credits back across the table, apologising for her joke. She then revealed that she had a psychic bond with the gyrinx and waved the cat away with a gentle reprimand.

After that first encounter, the inquisitor behaved very differently, treating me as a trusted confidant. It took me a while to understand the purpose of her ruse, but when I did understand it, I was impressed by her logic. She had come to Precipice hoping to separate the heretics from the



merely ambitious. She had heard of my skills as a diplomat and guessed that I would be guarded and subtle when quizzed, and so used her bond with the gyrinx to wrong-foot me. When I thought back over the game, I realised, in my annoyance, that I had spoken far more clearly than I would have wished. Luckily, having nothing to hide, this earned her approbation rather than her wrath. Others were not so fortunate.

Wyvach

Draco psychicorum

So often, I find that there is a peculiar conjunction between science and myth. Every culture has its own form of dragon.

The river tribes of Naportus IX live in fear of a winged serpent called the sabaeon that rises once a year to devour those who have spoken ill of the dead. Scyan nomads* write sagas concerning a beast called the duchau that can ignite them simply by fixing things with its livid gaze. Even the myths of Old Earth are crowded with wyverns, dracos and wyrms.

But it was only as I began to read the work of the great xenologists that I realised there may be a scientific basis for some of the fantastical creatures.

For example, while I have never seen one myself, I have heard two different accounts of dragon-like creatures called wyvachs that share some of the 'familiar' attributes of the gyrinx, in that they create what appears to be a supernatural bond with their keepers. They are scaled, serpentine creatures with long necks, a crest of spikes running down their backs and forelimbs that have evolved into wings. Their heads show a mix of avian and reptilian traits, with scales and a curved, raptor-like beak that can cut through most forms of armour.

Their appearance is similar to dragons portrayed in mythological texts, and in the few cultures that have knowledge of them (wyvachs are extremely rare), they are rightly feared as dangerous predators. They are not feral beasts, however. From what I have heard about them, they are creatures of subtlety and wit. Whether this is a natural trait, or a consequence of their psychic bond with a human master, I cannot say.

I have read several reports of humans who have built such close telepathic bonds with wyvachs that they are able to see and hear through the creatures' eyes and ears, and vice versa. This has obvious practical applications for tracking, scouting and spying, and as a result wyvachs are highly prized.**

However, there are clear risks in conjoining oneself to a xenospecies. Firstly, and most obviously, some Ordo Xenos inquisitors are likely to execute a wyvach owner first and then look into whether there were any extenuating circumstances. The second risk is a more esoteric one. The *Xenographia Universalis* states that owners of wyvachs rarely send their familiars on long journeys. The close symbiotic bond means that both the wyvach and its owner are weakened, physically and psychologically, when parted for long periods. This would seem to imply that should a wyvach be killed at a moment of crisis, its owner may find themselves even more enfeebled and perhaps be unable to defend themselves.

* A race of winged, cyclopean giants found across the Lorix Sector. They have a peculiar belief that the plane of existence is the afterlife and they will only truly begin living once they die.



66.

** During my talks with the drukhari archon Xylus Vhorzum, I asked him if he had ever seen a wvach in his 'dark city'. He laughed, in the same irritatingly theatrical manner I observed earlier and announced that no such creature exists (he is wrong) but that he once convinced one of his 'useless' brothers, Zoralus, that he was in possession of one. He took a reptile and ordered one of his haemonculi to graft wings on to it and a form of neural harness so that he could manipulate the creature like a puppet. He then paraded the thing in front of his brother, whom he knew was obsessed with acquiring a wvach.

A few weeks later, the jealous brother sent members of his kabal into Vhorzum's palace and stole the lizard. Vhorzum described with relish the string of catastrophes that then befell his brother (which he heard of through spies). First, Zoralus was infuriated to find that the creature would not obey him – because, of course, it was unable to. The poor reptile rampaged around Zoralus' palace, devouring furniture and slaves. Then, Zoralus demanded that his haemonculi find a way to merge his thoughts with the lizard so that it could become his familiar, as he had heard of other wvachs doing. The haemonculi agreed, with hidden smiles, and set to work.

The day came for Zoralus to be psychically wedded to his wvach, and he invited a crowd of drukhari nobles to his court for a great ball, so that they could witness his new toy. To his surprise, half of Connorrhagh arrived, filling his ballroom with eager, expectant faces. With great fanfare, the haemonculi completed the surgery and backed away as the mind of the dumb animal meshed with that of Zoralus. To the hilarity of everyone present, Zoralus let out a feral snarl and leapt into the crowd, attacking anyone he could reach. Violence at a drukhari court is not uncommon, explained Vhorzum, but this was not elegant cruelty, or arch subterfuge: Zoralus had devolved into a gibbering, drooling savage. As he spat and lunged across the chamber, the crowd showered Vhorzum with praise and applause. He had explained his ruse beforehand, which was the real reason Zoralus' ball was so well attended.

Dialogues with Magos Upsilon, Cryptogeologist

Along with a host of fortune seekers, privateers and data traders, Precipice has also attracted explorers of a more scientific mindset, so fascinated by the nature of the Blackstone Fortress that they were willing to brave the hazardous approach and endure the company of the scoundrels on this orbital platform.

I first encountered the cryptogeologist Mepsus Upsilon in the vaults of the Blackstone itself. I thought I was being attacked by spindle drones, but then realised the devices I was shooting at bore no resemblance to the rest of the fortress, and in fact bore the markings of a forge world. Realising they were Adeptus Mechanicus servo-drones, I followed them back to Upsilon. I found the magos defending himself from a group of ur-ghuls and was pleased to have a chance to assist him. We have since become good friends and have had several conversations, during which the magos has enlightened me about the nature of various xenos materials.

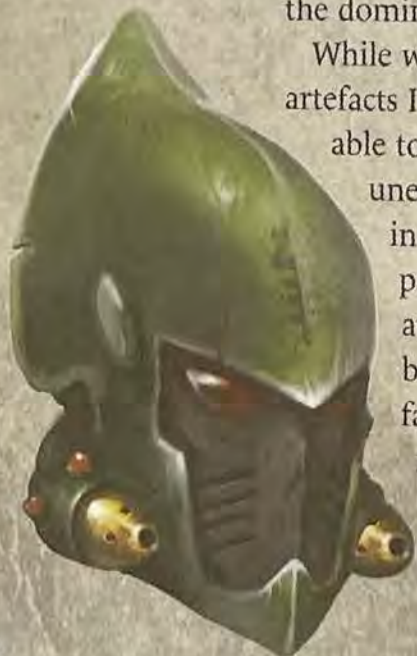
Upsilon was drawn to the Blackstone Fortress so that he could study the peculiar material it is constructed from. The substance known as blackstone is not unique to this mysterious star fort. Upsilon describes it as a metallo-organic compound, rightfully called noctilith, that has been recorded in several sites across the galaxy. Some of these sites are linked to the vast tear in realspace that has filled the galaxy with warp storms. Upsilon, and other magi from his forge world, have made it their business to discern the link between these sites and the noctilith that is found there.

Upsilon was understandably reticent when describing the goals of his organisation, but he did mention a senior Mechanicus prelate by the name of Archmagos Cawl. From what I can gather, Cawl is collating every piece of noctilith research, and Upsilon showed great faith in the archmagos' ability to draw all the threads of analysis together. Upsilon claimed that the first species to truly understand noctilith will become the dominant force in the galaxy.

While we spoke, Magos Upsilon commented on many of the xenos artefacts I had on display in the *Vanguard*. In a few short minutes, he was able to reveal more about some of my finds than I had managed to unearth over many years. One of the pieces he was most interested in was an aeldari helmet that he claimed was constructed from a psychically resonant material called wraithbone. He also spoke at length about a piece of barbed carapace that I had never been able to categorise with any confidence. Magos Upsilon was fascinated by it and suggested it might have originated with the xenos swarm known as the Great Devourer or tyrannids. I admit that the revelation caused me to shudder, having already heard much that troubled me about this species.*

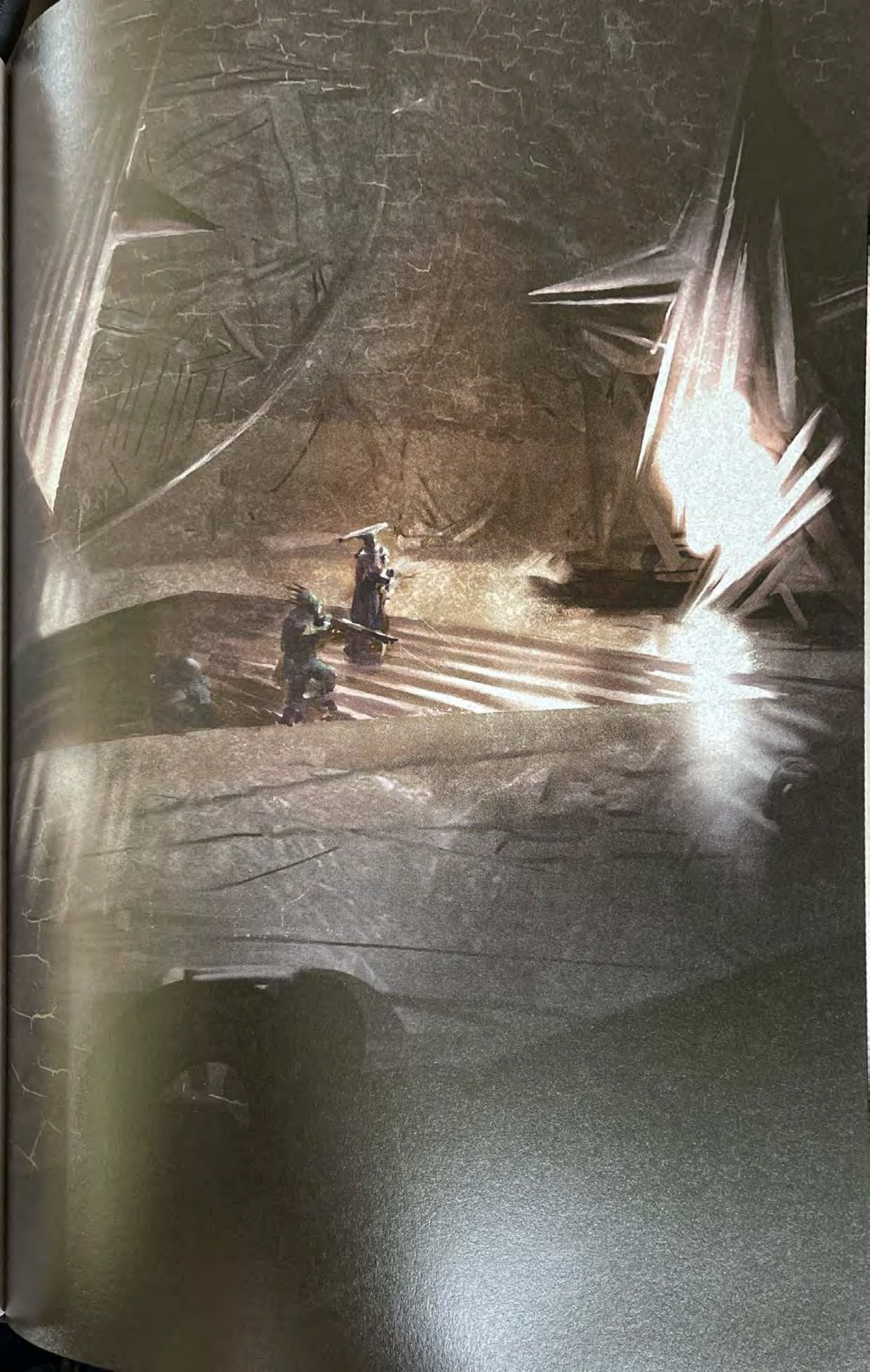


67.



68.

*See my notes on the tyrannids.



Ambull

Luther subteranis

Many of the predators that stalk mankind seek us out, hunting us through the void, either bent on our destruction or simply hungry for our flesh. There are some threats, however, for which we only have ourselves to blame. I have faced the ambull on several occasions and each time I do, it galls me to think that short-sighted genitors and Imperial nobles are responsible for the creatures' presence across the galaxy.

They originated on the inhospitable desert world of Luther McIntyre in Segmentum Tempestus and would have remained there, hiding from the incredible heat in subterranean caverns, were it not for several misguided attempts to domesticate them.

The ambull is a large (up to thirteen feet tall) bipedal predator, with a hunched, ape-like posture, arms long enough to reach the floor and a bestial face dominated by expandable mandibles. To escape the heat of their home world, they developed incredible upper body strength, enabling them tunnel through rock and soil at incredible speeds. They are able to eat almost anything, can break through most barriers, given time, and follow thought processes so alien that it is entirely impossible to reason or bargain with them.

I had already encountered several of the creatures on the Blackstone Fortress, when certain ill-informed individuals concocted the idea of catching one and bringing it back to Precipice. I managed to stymie several of these misguided attempts, but once, after one of my more prolonged expeditions, I returned to find the orbital platform in chaos as an ambull ripped through the moored void ships and butchered their crews.

Precipice is well named, teetering as it does on the edge of violence. It only takes

the smallest spark to kindle the place; the arrival of an enraged ambull was enough to provoke an all-out riot. There was looting and fighting in every corner of the space station as long-held rivalries broke through flimsy truces, exploding into gunfights and neck-slicing. What little law there is on Precipice is upheld by a cabal of self-appointed leaders (scoundrels, to a man) who enforce their will with an iron fist.

I reached the ambull just as the group of utterly moronic Vostroyan mercenaries responsible were attempting to fix the problem they had created by destroying the creature with a pair of plasma charges. Their solution was, I'm afraid to say, as idiotic as their original idea of capturing the beast. Ambulls have a peculiar ability to feed on almost anything, including plasma. I was just too late to stop them triggering the first device. The resultant blast only fuelled the creature's hunger and ferocity. With energy sparking across its carapace, the ambull butchered the



Vostroyans, and I barely managed to avoid being torn apart myself. While my guards distracted the ambull with a barrage of shots, I managed to grab the second, unexploded plasma charge, and head for the nearest mooring spar.

Noticing the chance to enjoy a further delicacy, the ambull crashed through another lander and barrelled after me, leaving a trail of corpses and wreckage in its wake.

I bolted into the Vostroyans' ship, managed to trigger the launch protocols and then leapt out through the landing hatch as the vessel began to move.

The ambull sheared its way into the Vostroyan ship, absorbed the plasma blast and was already half a mile from Precipice when it realised the ship was in flight.

I shall decline to comment on the suggestions that I knew several Vostroyans were still aboard.



Ambull larvae, or 'boreworms', are absolutely ferocious predators, driven by an insatiable hunger to consume almost anything, be it radioactive energy or the flesh of an unwitting human.

70.



Mjordhainn Raiders

Kavalaris cyclopis

I once met a Thuselian queen who, upon hearing of my interest in xenos life forms, told me she was in possession of something that may be of interest to me. The queen was a proud woman and her tribes had served the Emperor with honour for thousands of years, so I agreed to talk more with her. It was several weeks later when I finally managed to take her up on her offer and visit the yurt she called home. As her servants prepared an impressive meal, she showed me what I took to be a piece of unfired clay, roughly formed into the shape of an oversized hand, with eight long, unusually tapered fingers. The queen told me that this crumbling hand was not tribal art, but a severed piece of a creature known as a mjordhainn. She said that many centuries ago, her ancestors were hunted almost to extinction by mjordhainn raiders and their winged serpent steeds, the tchorlau.

The enormous hand had obviously been made from some form of clay, but it is never wise to dismiss the long-cherished cultural beliefs of one's host (especially as they are about to feed you) so I allowed the queen to continue. She told me that the mjordhainn are a species of nomadic, heavily muscled, cyclopean giants that do not mate but are 'born of the earth', requiring neither food nor water to live, only the thrill of the hunt and the blood of their enemies. It was clearly an elaborate fantasy, but I was intrigued to know how it might have originated.

I asked the queen how her people had eventually managed to defeat the mjordhainn. She laughed and told me that no mortal man can stand against the raiders and win. 'Wounds do not slow them,' she said, 'for the raiders mould their forms back into shape with a swipe of their hand. They consider creatures of flesh and blood to be a stain on the sacred mudflats of Thusel Prime and they hunted us relentlessly, filling the skies with the ragged wings of their tchorlau and the drone of their hunting horns until one day, hearing our pleas, star warriors descended from above and hunted the hunters, burning them back into the ground with holy fire.'

I thanked the queen for her story, made a quick sketch of the hand, then forgot the episode until, years later, I was visiting the Aristium Library of Warfare (near Lion's Gate space port on Terra) and was shocked to see the name mjordhainn appear in one of the exhibits. The library contains several works detailing the history of the White Scars Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, and one of the oldest and most beautifully illuminated manuscripts was open on a page describing a prolonged campaign against a race of xenos giants called mjordhainn that had 'earth-like' flesh able to absorb wounds with no ill-effects. One of the illuminations even matched the queen's description, showing a towering, cyclopean rider on a steed resembling a mythological dragon. I was even more intrigued to see that the world of Thusel Prime was mentioned as the site of the campaign's most decisive engagement.

I spoke to the head librarian to see if there was any more information regarding the mjordhainn, but that single book was the only reference and no physical proof of the race's existence had ever been found. I recalled the disembodied hand the queen had shown me and cursed myself for not studying it more closely.

Several years passed before I was able to make the diversion back to Thusel Prime and seek the queen. To my disappointment, the entire planet had been terraformed since my last visit, and mined so heavily that there was no trace of the mudflats or the tribes that once inhabited them. The indigenous people had been displaced, merged with huge numbers of indentured workers and crowded into manufacturums and hives. No records existed concerning the queen and I was never able to ascertain what became of her.



Clawed Fiend

Monstrum donori's

These massive, ape-like bipeds are famed for their incredible strength and the horrific amount of damage they can inflict with their eponymous and appendages. They are said to have originated in the Donorian Sector and are sometimes referred to as Donorian fiends, but I have heard rumours of them in several other locations around the galaxy. They bear all the usual hallmarks of an apex predator: great speed, size, ferocity and power; but none of these attributes has fascinated me quite so much as their eyes. A clawed fiend's eyes, of which they are rumoured to have six, are claimed to be octochromatic – that is, they have light receptors that are uniquely sensitive. In combination with their other physiological abnormalities, this means the creatures are able to perceive colour spectra that are beyond the range of human eyesight. I first heard of this phenomenon while I was still on Terra, and I managed to procure a facsimile of a diagram from Passaron's long-lost classic *Optiks*. It shows what he believes to be the spectra visible to the fiends.



The ratlings Raus and Rein are two of Precipice's least impressive individuals, it has to be said, but they have a habit of being on hand whenever something momentous happens. While busy attending to another matter, I heard that they would be acting as guides on a Blackstone expedition led by a rogue trader called Augustus Orova. Orova was braving the fortress with the specific intention of hunting down a clawed fiend that the ratlings claimed to know the whereabouts of (the pelts are worth more than some void ships). The underhanded wretches came to me before they disembarked, knowing my interest in fiends and asking if I wanted to offer them a higher rate than their current client. Orova seemed a decent man, and I had no intention of derailing his expedition, but I did put forth a proposal. If the ratlings brought me one of the fiend's eyes, I would match the fee Orova was giving them for the pelt. Their grubby faces lit up at this and they promised, in an absurdly profuse way, not to fail me.

I hardly expected to hear from them again, considering how undisciplined and incompetent they usually seemed, but, a few weeks later, the ratlings reappeared outside the *Vanguard* looking as untrustworthy as ever but claiming to have secured the eye.

The thing was drifting in a jar of such gloopy, cloudy solution that I could barely be sure it even was an eye. I spent the next few days carefully cleaning it and attempting to dissect it using my rudimentary skills as a surgeon. The eye had clearly been damaged by the creature's violent death and there were several lesions to the cornea but, eventually, I was excited to see that it had two retinas. This must be part of the mystery. I wondered if a genitor might be able to somehow graft the retinas onto a living human eye, granting them glimpses of colour no man had ever seen before. I confess, I became obsessed by the idea of what the hidden colours might look like, returning many times to the diagram from Passaron's *Optiks*.

I made my way through Precipice's heaving crowds, heading for the trading auditorium called the Dromeplatz, to see if I could find a magos or a genitor willing to help with my research, when I bumped into the rogue trader Orova. He looked crestfallen and defeated, and not at all like a man who had just bagged one of the most valuable pelts in the galaxy. I stopped to compliment him on his success but he shook his head, saying that the expedition was a disaster. He had managed to wound the monster, but once it caught the scent of its own blood it grew shockingly berserk and nothing could stop it. It butchered his entire entourage and even his beloved younger brother was killed, cut down right in front of him by the rampaging fiend. Orova himself only managed to escape because the Blackstone Fortress began one of its periodic transformations, causing walls to slide and floors to vanish, and he was thrown to safety.

He was lost for several hours before he managed to make his way back to his lander. At one point he even passed near the scene of the massacre and came within a few feet of his brother's corpse. He grimaced at the memory, appalled and baffled by the fact that someone had gouged out the dead man's eyes. 'Who would do such a thing?' he asked me.

As I thought of the ratlings' shifty expressions as they brought me the eye, and the damaged nature of the object, I realised I knew.

Sepolcrali

Vermis sepulcris

I learned from one of my contacts on Precipice that a Militarum officer by the name of Prasmon, of the Vharun 12th, was drinking himself to death in the Helmsman while talking to anyone who would listen about the xenos that had wiped out his regiment.

Despite his agitated appearance he was eager enough to speak once he had a drink in his hand. He told me, with no trace of irony, that he was insane, and that Thermia V had robbed him of reason. He did not always speak clearly, slipping off into rambling digressions and nonsensical conversations with himself, but as far as I could tell Thermia V was an ash-covered death world that, for reasons the Guardsman did not explain, had been used for mass burials over many centuries, giving it the feel of an abandoned mausoleum. While stationed there, the Vharan 12th had heard rumours of local spirits called ash worms that inhabited the graves. Offended by the very presence of the living, the spirits would emerge from the crypts to ensure they did not stay living for long.

Like the rest of his regiment, Prasmon dismissed the tales of ash worms as ghost stories, but a few months later, reports started to come in from various outposts that the worms were not only real, but they were attacking patrols in the most horrific way.

Prasmon told me that the attacks became so overwhelming that the regiment had to be evacuated under the escort of an Adeptus Astartes strike force.* Most of the regiment did not make it off Thermia V alive, but Prasmon was not convinced that made him one of the lucky ones. He told me he had struggled to sleep since, tormented by nightmares of the sepolcrali. He seemed very confused and was not entirely sure how he had ended up orbiting the Blackstone Fortress and drinking in Gatto's bar. I suspected that like so many of the Helmsman's other patrons, Prasmon was a deserter, but there was nothing to be gained by accusing him of such. Instead, I asked him what made these spectres so disturbing. He described, in broken whispers, how he saw them attacking as he fled towards the space port. I recorded some of his words verbatim:

'It looked like ash, rolling and twisting, like a tornado, but as it came closer I could see they were animals. Living things but made of dust, coiling like snakes and flying through the air. They were so fast. None of those poor sods outside the perimeter had a chance of outrunning them. And las-fire did nothing. Like shooting a sandstorm. Then the worms just circled and waited.' He paused, the colour draining from his face. 'They waited until someone cried out. Then flooded through his mouth. Then that was it - they were all dead men.'

I asked him to explain why the fate of a single man had doomed them all.

* Prasmon claims the Space Marines belonged to the Blood Angels Chapter. It seems odd to me that even a small group of Blood Angels would have devoted time to helping Prasmon's regiment, but he explained that they were there on an errand of their own that had no connection to the worms. It was from the Blood Angels that Prasmon heard the name *sepolcrali*.

'Because it wasn't just ash. Because now he was one of the sepulcrali. And once it was in him he was part of Thermia. Do you see? He was one of the dead.'

I did not see, but I nodded for him to continue.

'Once the ash was in him, he died, hitting the ground in seconds, but he didn't stay down, see? He started moving and growing, then began hunting the others, and they couldn't do anything because he was already dead. And when they screamed, the ash rushed through their throats too. Then they were all ghosts.'

After that he became less coherent and began scratching his skin violently, trying to rid himself of imaginary attackers, but I had learned enough to categorise the creatures. This is not the first account I have heard of beings that can reanimate the bodies of their prey and use them as weapons. There is nothing supernatural about the process, but it does seem designed to mirror some of our oldest cultural fears.

72.



Zoat

Centaurus serpentius

Prior to my time on Precipice I had heard only the vaguest rumours concerning the species known as the zoat. They are one of the most enigmatic and sinister of all the creatures I have studied – loners who travel the galaxy in secrecy, not linked to any particular home world or creed. They are large, heavily muscled and centaur-like in appearance, and they appear to be reptilian in origin, covered in thick, densely layered scales. They look like brutal, mindless predators, but I have learned that their fearsome appearance is deceptive.

In the trading halls of Precipice I have observed one at close quarters and heard rumours of its methods. I would have assumed it was as dim-witted and savage as a greenskin – perhaps even a quadrupedal offshoot of that primitive race – but, on the contrary, the zoat on Precipice is a subtle, manipulative creature working towards a goal known only to itself.

Many of my informants have ceased to work for me, instead finding employment with the zoat, and those who still confide in me have claimed it is building a complex network of agents and spies. From my fleeting glimpses of the thing I have also ascertained that it is far more technologically advanced than I originally expected. Its body is adorned with a plethora of devices that seem to be a combination of the mechanical and the organic.

Strangest of all are the reports that this monster, which refers to itself as the Archivist, does not communicate verbally with its agents, but through some form of telepathy, perhaps via the mask-like device that hides its face.

The zoat masquerades as an ally of those who are trying to plumb the Blackstone's depths, but the extent of its subterfuge tells me a different story. I have resolved to investigate the matter further.

I first encountered the term 'zoat' in a book of folk tales written for children, but since the arrival of the Archivist, I have scoured my library for more references and was fascinated to find the name in a far stranger and more disturbing document. In a book of confidential Adeptus Ministorum records, I stumbled across a letter from a Cardinal Dramitzi to his arch-cardinal. In it, he relates his final visit to an old friend, Arch-deacon Comino.



Your Grace,

Much as I hate to add to your burden, I'm afraid I write with sad news. I have come to the Elpenor Cathedral, as you requested, to investigate the dreadful rumours. It pains me to reveal that they were true: every one of the senior brothers has been murdered, leaving only junior priests and curates to manage the running of the diocese. The true horror of the story was not revealed to me until I arrived here, however. The murderer, currently detained in the undercroft, is Arch-deacon Comino himself. He killed his own priests, your eminence! I would refuse to believe it, but several of the killings were recorded by servitors and I have seen the pict footage. Those dreadful images will stay with me until I die. Comino became an animal. Word has, I'm afraid, leaked to the wider communities and there are already signs of insurrection. It was only the reverence for this order in general, and Comino in particular, that maintained the peace. I fear for the future of this planet, eminence.

Comino was scheduled to be executed the morning after my arrival so, despite my abhorrence for his actions, I forced myself to visit him in his cell and see if I could gain some understanding of his fall from grace.

He was barely recognisable, ranting at shadows and answering imagined voices, and I realised he had simply lost his mind. Tragic, I know, but perhaps understandable on such an inhospitable world. He babbled like a drunkard, jumping from one subject to another, but I noticed he kept returning to one theme: he was fixated on the idea that he had been robbed of a great treasure. I asked him what it was and, after giving me a wary look, he demanded to know if I had it. Explaining that I had no idea what he was talking about, I convinced him to tell me what he had lost, sensing that this supposed theft was at the root of his madness. He told me, in a despairing tone, that he was visited by a mysterious pilgrim called Zoot. He said Zoot was so obese and deformed he kept his body hidden within his robes and did not leave the palanquin carried by his servants. Comino only saw the man's hands, and they were covered in thick green scales.

The man called Zoot gave Comino a bracelet of bones and claimed they were the fingers of Saint Iavenza. Zoot begged Arch-deacon Comino to keep the bracelet safe in the cathedral and ensure no harm came to it.

Even though he was hunched in his cell, awaiting execution, Comino's eyes lit up at the memory of the bone bracelet. He said he could feel such holy power radiating from it that he could not trust leaving it in the reliquary. Instead, he wore it around his wrist when he went to bed that night. When he awoke, Comino found that the bracelet had been stolen from his wrist. He claims that Saint Iavenza then spoke to him, aggrieved and enraged and saying that one of the senior priests was responsible.

At this point, Arch-deacon Comino became so agitated that the guards had to sedate him, but it would appear that it was this voice, the voice of the bones, that convinced Comino to kill his fellow priests. He really believed one of them had stolen this sacred relic. At my request, the junior priests scoured the cathedral for any trace of such a bracelet, but there was no sign of such a thing, and no one else recalled the visit of the pilgrim called Zoot.

The next morning, as the rioting beyond the walls grew louder, the arch-deacon was executed. It was a tragic scene and though I did not question the sentence, I took no satisfaction in seeing such a deranged man die.

I have the honour to remain,

Your Grace's most devoted and obedient servant,

Cardinal Dramitzi.

Postscript: Your Grace, the most peculiar and troubling thing has occurred. It is the morning of the day after the execution, and I was just about to send this missive when I heard that a post-mortem had been performed on the arch-deacon. The strangest thing! They have found the bone bracelet! It was inside his arm. It is impossible to explain. It is as though his body had absorbed it. What a strange, dreadful thing! I have taken possession of the relic and will bring it directly to you.

The story troubles me in many ways. Can it be a coincidence that the word 'zoat' appears alongside a description of a 'man' with green scales who keeps his bulky appearance hidden? I think not. Could it be that this bone bracelet was used as a method of mind control? Could it be that instigated the dreadful sector-wide insurrections that followed? Both Cardinal Dramitzi and the arch-cardinal died in the slaughter, but I shall endeavour to seek out more information concerning this mysterious tale.



Do not be deceived by the zoat's savage appearance. These are subtle, canny, technologically advanced creatures that evade any attempts to pin down their motives.

Fedridian Althak

Canis foetidus

My kroot tracker has many outlandish beliefs but he is particularly deluded concerning the Blackstone Fortress. Grekh believes it is a facet of divinity, an avatar of a supreme being or beings that have sent the fortress here, at this particular time, to achieve some unknowable end. He also believes we have not come to the Western Reaches through free will, but were drawn here by the fortress, like moths to a flame, so that we may do its bidding. Most of Grekh's beliefs are baffling in the extreme, but his delusions regarding the fortress are more understandable. It is a peculiar place. I do not mean the way it defies physics with its shifting gravity and impossible architecture, I mean that strange things happen there – coincidences that are hard to reconcile and results that seem too contrived to be natural, almost as though stage-directed to illustrate a moral point that remains just beyond one's grasp. My first experience of the althak is a good example.

During the various interviews and meetings I have held on Precipice, I heard of a flamboyant character known as the Huntsman. According to the local drunks, he was the only traveller to explore the Blackstone Fortress with apparent ease. He had made several trips to the star fort without sustaining a single scratch. If this was true, it was incredible. Even the most skilled, well-armed individuals on Precipice struggled to survive their expeditions to the Blackstone. It is an unpredictable, weaponised labyrinth crowded with xenos predators.

Intrigued, I tracked the Huntsman down and asked him his secret. He was a very conceited individual. Dressed in a gaudy collection of pelts and hides, and laden with every possible form of weapon, he boasted to me that there were few animals in the galaxy he had not killed. He told me of a forest world called Fedrid, home to all manner of vicious predators, where hunters from across the galaxy gathered to display their prowess. I cannot think of a more wasteful use of resources than a world full of well-armed egoists killing xenos for pleasure rather than endeavouring to save their own species from destruction. I hid my distaste and asked the man how he explored the Blackstone Fortress in apparent safety.

He was happy to explain. One of the xenos he hunted on Fedrid was known as the althak – a form of oversized reptilian wolf. The althak is famously hard to kill, and famously ferocious, so said the Huntsman, telling me how incredible it was that he had slain one. He showed me one of the hides on his wall and explained that it was the skin of the althak. It did indeed look like an impressive beast, but I noticed some small exit wounds in its side that looked like they had been caused by an extremely long-range rifle, and I wondered how fair a fight it had been.

The Huntsman then showed me a plasteel canister under his coat, carefully sealed and covered in warning sigils. He explained that it contained urine taken from the althak, and that it released territorial pheromones so powerful that no other predator would come near him

while he was wearing it. Even the fortress' own defence mechanisms had stayed away from him on his first couple of expeditions, and he was now planning a third. I asked him why he had come and he said it was for no other purpose but to hunt. For reasons unknown – except perhaps to Grekh! – there is an incredible menagerie of creatures trapped on the fortress; creatures from across the galaxy roam its lightless vaults, and to an idle sportsman like the Huntsman, that made it the perfect destination.

I thanked him for his frankness and left him to his delusions of grandeur, saddened to think that, through the application of urine, such an uncouth man seemed destined to reach parts of the fortress that I never would.

It was only a few weeks later, however, that I heard from Grekh that the Huntsman had been killed during one of his expeditions. I demanded to know how, recalling what the man had said about the althak urine.

Grekh shrugged and said that the Huntsman was killed near the landing point known as the Stygian Aperture. He knew none of the details, save one: the predator that tore the Huntsman apart looked like an oversized reptilian wolf.



Vespid

Vesparum mors

The vespid are tall, winged humanoids that, to my eyes at least, bear a similarity to hornets, with barbed, chitinous carapaces, twitching antennae and wings that emit a harsh, droning sound. I have fought them twice, and on both occasions found them to be formidable.

Their success on the battlefield derives from two particular factors. Firstly, the sound and appearance of the vespid has a severe impact on morale, unnerving all but the most hardened fighter. The buzz of their wings, their insect-like armour, and their grotesque six-eyed faces have a nightmarish quality that can rout troops before a single shot has been fired.

The second reason for their success is their advanced weaponry. Grekh, who has fought alongside the vespid, tells me that their guns are produced by their overlords, the t'au, and I have even seen mighty Space Marines cut down by these xenos warriors.

As I mentioned earlier in this treatise (see the chapter on kroot) Grekh has the ability to summon memories that he has subsumed from the prey he has eaten, claiming to 'digest the soul' as well as the body to gain both spiritual and physical nourishment. He is proud, in a rough sort of way, and never keen to display this genetic quirk on demand, but when I described the vespid as savage beasts, he showed an uncharacteristic flicker of emotion and then deigned to share one of the digested memories with me.

Grekh is very clear on the fact that he only ever fought alongside the t'au for money. He takes pride in his status as a mercenary who has never adopted, or even understood, the t'au credo.

He spoke of a time when he and a vespid warrior by the name of Alupka became separated from the main t'au offensive and were trapped, alone, in a crevasse as dozens of greenskins poured from the mountains on either side of them.

Grekh sat erect, like he was on a parade ground, as he recalled how bravely Alupka fought. The two warriors had no shared language, but Grekh told me they needed no words, fighting with the seamless efficiency of comrades who had survived a long campaign. I confess, I found it odd to think of two such seemingly barbarous xenos becoming loyal comrades, as humans might be, but that is how Grekh described the scene.

As the orks reached the gulley floor, Grekh was wounded and fell to the ground. Alupka, seeing that they could no longer win the skirmish, lifted Grekh in his arms, pounded his wings and launched them into the air.

With Grekh's additional weight, Alupka could only fly at low altitude and with great difficulty. As they flew towards the far end of the gulley, the orks fired a deafening barrage of shots and Alupka was hit. Grekh could see immediately that the wound was serious, but Alupka continued trying to outrun the orks.

Grekh paused at this part of the story and fixed me with those dark, blank eyes of his. He explained that if Alupka had dropped him at that point, the vespid could still have gained altitude and escaped from the



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orks. But Alupka clung on to Grekh, even as several more shots punched into the vespid. Grekh could see that Alupka would surely die if he didn't drop him, and tried to wrestle free, but the vespid would not let him go.

By the time they left the orks behind, Alupka was covered in wounds and clearly dying, but he managed to find enough strength to reach a high precipice and land out of sight of the enemy.

Save for his earlier injury Grekh was relatively unharmed, but Alupka only managed a few ragged breaths before dying at Grekh's feet.

Grekh paused again at this point and examined a piece of something attached to his body armour, seeming to forget he was in the middle of his account. I reminded him that he was going to share a stranger's memory with me and Grekh nodded, explaining that Alupka had proven himself such a brave, worthy soul, that there was only one way he could honour him sufficiently. As the orks scoured the mountains for them, Grekh began to devour his dead comrade. As he ate, he gained what he refers to as 'insights' (see my notes on the subject elsewhere in this book) but he also claims to have witnessed Alupka's most enduring memory: a memory of the day he left his home.

At this point, Grekh's whole demeanour changed and he spoke in a language and tone that I had never heard before. It was like witnessing a lunatic who imagined themselves possessed by spirits. It was weeks before Isola's cogitator could translate my recording into the following words. She was unsure, even then, if the translation was accurate, but it is evocative nonetheless. Remember, these words describe the memory Grekh claims to have absorbed from Alupka. Grekh tells me he learned many things from his vespid comrade, including how it feels to abandon one's past.

Finally, weighed down by the sadness I had seen, I alighted in the chambers of Bulata, where the wings once gathered in their mighty seethes, waiting to greet the lucent as they returned from a lode. I looked up into the distant vaults, recalling the sound of a thousand wings paying tribute to the mothers' bravery. But now there was only silence. The seethes were gone, dispersed long ago on the orders of the ethereals, and where there should have been mounds of tributes, there were only piles of dust. Once the lucent had sworn allegiance to the t'au, what was the use in places such as Bulata? The old customs had become meaningless. The lucent no longer brought crystals for the seethes; they gathered them for the ethereals.*

I launched myself into the air, circled the chamber and tried to drag the old melody from my wings. But my soul was as empty as the hall; my heart as still as the dust.

* Presumably a reference to the t'au ruling caste.



To survive the harsh environments of their home world, vespids nest in vast, crystalline islands that weather the storms.

Hrud

Troglydium hrudii

Various xenologists have tried to decipher the riddle of the hrud, but reports vary wildly making it hard to separate fact from fiction.* The descriptions of their physical appearance seldom agree and only one fact occurs with any regularity: most of the encounters with hrud occur on maintenance floors and in the access vents between the decks of our own Imperial void ships. In a ship as monolithic as a battle cruiser I suppose it might be possible for a xenospecies to escape detection and even thrive in the darkness.

Word of my investigations has spread across Precipice and various individuals have approached me with stories of varying plausibility. A former indentured crewman told a tale that chimed with my notes on the hrud, so I have included a brief extract below:

I was a salvage hand. Responsible for the crawlerways between Uxorum deck, the thermal protection masts and the starboard enginarium decks. Five miles of crawlerway. And no one to talk to for years on end. When you're alone that much, you have to talk to something, so I talked to the shadows. Not many working glow-globes in the crawlerways, see. It's mostly shadow. And they moved funny sometimes, like they heard what I was sayin'.

You'll think I'm cracked, but after years of it, I started to think of the shadows as friends. I even left them gifts. Bits of scrap the enginseers wouldn't want. And the gifts would vanish! I swear it! The shadows took them somewhere. Then one day Warrant Officer Scaldis came down the crawlerway and set about me with a vengeance. Throne knows who got him so het up. It don't take much. He went at me with a ratchet like he meant to kill me.

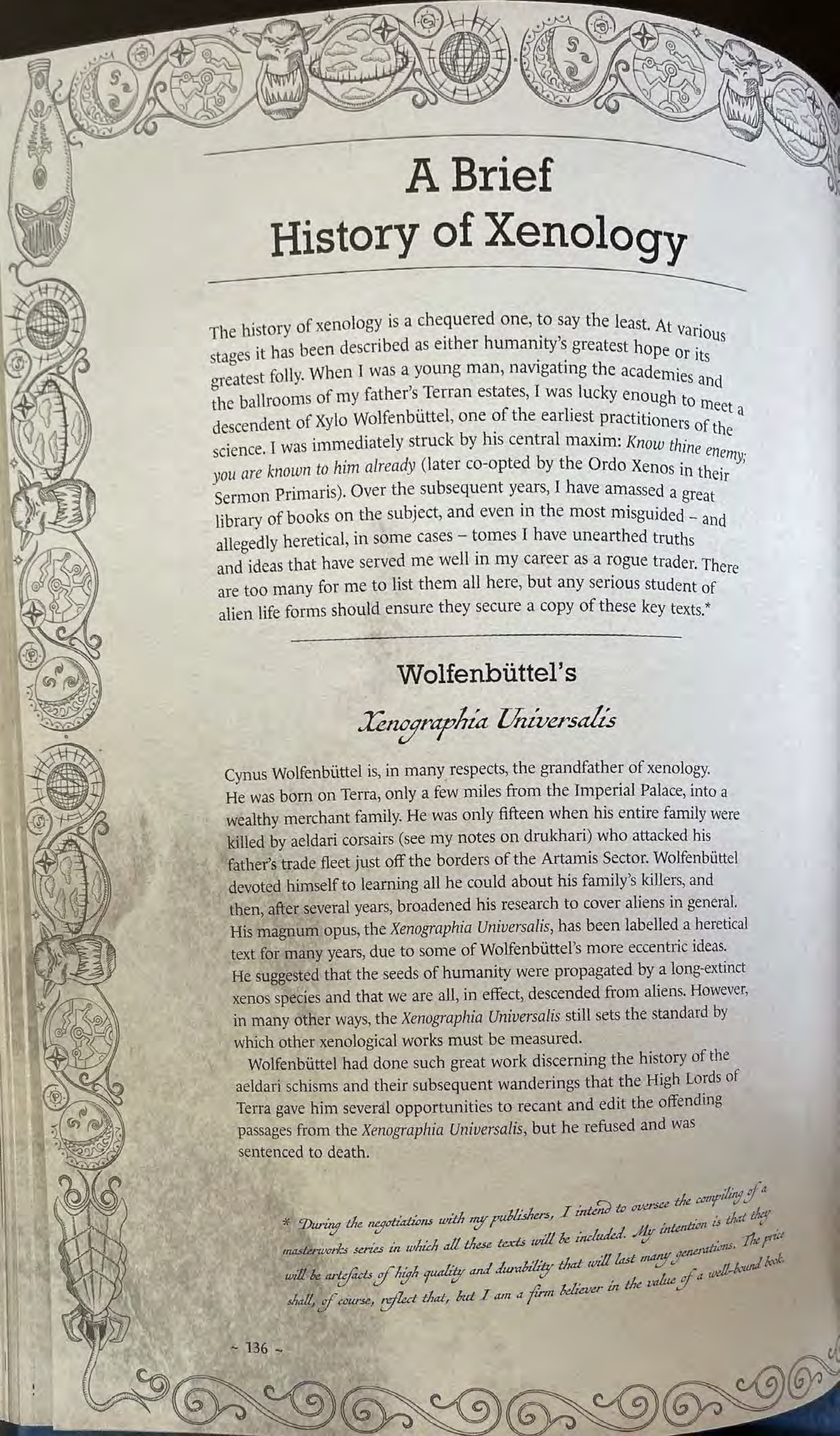
And then it happened. Call me cracked if you like, but I know what I saw. One of the shadows sort of unfolded itself. Moving fast. It rushed Scaldis and he went down cold. And there was something in the shadow. I swear it. Something tall, wearing rotten rags and its limbs all bending wrong, like they were broken. I only saw it once then it folded back into the darkness. I panicked and helped Scaldis up, worried about what he'd do, but it was the weirdest thing. He looked older – all shrivelled like – and there was such terror in his eyes. He never came back to the crawlerways. And I never saw the shadow man again neither.

** Even their name seems to be a misnomer. The earliest reports describe them as 'the nocturnal warriors of Hrud', which would seem to imply that hrud refers to their home world rather than being the name of the species.*



REDACTED

fig. 01



A Brief History of Xenology

The history of xenology is a chequered one, to say the least. At various stages it has been described as either humanity's greatest hope or its greatest folly. When I was a young man, navigating the academies and the ballrooms of my father's Terran estates, I was lucky enough to meet a descendent of Xylo Wolfenbüttel, one of the earliest practitioners of the science. I was immediately struck by his central maxim: *Know thine enemy; you are known to him already* (later co-opted by the Ordo Xenos in their Sermon Primaris). Over the subsequent years, I have amassed a great library of books on the subject, and even in the most misguided – and allegedly heretical, in some cases – tomes I have unearthed truths and ideas that have served me well in my career as a rogue trader. There are too many for me to list them all here, but any serious student of alien life forms should ensure they secure a copy of these key texts.*

Wolfenbüttel's

Xenographia Universalis

Cynus Wolfenbüttel is, in many respects, the grandfather of xenology. He was born on Terra, only a few miles from the Imperial Palace, into a wealthy merchant family. He was only fifteen when his entire family were killed by aeldari corsairs (see my notes on drukhari) who attacked his father's trade fleet just off the borders of the Artamis Sector. Wolfenbüttel devoted himself to learning all he could about his family's killers, and then, after several years, broadened his research to cover aliens in general. His magnum opus, the *Xenographia Universalis*, has been labelled a heretical text for many years, due to some of Wolfenbüttel's more eccentric ideas. He suggested that the seeds of humanity were propagated by a long-extinct xenos species and that we are all, in effect, descended from aliens. However, in many other ways, the *Xenographia Universalis* still sets the standard by which other xenological works must be measured.

Wolfenbüttel had done such great work discerning the history of the aeldari schisms and their subsequent wanderings that the High Lords of Terra gave him several opportunities to recant and edit the offending passages from the *Xenographia Universalis*, but he refused and was sentenced to death.

* During the negotiations with my publishers, I intend to oversee the compiling of a masterworks series in which all these texts will be included. My intention is that they will be artefacts of high quality and durability that will last many generations. The price shall, of course, reflect that, but I am a firm believer in the value of a well-bound book.

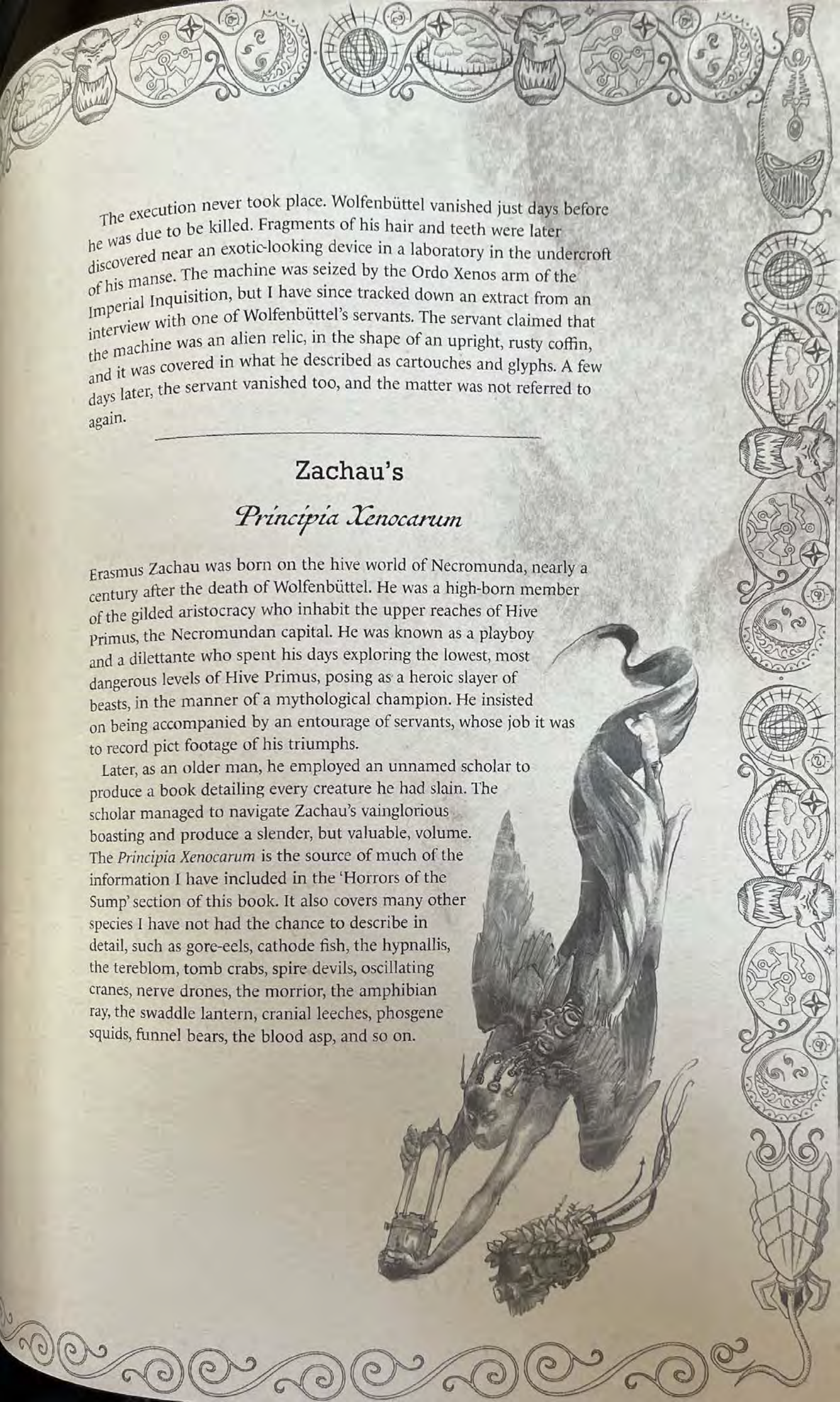
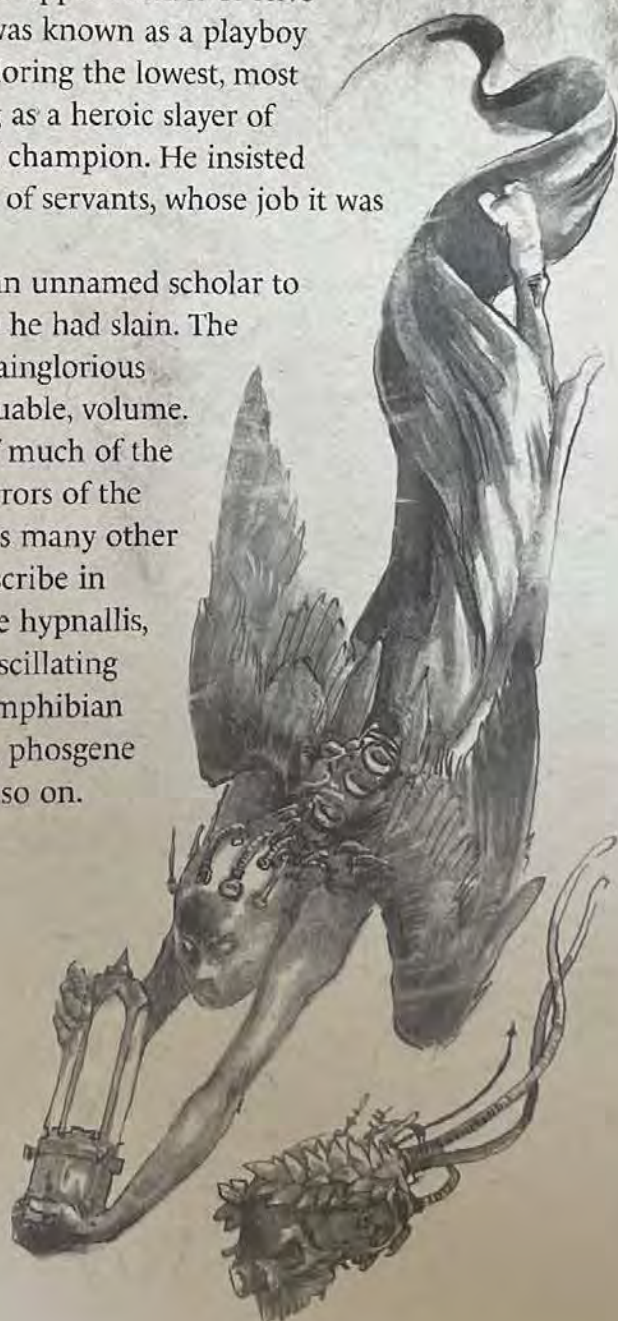
The execution never took place. Wolfenbüttel vanished just days before he was due to be killed. Fragments of his hair and teeth were later discovered near an exotic-looking device in a laboratory in the undercroft of his manse. The machine was seized by the Ordo Xenos arm of the Imperial Inquisition, but I have since tracked down an extract from an interview with one of Wolfenbüttel's servants. The servant claimed that the machine was an alien relic, in the shape of an upright, rusty coffin, and it was covered in what he described as cartouches and glyphs. A few days later, the servant vanished too, and the matter was not referred to again.

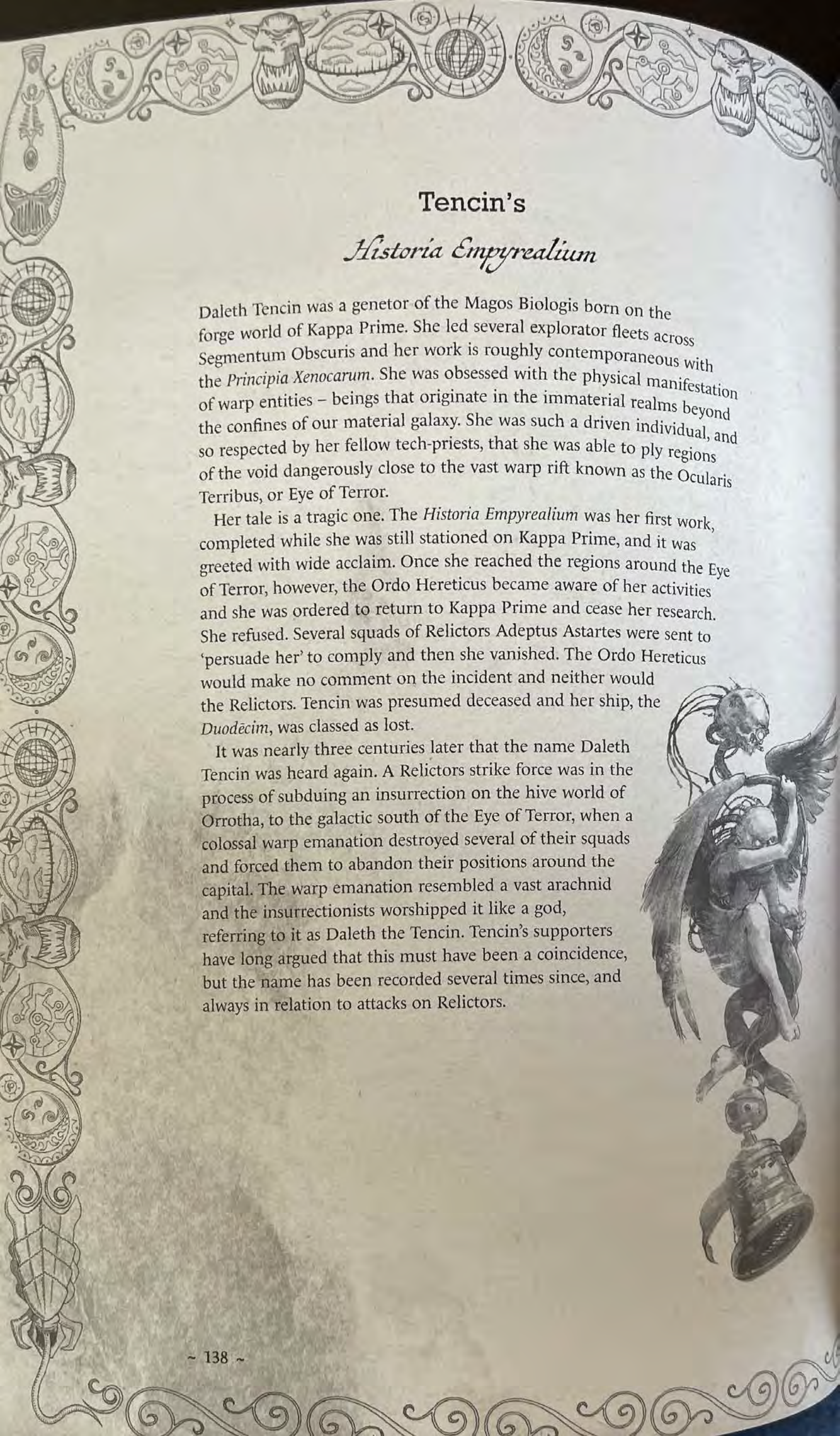
Zachau's

Principia Xenocarum

Erasmus Zachau was born on the hive world of Necromunda, nearly a century after the death of Wolfenbüttel. He was a high-born member of the gilded aristocracy who inhabit the upper reaches of Hive Primus, the Necromundan capital. He was known as a playboy and a dilettante who spent his days exploring the lowest, most dangerous levels of Hive Primus, posing as a heroic slayer of beasts, in the manner of a mythological champion. He insisted on being accompanied by an entourage of servants, whose job it was to record pict footage of his triumphs.

Later, as an older man, he employed an unnamed scholar to produce a book detailing every creature he had slain. The scholar managed to navigate Zachau's vainglorious boasting and produce a slender, but valuable, volume. The *Principia Xenocarum* is the source of much of the information I have included in the 'Horrors of the Sump' section of this book. It also covers many other species I have not had the chance to describe in detail, such as gore-eels, cathode fish, the hypnallis, the tereblom, tomb crabs, spire devils, oscillating cranes, nerve drones, the morrior, the amphibian ray, the swaddle lantern, cranial leeches, phosgene squids, funnel bears, the blood asp, and so on.





Tencin's

Historia Empyrealium

Daleth Tencin was a genetor of the Magos Biologis born on the forge world of Kappa Prime. She led several explorer fleets across Segmentum Obscuris and her work is roughly contemporaneous with the *Principia Xenocarum*. She was obsessed with the physical manifestation of warp entities – beings that originate in the immaterial realms beyond the confines of our material galaxy. She was such a driven individual, and so respected by her fellow tech-priests, that she was able to ply regions of the void dangerously close to the vast warp rift known as the Ocularis Terribus, or Eye of Terror.

Her tale is a tragic one. The *Historia Empyrealium* was her first work, completed while she was still stationed on Kappa Prime, and it was greeted with wide acclaim. Once she reached the regions around the Eye of Terror, however, the Ordo Hereticus became aware of her activities and she was ordered to return to Kappa Prime and cease her research. She refused. Several squads of Relictors Adeptus Astartes were sent to 'persuade her' to comply and then she vanished. The Ordo Hereticus would make no comment on the incident and neither would the Relictors. Tencin was presumed deceased and her ship, the *Duodēcim*, was classed as lost.

It was nearly three centuries later that the name Daleth Tencin was heard again. A Relictors strike force was in the process of subduing an insurrection on the hive world of Orrotha, to the galactic south of the Eye of Terror, when a colossal warp emanation destroyed several of their squads and forced them to abandon their positions around the capital. The warp emanation resembled a vast arachnid and the insurrectionists worshipped it like a god, referring to it as Daleth the Tencin. Tencin's supporters have long argued that this must have been a coincidence, but the name has been recorded several times since, and always in relation to attacks on Relictors.



Einach's *Xeno Corporis Fabrica*

Tiberias Einach was the planetary governor of Aluta XIV. He was, by all accounts, a wise and honest defender of the Imperial Creed and a beloved ruler of his people. He was also an amateur xenologist who amassed a wealth of documents on the subject.

He had a particular fascination with the greenskin races and theorised that orks are a form of sentient mycotoxin (fungal poison) that could be 'treated' by an antitoxin. He believed that he could develop a serum that when injected into the bloodstream would be so harmful to greenskins, the orks would not be able to approach a human colony without becoming violently, fatally ill. He spent many years honing his theory until he finally had an antitoxin he was prepared to trial. Being a man of principles, he was unwilling to let anyone else take the first dose of his 'cure'.

The psychosis plagues that subsequently ravaged the Aluta System have been well documented, and Aluta XIV was eventually declared Exterminatus by the Imperial Navy. All trace of Einach's work was thought to be lost. It was only by chance that I stumbled on a copy of *Xeno Corporis Fabrica* in a bio-containment unit in the Nagadiba library. Two pages are visible through the reinforced armaglass, and it is a torment to me that I am unable to see more of this fascinating piece of xenological history.

Unfortunately, the field of xenology is crowded with imposters and frauds. I would strongly advise the serious scholar to avoid any of the following volumes: Camargo's *De Morbis Xenoris*, Alciphron's *Doctrina Numorum Xenorum* and Volland's *Bibliothèque Xenologis*.



Djemja Falak

Molluscus veritas

Not all xenologists are interested in furthering the science; there are many who have come to this field of research for more mercenary reasons. There are fortunes to be made for those who procure certain alien species.

The djemja falak is an ugly little cephalopod, so repulsive and strange that for many years it was believed to be a warp entity. It is, in fact, as Wolfenbüttel states in his *Xenographia Universalis*, a physical creature that has spread across the galaxy by breeding in the liquid that flows through the cooling loops of plasma drives. How they came to be there, even Wolfenbüttel has no idea, but they have only done so in very small numbers.

Falaks are extremely rare. I acquired mine, at great expense, from a contact in the Agripinaa Sector. Its value is in direct contrast to its repulsive appearance (imagine a small, mutated squid, with far too many tentacles and flesh that seems to be made of black, viscous tar) and stems from the unusual nature of its neurotoxins. When placed on a head, a falak will take hold and inject the neurotoxins into its victim. Over time, this will rot the brain and eventually the entire head, but before that happens the neurotoxin acts like a psychoactive drug, making it impossible for the victim to tell anything other than the absolute truth. The usefulness of this is obvious, and the falak's value is impossible to understate.

To be honest, I keep the grotesque thing so well hidden that I might have neglected to include it in this treatise were it not for a recent incident that saw me make use of its rare gifts.

As I stated at the start of the book, a fragile truce holds sway on Precipice, meaning that outright violence is kept to a minimum. However, in a place so crowded with escaped felons and malefactors, it is inevitable that lesser forms of crime are rife. In the early days of my time on Precipice, my ship, the *Vanguard*, was well armed and staffed by a large complement of the Draik House Guard. At that time, there were few who would have dared risk earning my wrath. Dozens of expeditions have seen me temporarily short on funds and personnel, however, and there have been several recent attempts to ransack my ship. I was enraged to find that my collection of lucullian rifles had been taken, but fortunately the culprit was foolish enough to make a return visit, at which point he found me, Grekh and Isola waiting for him.

We bound him to a chair and I demanded that he tell me who he had sold the rifles to. The man laughed at me. He was a hard-nosed brute who carried the stench of a penal legion about him. Threats of violence were little use, and even the close proximity of a twitching, hungry kroot did not break his resolve. He said he'd die before he told me what he'd done with the rifles. The convict stared at me with such venom that I guessed there was a form of inverted snobbery behind his unreasonable behaviour.

It was then that I recalled my djemja falak. I ordered Isola to fetch it and when the convict saw the shape in the jar, I was pleased to see that he knew what it was. I reminded him that once the thing was attached to his skull, he would suffer great pain and scream whatever answers I needed from him.

Then he sneered, claiming that he knew my sort and that such an 'honourable nobleman' – how he spat those words! – would not stoop so low as to murder him in such a repulsive way.

I placed a glove on my hand, removed the falak from the jar and draped it over his face.

He screamed in terror, crying out the name of the man who had my rifles and the whereabouts of his ship, pleading with me to remove the creature before it was too late. We both knew that 'too late' was only a matter of a few seconds, so I took great pleasure in strolling across the cabin and pouring myself a glass of amasec.

The criminal howled with increasing desperation. Then, after a minute or so of this, he realised that he was not in pain and fell into a confused silence.

Then it was my turn to laugh as I plucked the long-dead falak from his head and dropped the little corpse back into its jar.

77.



Tyranids

Across the galaxy, on countless worlds, predators of every kind are linked by a simple understanding: to sate their hunger, to quench their bone-deep thirst for the kill, they must simply find the weakest and the oldest, the straggler that has been abandoned by the herd. As the Imperium battles foes on all sides and insurrection from within, reeling from the unprecedented surge in warp storms and the growth of mutant strains, the greatest predator of all has caught the scent of our blood and stalked us through the stars. Thankfully, there are few in the Imperium who know the scale of this threat, if they know of it at all, but my research has led me to a dreadful realisation: all our wars and crusades, all our science and our prayers, will come to naught if we do not find a way to halt the Great Devourer.

My first encounter with tyranids came in a fragment of religious tract called *The Last Vision of Saint Kessel of Marinorum*. At the time I thought it an allegorical tale, describing the spiritual death of worlds that had wandered from the Imperial Creed. The accompanying illustrations are gruesome and tell a bleak tale, but it was many years later that I realised these terrifying scenes showed an actual, rather than figurative event.

Since then I have been able to cross reference Saint Kessel's 'vision' with several Astra Militarum records and managed to categorise some of the fiends he prophesied (see below). Unable to make the governments or Ministorum prelates of Marinorum hear his warning, Kessel fled his home just as the first of his prophecies came true. As his void ship left the system, its augur arrays showed massive swarms of biomass gathering around Marinorum. He raced to the Imperial outpost at the Taocene Cluster and found his voice was just one among a chorus of refugees from hundreds of worlds, all relaying the same horrific tale. Since then, the entire subsector has fallen into darkness. There is no word of Saint Kessel, but his writings eventually fell into my hands just as I arrived at the Western Reaches. It makes for troubling reading. How many worlds will soon be facing what Kessel foresaw in his dreams?





The dreams came again last night and they were identical in every regard to those that came before. It is the ninth time I have beheld these atrocities, and the number cannot be ignored. This is exactly as it was described in the Protocol of Acyphas; this is the divine lucidity that was foretold. Throne preserve me, these are not nightmares I am seeing, they are visions of the future. Our future.



First comes the great darkness. A mass of boiling cloud that blocks out the sun and the sky. The gloom is so intense that even the most powerful lumens seem unable to drive it back. It is as though the sky has been burned. Then the screaming begins. Astropaths across the world thrash and buck in their sanctums, blood bubbling from their pores like sweat, torrents of black ash pouring from their open mouths. Through their agony they manage to announce that we have been severed from the Emperor's light; we are alone in the darkness; alone under these heavy, fast-moving clouds.

The orbital augur stations give no response, as though crushed by the storm, and Governor Chalcis pleads for calm, claiming that it will soon pass and we will be returned to the benevolence of the God-Emperor.

Then the true horror begins. As the clouds turn faster, they drop closer to the land and we see that they are not clouds at all, but monumental swarms of alien creatures – winged, unholy abominations that resemble a cross between insects and serpents are followed by pulsating spores of every conceivable shape and size that rush towards us like hellish rain.

The creatures wash over cities like an ocean of chitinous limbs and claws, devouring everything in their path. So much insatiable, mindless hunger! There is no defence against it. Entire regiments of Guardsmen vanish in the tumult, torn to pulp and trampled under taloned feet. Those who are sworn to lead succumb to panic and flee, screaming gibberish as the darkness deepens and the swarm grows larger. Eventually there is nothing but the swarm, consuming, consuming, consuming...



After this, the writing becomes confused and hysterical, but later, Kessel describes the numerous forms of his enemy and it was this, combined with several *Militarum* manuals, that allowed me to compile the descriptions below. The swarm seems to adapt, like a virus, spawning new organs and even life forms to overcome any defence that is set against it. Few reports have escaped from worlds under tyrannid attack, but the few that have paint a terrifying picture.

Most of the creatures resemble a cross between insect and reptilian species, but with the carnivorous anatomical aspects magnified to a shocking extreme. They have hard, chitinous carapaces, elongated teeth-filled heads and long razor-sharp claws, and 'weapons' appear to be living parts of the tyrannid swarm.

While waves of skittering monsters cover the landscape, airborne fiends swoop overhead, racing ahead of the main attack, causing confusion and panic in defence lines prior to the arrival of the rest of the swarm. These flying tyrannids carry the same grub-firing appendages as the ground troops, but also spit an acid that blinds their foes, leaving their victims to scream helplessly as they hear, but are unable to see, the nightmarish tide scuttling towards them.

There are also accounts of huge creatures, twice the size of the warrior strain, that lack the agility and cunning of the smaller breeds, but which are so powerful and heavily armoured they tear through bunkers and topple ferrocrete bastions with ease. These monsters have even been known to rip armoured vehicles open as though they are made of flesh and bone rather than reinforced plasteel.

Let me be clear: this is not an invading army battling for territory or ideals, this is a xenospecies whose only purpose is to feed. One report, sent just prior to the collapse of the Imperial outpost at Obrima, describes a kind of armoured walking stomach that stomped into the ranks of dazed defenders and devoured them at an incredible rate, using tentacles, fangs and tongues to haul victims into its gaping maw. As it ate, dorsal pipes on its shell released plumes of steam or smoke like some hellish engine.

It is unclear how a command structure might work in such a frenzied swarm. Waves of invaders move in perfect unison without any sign of communication. However, there have been some reports in which survivors of a tyrannid invasion describe one of the larger strains seeming to lead the attacks – or at least acting as a focal point for their strikes. This lord (perhaps a spiritual leader?) resembled the smaller warrior breeds but was far larger and, rather than being dragged along by the momentum of the lesser monsters, surveyed the battle with chilling calm, appearing to formulate tactics as a human general might. Could it be that this is an individual of such subtlety and sagacity that it has plotted the entire tyrannid invasion, working to some unknowable, personal agenda? Or could it be an avatar of another being? Or perhaps simply a powerful regent? It seems essential to me that we define the nature of this ruler. It is my belief that the only way to halt the advance of the tyrannids is to slay their king. Then, perhaps, we might behead this invasion before more systems fall as *Marinorum* fell.



79.





Carnificus Naturalis

Xenospecies defend themselves in a variety of ways. There are some, such as the t'au, the zaruk* and the aeldari, that have developed advanced weaponry – in the case of the t'au by rapid expansion, in the case of the aeldari by combining thousands of years of craftsmanship with an innate psychic ability, and in the case of the zaruk by stealing ideas from everyone they conquer.

But there are many other species that, unable to design and manufacture mechanical instruments of war, have found biological ways to achieve the same result.

A good example of this phenomenon is the tyranid hive fleets. Their armour, weapons and tools seem to 'grow' from their bodies like a tumour or a canker, but one that is a useful, symbiotic evolution rather than a harmful mutation. The Magos Biologis have suggested that these growths develop in response to environmental stimuli, enabling the species to quickly adapt to any threat.



** A piratical xenospecies encountered in the Uhul's Sector. They use fleets of warp-capable void ships powered by 'dihedral loop' technology. They wear elaborate, oversized suits of armour that appear to be made from the bones of large, predatory reptiles. As a result, little is known of zaruk anatomy beyond that they are bipedal and vaguely humanoid in shape.*



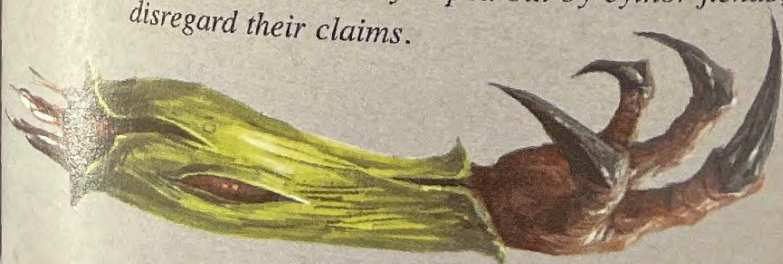
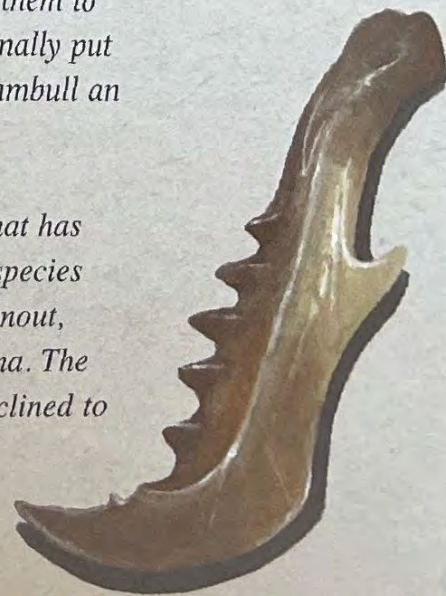
The *Xenographia Universalis* lists several examples of xenos body parts that function as weapons. Here is a sample, transcribed directly from the original text:

The monstrous, insectoid members of the tyranid swarms employ a devilish armoury of weaponised body parts. Some have claws that act as pistols, firing toxic barbs or tiny, industrious tyranid forms that burrow their way into the target's organs. Others wear their bones outside their limbs, sharpened to blades so that they may be used as a form of sword. By some quirk of tyranid nature, these bone weapons reform when damaged, healing themselves with grotesque tendrils that bind and harden into a new cutting edge. Others are able to launch parts of their carapace, causing them to drift like the spores of a fungus. The spores explode upon landing, unleashing a range of lethal poisons and acids. As the tyranid swarms extend their reach into our galaxy, there have been various attempts, by many different species, to find defences against these monstrous bio-weapons, but all have been fruitless, akin to trying to catch water in one's hands – every tyranid invasion reveals new horrors. What little information I have managed to glean about this rapacious species reveals that they are mutating constantly and at an alarming rate, so the threat we face today may only be a fraction of the threat we face tomorrow.

The mandibles of the troglodytic monster known as the ambull are formed of keratin, a substance that appears in our own fingernails, but which in the ambull has evolved into a material so hard it can cut through almost anything. The mandibles also feature an ingenious, biological mechanism that allows them to act as a saw, scything back and forth as they cut. This ability was originally put to use as a mining tool, but when deployed as a weapon, it makes the ambull an almost unstoppable foe.

The skin of the cythor fiend, or ghouf fiend, gives off a foetid stink that has a paralytic effect on all who come in close proximity to it. The agusa species of Clabrus V claimed that a scented poultice, worn over the nose (or snout, in the case of the agusa), was enough to ward off the debilitating aroma. The agusa were eventually wiped out by cythor fiends, however, so I am inclined to disregard their claims.

80.



Cythor Fiends

Homindae crystallis

During one of my recent expeditions to the Blackstone Fortress, I attempted to decipher the controls of the transportation mechanisms known as maglev chambers. My attaché, Isola, has studied the various steering methods to be found in these mysterious cells, and I was equipped with a series of suggested combinations to try out on the runes that are often scored in the chamber walls.

Not for the first time, I had found myself isolated from the rest of my party and was wandering the Stygian depths of the fortress alone. I passed over a narrow walkway and emerged into the basin of a vast, spherical hall. Unlike much of the fortress, the hall was illuminated. Veins of cold blue light networked the curved walls and the floor was brittle with frost.

Upon entering the hall, I immediately halted and took out my splinter pistol. In the centre of the icy vault there was a group of figures, and they seemed to be locked in a fight. I edged closer, keeping my pistol raised, and as I reached the group I realised a pack of ur-ghuls had gathered around a man and were attempting to kill him. The ugly, loping creatures were behaving oddly, however. They are normally relentless in their attacks, scrambling from the shadows in a frenzy and tearing their prey apart in seconds; but these ur-ghuls seemed unwilling to attack, circling slowly and looking for a chance to lunge. The frigid light washed over their grotesque, eyeless faces and I could hear them snorting and sniffing at their prey.

The man was tall and slender and did not seem physically powerful enough to have had such an effect on the cadaverous ur-ghuls. I was about to call out to him when he turned to look my way and almost caused me to drop my pistol in shock. He was not, as I had presumed, a human. He was *humanoid*, but his face was so thin and elongated that it looked like a theatrical mask that had melted and flowed into a mockery of the human visage. Now that he was facing me, I could also see that he was more than simply slender – there was something mantis-like about his teetering, wire-thin limbs and torso, and his skin had a glassy, reflective quality. Strangest of all was the light in his eyes. It froze me to the spot, causing some kind of temporary paralysis.

It was then I saw the reason for the ur-ghul's hesitance – there were dozens of their corpses sprawled across the floor of the hall, their throats neatly sliced. As soon as the alien looked my way, however, the ur-ghuls overcame their doubts and scampered forwards.

The slender alien was holding an object in his hand that looked like a small, silver disc. As the ur-ghuls attacked, he turned the disc, causing it to flash, and then, to my amazement, he seemed to collapse. I do not mean he fell; I mean he came apart, like a shattered glass. A shower of glittering shards fell to the floor, then reformed into what looked like a crystal. What happened next occurred so fast that my eye struggled

to follow it, but I believe the crystal moved of its own accord, passing through the mob of snorting ur-ghuls.

In seconds, the ur-ghuls lay dead, their throats sliced in the same way as all the others.

There was no sign of the crystal or the thin alien so I backed away, raising my gun. As I entered the maglev chamber and triggered the mechanism, I thought I saw something move towards me but I could not be sure. Then the doors closed and a few hours later I made it safely back to the *Vanguard*, rejoined my crew and returned to Precipice.

Something about the alien's face seemed familiar, so I immediately began poring over my xenological texts until I stumbled across a mention of a creature known as the cythor fiend that once inhabited a region in the galactic north-east known as the Ghouls Stars. The accompanying illustration showed a face that was eerily similar to the one I had seen on the Blackstone Fortress. There was little information regarding the species other than they are described as ingenious makers of weapons and other devices through the use of a crystal-based technology. According to the historians of the Adeptus Terra, the species was wiped out during a crusade led by High Marshall Helbrecht of the Black Templars Space Marines. However, when I looked through my translations of aeldari texts on the subject, I read that the cythor fiends are a technologically advanced species that 'evaded' Helbrecht's crusade. The aeldari view of history is as perfidious as every other aspect of their society, so it is hard to say if there is any truth in their claim.

It was only after an hour or so that I noticed an uncomfortable pressure on the side of my neck. I reached up, expecting to find a bruise, and was surprised to dislodge an object. There was a clattering sound as something fell to the floor of my cabin. I saw a brief shimmer, as though I had scattered some diamonds, then the shapes vanished from view, slipping through the gaps in the deck plating.

The incident left me troubled and frustrated by my inability to unearth more details of the cythor fiends. Strange as it may sound, the flash of light I saw on the floor of my cabin seemed to be the same light I had seen in the eyes of the alien.



The Art of the Hunt

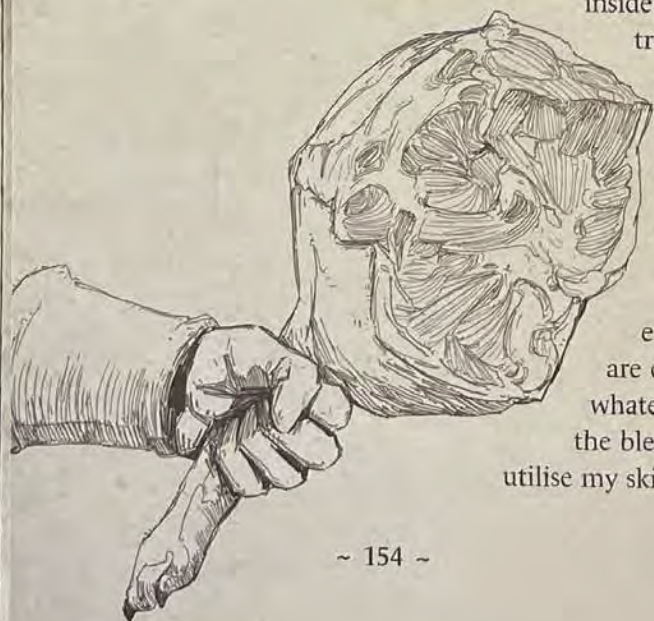
As I have stated elsewhere in this volume, I have no time for the gross idleness of the 'sportsman' – those dissolute souls who hunt for pleasure as, all around them, their fellows fight for their very lives. Perhaps I sound petty, but let me explain why the subject causes me such ire. I have crossed the galaxy seeking knowledge of the races that inhabit it. This is not some idle pursuit or vain fancy; I do it because I believe it is our only chance to win the great battle of wills in which we are engaged.

With this in mind, I shall now share what I have learned of xenos hunting. One must not submit to base, callous instincts, but the galaxy is a cruel and predatory place and I have found myself in countless situations where deploying armed forces or engaging in diplomacy have not been an option. Often, I have had to rely on cunning and physical strength to survive. I am working on a plan to publish a separate folio covering this topic, but for now I shall provide a few key points on the hunting of xenos.*

Every species has unique habits and idiosyncrasies. Before reaching an unfamiliar environment, do all you can to acquaint yourself with the native flora and fauna. Study migratory patterns, geology and seasonal variations so that there is little that can surprise you. This may seem like drudgery more suited to your advisors, but the only way to retain knowledge is to seek it yourself. To shirk this is to invite disaster.

While crossing the Aducan Plains of Orationis, I observed a stampede of ruminants and knew from my studies that their panicked behaviour indicated the approach of a predator called a fulda – the very beast I had come to slay. Knowing that a fulda is blind and hunts by scent, I felt pleased with myself as I hid inside the blasted trunk of a (heavily scented) caturgis tree and prepared to take my shot. If I had been more thorough in my preparation, I would have known that fulda is actually the plural of fuld. I had misunderstood my commission entirely and spent the next few hours in a desperate battle with dozens of the wretched creatures.

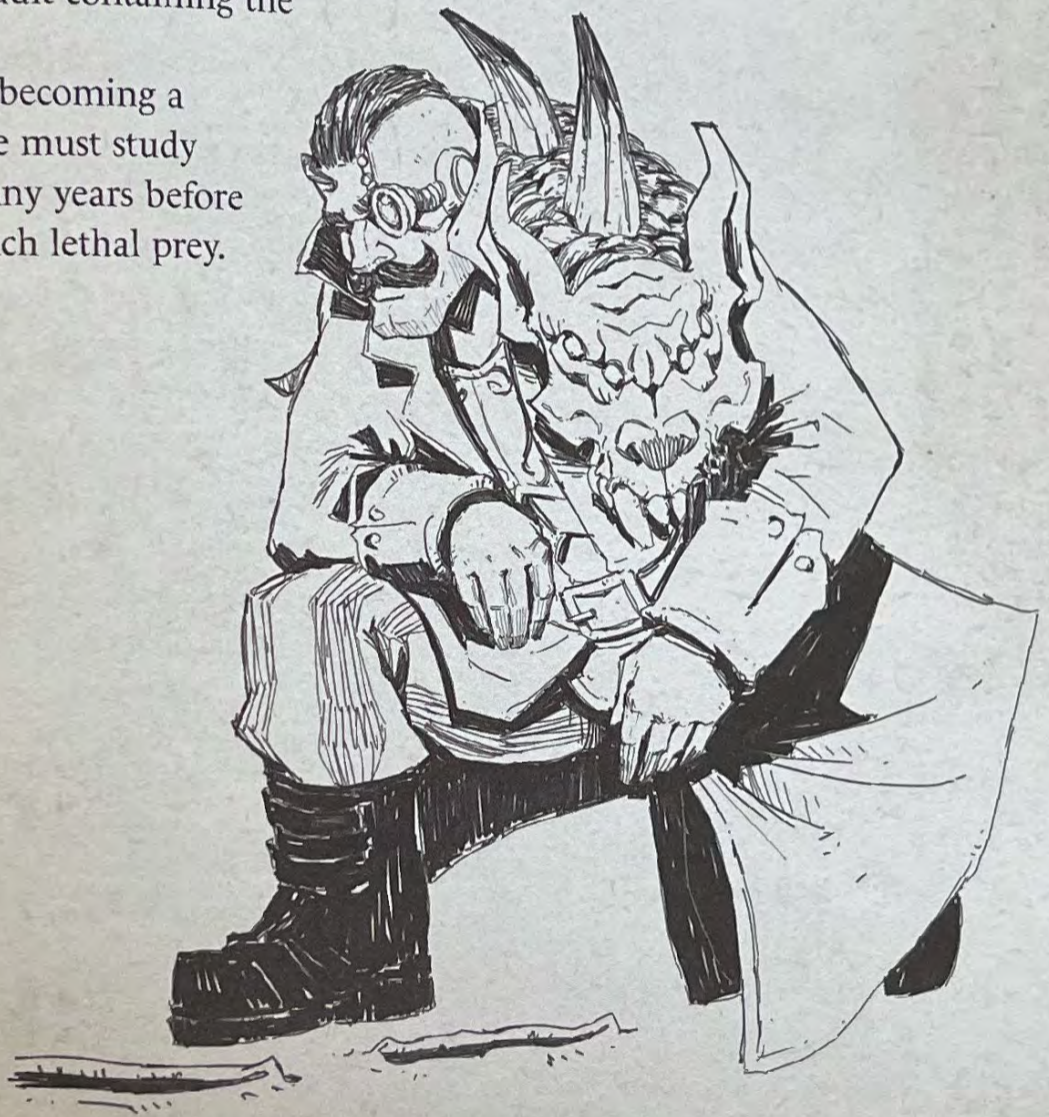
At his core, a good hunter must have an encyclopaedic grasp of tracking techniques. There are countless ways to find the trail of a xenos prey, whatever environment one finds oneself in. Even in the bleak pits of the Blackstone Fortress I am able to utilise my skills. Ur-ghuls, for example, may seem impossible



to hunt, loping easily through absolute blackness and using their finely tuned sensory organs to catch the scent of a stalker. As with the fulda of the Aducan Plains, however, their blindness can be exploited, in conjunction with their feverish bloodlust. I carry on myself, at all times, a cut of fresh, bloody meat with an explosive charge sewn inside. At the first sound of an ur-ghul attack – I learned long ago to recognise the snort of their grotesque nostrils – I unpack the bloody meat, retreat to a safe vantage point and wait for the inevitable explosion, at which point I am able to pick off the dazed survivors with my splinter pistol.

On several occasions my hunting companions have viewed me with wonder as I locate a prey that has eluded all previous trackers. I have been accused of having some form of psychic ability, but the truth is far more mundane. I have made myself an expert in the scat of xenos predators. For example, only recently on the Blackstone Fortress I saw a pale, chalky, tubular shape on the floor that contained fragments of human skin and teeth. My attaché, Isola, thought it was the corpse of a small creature, but I recognised it immediately as the droppings of our prey, a sslyth. I was able to follow the pale shapes until I reached the vault containing the serpentine killer.

There are no shortcuts to becoming a successful xenos hunter. One must study and train obsessively for many years before even considering stalking such lethal prey.



** To be a successful hunter, one must first ensure a strict regimen of physical exercise. I prescribe short bursts of intense exertion two or three times a day. Dumb-bells, fencing equipment and a well-equipped combat-servitor are all one needs. Wherever possible, eat foods that come from a natural source, and when it comes to stimulants such as alcohol, be sure to drink only the very best quality available. Drinking inferior quality spirits or wine is a false economy and may lead to ill health. Your body is your foremost weapon; it must be honed and tempered.*

Enslavers

Spiritus subjugator

I pride myself on being a man of logic and reason, not easily swayed by tales of the supernatural. Through years of research, however, I have come to accept that there are beings of a transdimensional nature that are so peculiar and remote from us, physically and psychologically, that the distinction between xenos and spectre becomes almost academic. The alien life forms known as enslavers are not well known, even to students of xenology, and in part this is because tales of them have often been dismissed as ghost stories. Enslavers are not born of the same physics as humans, but are a product of the empyrean – creatures of psychic energy that feed on the minds of unguarded psykers. Once they have a foothold in someone's mind they 'possess' them, eventually turning them into a gateway between our reality and the enslavers' unreality.

The possessed victim does not survive the process, their mind and flesh torn into a portal to the immaterium, but this is not the worst of the matter. Once the victim has become a gateway, countless more enslavers are free to pour into reality through the victim's dying body. In this way, whole communities and, I believe, whole worlds have been overtaken by the creatures.

From the scraps of information I have gleaned, it seems that the enslavers are so different from us in every way, that communicating with them would be utterly impossible. As a result, we have no idea why they are seeking a foothold in our galaxy. Whatever the reason, my studies indicate that there has been a marked rise in recorded incidents of enslaver possession.

Prior to my arrival at the Blackstone Fortress, I had no first-hand testimonies to support my theory that the enslavers are real, but during one of my earliest expeditions I heard a tale that chimed closely with everything I had already read on the subject.

*Despite the vast,
ineffable nature of the
Blackstone's vaults,
one often feels crushed
by claustrophobia as
the darkness presses in,
laden with threat.*



Isola, Grekh and I had found ourselves trapped on a broad ledge, with our backs to a bottomless drop and dozens of heavily armed cultists firing on us from the previous chamber. We had been pinned down for nearly an hour when a woman sauntered into the chamber and began gunning down the heretics with such a nonchalant air that they were quite thrown off guard. Isola, Grekh and I took the chance to charge back into the room and join the woman as she attacked the dazed heretics. Within a few seconds they were all dead, and the woman made to leave the chamber without even speaking to us. I managed to halt her and was quite taken aback by her demeanour. She seemed oddly cold, as though she had been sedated, and she showed absolutely no regard for her own safety. I managed to convince her to let us accompany her a little way and found out the reason for her odd behaviour.

The woman's name was Drumyn and she was obviously quite deranged, but she was eager enough to tell me of her past, and as she did so I was immediately reminded of the enslavers. Drumyn had no idea that was what she had experienced, but I was sure of it. She had once been an arms smuggler, flying proscribed weaponry into the lower levels of Mepthora Hive on Volturmo VI.* By the standards of a hive-dweller she was wealthy and successful. Then she saw something that disturbed her so much she fled the hive:

The others had been acting weird for days. I could smell something was wrong. They were screwing me over. I knew it. I couldn't track any of them down, but I heard they were all out of their minds on something. They were cutting me out of the deal and I was furious. But when I managed to find one of them, Largo, I held off from blowing his brains out, hid and followed him at a distance, trying to understand where he was going. He looked drunk, stumbling and muttering as he went through the old Kablinka refinery and out past the hab-zones to where... Well, to where no one goes. Right at the edge of the hive. The air is so bad that close to the perimeter. I had never been so far east. I could hear the damned ash storms.

I started to get edgy and I half wanted to head back, but I was sure they were all screwing me over and I wanted to see how. We'd been together since we were kids. They were my only family.

Largo went up the steps of a ruined chapel and went inside. I dared not use a lumen and there were no lights, so once Largo went in the chapel I had to creep through the rubble in the dark. I was just at the bottom of the steps when light started to pour out the windows.

It wasn't... it wasn't normal light. Weak and bright at the same time. Pale, sickly and shining from the ruins in long lines. I crept closer and they were all in there – the whole gang, gathered in a circle. But as soon as I saw them I knew it wasn't what I thought. They weren't betraying me. Something had happened to them. Something bad. They were slumped and hunched, like they were dead on their feet.

Then I saw the source of the light. It was... I found it hard to look at it. I've seen some bad stuff, but these things were wrong in a way that hurt my head. Like pools of light, hanging over the gang like glowing sacks, just drifting in the air. They were kind of pear-shaped, a bit like massive ticks, or maybe embryos, but they had mandibles, or tentacles, or something like that dangling from their

** She announced this with no compunction whatsoever. She showed no interest in hiding her criminal past.*

faces. Well, they didn't really have faces. It was hard to make them out. I could see through them. Maybe they had an eye? It might have been a mouth. The tentacles were dangling from their heads. They were like creatures made of light, but the really awful thing, the thing that made me feel sick, was that they were feeding somehow on the gang. As the light sacks drifted and twitched, the figures below moved in time with them, like they were tied to them.

It was death. I was seeing death. I knew it straight away. I have never been more sure of anything. Those things were the daemons that wait for us in the dark. The things that come for us when it is our turn to die and carry us on to whatever lies beyond. I wanted to run away but I couldn't take my eyes off the scene. It was like a slow, grotesque dance with Largo and the others stumbling and jerking in time to the spirits.

Then, as I watched, it became even more awful. Largo and the others started to break apart. Like they were melting. But it wasn't just them. The air seemed to be ripping. And through the tear I could see more of the pale light. And more of those things, rushing forwards. Hundreds more.

It took me a few seconds to realise that the awful sound I could hear was me, screaming. The spirits turned in my direction and one of them rushed across the chapel towards me.

I turned and sprinted into the darkness, but as I ran, I felt the light enter my head. It was like fire, filling my skull. I could feel it taking over my limbs, slowing me down, commanding me to halt.

And then, by dumb luck, I fell. I fell from a gantry in the dark and dropped thirty, maybe forty feet. I should have died, but I landed in ash.

I could see the spirit, far above, watching me, but it was no longer in my mind. I must have passed beyond its reach. So I ran again. And never looked back. I bought passage off-world and headed west.

Once Drumyn had told her story she stared at me, as though willing me to contradict her, but I simply asked her what she hoped to achieve by being on the Blackstone. She told me she had escaped death and now nothing could touch her. She meant to make a vast fortune on the Blackstone and then head to Terra, where she would live like a queen. I was about to ask her more, when she strode off into the darkness, ignoring my calls for her to halt.



The Rightful Primacy of Man

The stars are ours to rule. We are duty-bound to prosecute the God-Emperor's will, subjugating and destroying those who would oppose it. This, at least, we are taught. As children, kneeling before the altars and shrines of the Adeptus Ministorum, we learn to believe without question, to hate without cause. And to the untutored masses, or our brave *Militarum* legions, blind faith is enough. When pitted against rapacious horrors, our rough-hewn soldiers and citizenry need unequivocal facts.

However, for those scarce few of us who have read and travelled widely, another picture starts to appear. The truth is not so simple. There *are* monsters in the heavens waiting to devour us, but there are also species whose wisdom, subtlety and learning outstrip our own. For every mindless beast, there are creatures who have built proud civilisations, developed advanced technologies and produced works of art so profound they would move even the most determined xenophobe to tears. What then must the learned scholar believe? Once one hears the ancient wisdom of the aeldari, or beholds the elegant cities of the iasps or the sleek, ingenious weaponry of the t'au, questions inevitably arise. How can we be *sure* the galaxy will remain under our dominion?

In the first year of my travels, I visited many sites in the Segmentum Solar, exploring places I had only ever read about. To the galactic east of Gathalamor lies a shrine world by the name of Dehasch, and I fulfilled a long-held wish to visit the ruins of its famous temples. I spent several weeks on that mysterious, arid world, visiting such legendary sites of pilgrimage as the Carpella Mount and the Nimrood temple complex. On my final day I reached the ruins of a cathedrum called Cherosci. It was dawn as I approached its lofty mountaintop perch and, as the site is so remote and hard to reach, I was surprised to find that an elderly pilgrim was there before me, examining some of the ruined statuary.

Even at that time of day it was hot, and I offered the old man some water from my flask. He accepted with a smile and I asked him what he was looking at.

He showed me, beneath the boot of a crumbling saint, a crack in the flagstones, revealing a narrow crevasse at the centre of the ruins. He pointed out that beneath the upper layer of Imperial architecture, there were ruins of another kind. Intrigued, I dropped down into the hole and found that the cathedrum was built on an older site that looked to be of alien origin.

The pilgrim was clearly amused by my shock and suggested I look lower. I climbed down several feet and there, beneath the layer of alien ruins, were more, even older Imperial ruins. At the pilgrim's suggestion, I climbed lower still and found yet another form of rubble, this time from a different xenos civilisation. And finally, climbing as far as I dared, I found even more Imperial architecture from what must have been thousands of years ago.

For reasons I find hard to explain, the sight of that old rockcrete stirred a wave of emotion in me, and when I clambered back out of the hole, the pilgrim seemed to sense it. He placed a hand on my arm.

'We are hunted,' he said, his voice so hoarse with age I could barely hear him. 'But we are relentless.' He waved at the xenos ruins. 'Others will come. And others will go. But only we come back. Always. Whatever the odds. We are resolute. We will not fail.'

I spent the rest of the morning with the old pilgrim and he said much that impressed me, but it was those few, simple words that stayed with me. 'We are resolute. We will not fail.'

I have encountered species that are wiser, stronger and fiercer than us, but all of them, in their own way, have failed. The more I see, the surer I am of our purpose. If the galaxy is to be saved, it will be by our hand.



Galg

Adumminus sextus

I had read of galgs before arriving in the Western Reaches, but it was not until I encountered some on Precipice that I realised how widely misrepresented the species has been. In Camargo's atrocious rag, *De Morbis Xenoris*, he manages to confuse khoasps with kroot and vurls with ur-ghuls. Despite his claims of travelling the Imperium, I doubt Camargo ever left his library on Terra. And a very poorly stocked library it must have been, too. His inaccurate description of galgs as green, frog-like creatures has been quoted as fact so many times that galgs must doubt the veracity of their own reflections.

I recently encountered galgs in Precipice's drinking den, the Helmsman. The creatures were not at all frog-like, but they were certainly inhuman in appearance. In place of arms or legs, they had six tentacles that writhed as the galgs slumped in their seats. The creatures had no heads, but they did have clusters of what I assumed were optical appendages – they seemed to stare at us with them as we approached their table.

I was keen to interview the creatures so that I might correct some of the untruths propagated by *De Morbis Xenoris*, and Grekh surprised me again by revealing that he was able to communicate with them. The galgs had no mouths, but they produced a kind of whining moan as they moved their limbs, and it was oddly pleasant – a little like the sound of a glass harmonium. Incredibly, Grekh was able to answer in kind, opening his beak as wide as he could, tilting his head back and shaking the crest of spines that tops his head.

The galgs were excited to be addressed in their own tongue and, after exchanging what I assume were Grekh's clumsy equivalent of pleasantries, he was able to ask them some questions on my behalf.

The galgs told Grekh that they originate from a world called Adummin in the Ultima Segmentum, not far from the Eastern Fringe. They told Grekh that they lived in palaces built deep underground and illuminated by bioluminescent spores. The palaces are called *soums* and they are built under ceremonial mounds called *vathries*. The galgs believe that beneath their soums dwells a malevolent species called the maku, and if galgs do not lead worthy lives they will descend into the realm of the maku when they die.

The galgs described what seemed to be an idyllic world without war or need that had remained unchanged for many thousands of years, but they became excited again when they described how Adummin had been changed irrevocably by the arrival of the T'au Empire. Rather than 'wasting' their lives on idle pleasures and peaceful pursuits, the galg are now 'lucky' enough to have a place alongside the t'au in a great project to civilise and protect the Ultima Segmentum. Their excitement seemed baffling to me. They had been dragged from a peaceful idyll into a war that was nothing to do with them, and they seemed ecstatic about it. But this is not the first time I have heard such tales.*

* See my notes on the T'au Empire.

I had more questions ready for Grekh to ask, when the galgs' mood soured. They suddenly launched themselves at Grekh and began trying to strangle him. One drew a gun-like weapon and their gentle, musical whine became an atonal scream.

Firing weapons on Precipice, especially somewhere as visible as the Helmsman, can lead to exile or even execution, so things could have gone badly for us. Fortunately, several nearby drinkers stepped in to help me free Grekh, while another snatched the galg's gun.

The galgs stormed out and, once the crowd had dispersed, I asked Grekh if he knew what had enraged them. He shook his head and his tone was as neutral as ever. 'They asked me how I learned their language. I explained that it was by eating their captain.' Enlightenment flickered in his eyes. 'I don't think they knew he had died.'



Khrove Marauders

Binomial nomenclature unknown

What greater, more fundamental fear could there be than the fear of being consumed? Beneath our veneer of civilisation we, all of us, have the same visceral dread of rending claws and violent death. The khrove are an advanced species, capable of warp travel in their fleets of 'web-ships', and well armed enough to have defeated many Imperial fleets. They even made a stand against the Emperor's mighty Adeptus Astartes, using psychically charged weapons known as warp-glamours or ether-blades. But their goal is as simple as a ravaging horde like the tyranids. They have come for food, nothing else. I had already read much about the khrove from Wolfenbüttel's *Xenographia Universalis*, but while on Precipice I learned of a man named Baldaris who had boasted of escaping from a khrove-infested world. I had my attaché, Isola, track him down and offer him payment for an interview. He was happy to oblige:



To be honest, I don't like thinking about it much. I don't have much option when I'm trying to sleep, but when I'm awake I can at least shut it out. But, for the amount you're offering, I'll face another nightmare.

Xati had been attacked before, of course. But the Astrian Ninth are based in Morrium Central and no one or nothing has ever got past them. Until the khraive. No one saw them land but they flooded through every city and citadel in a week. It was a massacre. Or at least that's what I thought until I was rounded up with all the others. Then I realised that they were only killing the *Militarum* troops. Everyone else was kept alive and herded like cattle into the old mines near Budor refinery. They locked us in there and left us in the dark, and, well, you can imagine the panic. There were ugly scenes, Captain Draik. People clawing over each other trying to get out. People crushed. People fighting and killing. And all in the dark of the mine. That's what I see in my nightmares.

Then it got worse. I didn't think it could, but it got worse. The khraive came back, carrying those weird guns and swords. They were bigger than men and powerful-looking, but it was their faces that chilled me. Like huge, carnivorous bats. Some of them even had wings. Anyway, they took about a dozen people and left food and water for the rest of us. The next day they came back and took some more people. No one they took ever came back, but we had no idea what they'd done with them. Although, I suppose we did have an idea. Those things are monsters, Captain Draik. Deep down, we all knew it. We knew why they were keeping us fed. Keeping us in storage. It was a damned larder. They were keeping us until they wanted to eat us.

A few of us decided we had to try something. Most people were too panicked to think, but me and a few others decided we'd rather die trying to get out than wait to be butchered. We found some old mine equipment and got ready for the next visit.

It was a farce. We tried to get out but it was a joke. It would have been funny if it wasn't so horrific. They had these weird guns that shot splinters of metal. They don't kill on impact, you understand; they stick your insides then melt your innards, until your brains run out your ears. Like being cooked from the inside. Only thing is, the one that hit me didn't work. I lay there, covered in smoking corpses, waiting to die. But I didn't. And by this point everyone in the mine was trying to follow our lead. The idiots. They had just seen what a mess we made of it and then they decided to copy us. The khraive gunned them down but there were so many people they began to get driven back by the sheer volume. So I took my chance. I shoved off the bodies, ran down an abandoned transitway and kept going until I reached the coast. I nearly died sailing across the Thessle Straits, but when I got to the coast I was in time to get the last ship off-world.

Disturbing as it is, his account marries neatly with the facts in the *Xenographia Universalis*. I have since researched the world of Xati and found it expunged from all Imperial records.

Khymerae

Panthera somnium

In Tencin's *Historia Empyrealium* there are several mentions of skinless, skull-headed, quadrupedal xenos called khymerae. They are described as terrifying and resembling huge, flayed felinids, but other than that they are an enigma. I have endeavoured to learn more but my research is constantly stymied by the mystical, supernatural nature of the source material. Khymerae are habitually described as 'spirit creatures' or 'monsters born of nightmares' and I have yet to find an accurate, scientific definition. The tale below is a typical example of the vague, confusing references I have unearthed.

A Militarum Guardsman named Captain Amordica had returned to his regiment after several years' absence, having been presumed long dead, and upon reaching the regimental HQ he displayed all the signs of a soldier who had been pushed beyond the limits of his reason. He attacked anyone who approached him, badly injuring several of his fellow officers. It was with sadness that his comrades had Amordica taken away to the sanatorium, where he remained locked in a kind of mania.

I shall transcribe the chirurgeon's notes verbatim:



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Day one:

I believe one cause of the patient's psychosis may simply be his refusal to sleep. He tells me it has been three days since he last slept and, from his haggard face and general air of manic confusion, I am inclined to believe him. At the suggestion of a sedative he became very distressed, thrashing in his restraints, so I have decided to let nature take its course. I will be surprised if he can stay awake another night, and sleep is a great healer. Let us see what tomorrow brings.

Day two:

I was surprised to find that the patient had still not slept. He was even more erratic and confused. When I asked him to explain his aversion to sleep, he screamed about something called 'Commorrans'. He said they had planted nightmares in his head and sent him home so that, once he slept, the nightmares would escape and kill everyone. He begged me to give him stimulants so that he could stay awake longer, or to kill him before he fell asleep. I asked him to see sense and consider how it could be possible to plant nightmares in someone else's head. He said the Commorrans dragged nightmares from a place called the ether sea and then used them as weapons.

His delusion was very detailed. He described the nightmares as spirit creatures, like great cats that had been flayed, leaving the muscles and cartilage exposed. He said that, in place of a head, these monsters had elongated, bleached skulls crowded with multiple eye sockets, and on their backs and flanks they had tentacles and claws. He screamed this description at me, demanding that I believe his claim that these monsters (he called them *khymerae*) were in his mind, waiting for him to sleep so they could be birthed by his nightmares. I wished him goodnight and left, sure that he must be about to finally sleep.

Day three:

To my amazement, the patient had still managed to evade sleep. He screamed constantly for some kind of tonic to keep him awake, but I could get no other sense out of him. In his cries I discerned the words *Commorrans* and *khymerae*, but the rest was howls and screeches. Seeing there was nothing to be done, I decided to give him one last chance to sleep naturally. If I returned the next morning to find him awake I would be forced to sedate him, however distressing he found it.

The notes end there. I cannot help but wonder if the captain may have been possessed in some way, rather than insane. His description of the *khymerae* tallies with the summary given in the *Historia Empyrealium*. Could it be that the captain was telling the truth about the creatures in his dreams? Could they truly exist? If so, it is chilling to consider how many other poor souls are currently locked in asylums, dismissed as lunatics and left to rot while trying desperately to warn us of a dreadful, xenos threat.

Medusae

Aetherzoa parasitus

In the pages of Tencin's *Historia Empyrearium* there is a chapter detailing warp entities Tencin labels as 'aethersites'. These are parasitic emanations that enter the bodies of living beings and inhabit them, often growing or reproducing in the flesh of the host, but not always devouring them. Some of these beings have adapted to inhabit another organism for prolonged periods. Tencin gives many disturbing examples* but there is one aethersite I would like to describe in more detail as I have a suspicion I have had personal experience of it.

Tencin describes the warp entities known as medusae in great detail, and even provides an illustration. They inhabit a realm outside of our own reality – a parallel universe called the webway that Tencin claims is a kind of passage through the warp, used by the aeldari races.** The medusae resemble disembodied brains that trail tentacles and other appendages that resemble spinal columns. They use these 'limbs' to attach themselves to the head of their victim but, unlike the enslavers I described earlier, their presence does not necessarily destroy their host. They manipulate their victim like a puppet master, but the host is still sentient, and if the medusae is removed they will recall all that has happened during their 'possession' with absolute clarity. In fact, Tencin states that those who have survived the attentions of medusae claim to have experienced a lucidity unlike anything they have ever known, specifically with regard to emotions. People have even felt bereft once the parasite has been removed, finding that the world seems grey and neutered in its absence.

I was immediately drawn to this description of former hosts pining for the vivid insights they gained from their parasite. It is funny how a single word can cast us back through the decades to a memory that has lain hidden. As I read the word 'neutered' in the *Historia Empyrearium* I recalled a childhood memory of dining in one of my father's palaces on Terra. It was a special occasion of some kind, a festival perhaps, and I had been allowed to join the adults in one of the great dining halls. I remember being captivated by the sight of so many nobles and heroes of the Imperium. Young as I was, I swore that one day I would be as august and proud as my father's guests. There was only one amongst them that seemed unimpressive. He was a hunched, wasted figure, too frail to fill his formal attire, and where the other guests spoke in strident tones, this man muttered and obfuscated, barely seeming to follow the conversation. I was near enough to hear some of his words and I recall him saying that, for him, the world had lost its lustre, that it seemed neutered. Later that evening, as I was ushered to bed by the servants, I passed him and noticed a peculiar



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arrangement of scars around his face and neck, as though his skin had been punctured several times. Later, I asked the servants why my father would entertain such an unimposing man. The servants laughed at my naiveté, explaining that the man was Dragomel, one of Terra's most beloved versifiers. He only wrote poems for a single year, they told me, but every one of them had the power to bring readers to tears. They were such a vivid insight into the human condition that Dragomel had been draped in awards and titles, even though, since that year, he had never been able to write again.

Perhaps it is an absurd fancy, but I cannot shake the idea that Dragomel's unusual artistic vision might have stemmed from an encounter with a medusae. The puncture wounds on his face correspond to the tentacles I see in Tencin's illustration, and his disconsolate words mirror those of the survivors Tencin describes. Could it be that artists might willingly submit to such a vile creature, so that they might produce greater works of art? The thought is staggering and repulsive, but I cannot rid myself of it.

** Such as the celeja, a winged, beetle-like being that lives inside its host's bloodstream for many years, occasionally visible as a swelling that moves beneath the skin. Only when the celeja has absorbed enough genetic information, does it send its victim into a catatonic state. The celeja then excretes a silke-like material through the host's pores that hardens into a cocoon. A few days later, the celeja emerges from the cocoon transformed into a perfect likeness of its host, who is left behind as a lifeless husk. The celeja then masquerades as the deceased, identical in every regard, working to some agenda that only it understands.*

*** But not, according to Tencin, created by them. She talks of a prehistoric species called the Old Lords or Old Kings, whom the aeldari describe as the long-dead masters of the webway. Whether these Old Kings created the webway or simply discovered it, Tencin is unsure.*



Genestealer

Corporaptor hominis

The vicious apex predators known as genestealers have been sighted on the hulks of abandoned ships and, if the rumours are true, in the shadiest corners of some Imperial cities. They are vaguely humanoid in appearance, but hunched and four-armed with a grotesquely elongated skull and an insect-like carapace that covers much of their body. In place of hands they have lethally sharp claws capable of cutting through almost anything. This makes them particularly dangerous at close quarters, able to use their forelimbs to scythe through even the blessed ceramite armour of the Adeptus Astartes.

I have been fortunate enough to avoid close contact with these feared killers, and the reports I have obtained make no clear reference to the genestealers' motivations. They attack in a frenzy, like any other wild beast, but some reports describe them as wearing manufactured armour. My instinct is that this is an error, symptomatic of the terrifying nature of genestealer encounters. From the sketches and pict captures I have procured, it seems to me that the creatures' carapace could easily be mistaken for battleplate.

When a creature is too savage to be observed with ease, one inaccuracy tends to beget another, and then another and so on, until an entire edifice of misinformation is built on a foundation of untruth. In the case of the genestealers, their very name is a misnomer. Several xenologists have posited the absurd theory of genestealer hybrids that are an unholy crossbreed of xenos and human. No reputable scholar would put their name to such a ridiculous (and deeply heretical) claim, of course, but we must be ever on our guard against the kind of rumour and propaganda that seeks to imply the human form is less than divine.





88.

T'au

Of all the threats arrayed against us, perhaps the most dangerous is that of an enticing ideology. As Lord Commander Khartum once said, 'The greatest generals win before a shot has been fired.' For thousands of years, humankind has endured and grown, bringing order where there was disorder, becoming a bulwark against the madness beyond the stars. And the bedrock of our success is the knowledge that we all have a role to play, from the humble worker in the processing plant, to the omniscient Navigator in the sanctum of a battle cruiser. We are all essential, in our own way, as long as we understand our station in life. Humanity is an edifice that will remain unbroken if cemented by faith. But there are some xenospecies so subtle and treacherous that they gnaw away at that faith, not through outright war or plagues of predatory beasts, but by promising something different; something better.

The t'au are, by the standards of the Imperium, newcomers to the galactic stage. They were first encountered by our explorer fleets only a few thousand years ago and, in truth, they occupy such a small part of the galaxy, on the Eastern Fringe of the Ultima Segmentum, that an Imperial Navy fleet will have no difficulty in destroying the species when resources finally permit it. I include them here not because I consider them a great threat in themselves, but as an example of the kinds of menace that can slip under our defences if we are not vigilant.

The t'au have conquered several human worlds, not through the use of firepower – although t'au weaponry is unusually advanced – but by perverting the natural human instinct to play a vital role in something greater than themselves. The t'au speak of a manifest destiny to spread enlightenment and peace across the stars. Enlightenment and peace! What could be viler than to convince simple-minded folk that there is enlightenment and peace to found in this desperate age? But entire worlds have fallen for this deceit and swallowed the t'au mantra of the 'greater good', believing that by embracing the rule – for it *is* rule – of the t'au, they might one day find peace. The idea is intoxicating, dangerous and utterly untrue.

The T'au Empire employs various xenospecies (kroot, galgs, vespids, etc.) as mercenaries, but here I shall describe the 'master' species. The race is not truly a collection of distinct subspecies, even though the morphological variety makes it appear so, but each physical 'type' does seem to fulfil a very specific role in t'au society.

When unarmoured, t'au are humanoids with blue-grey skin and cloven hooves in place of feet. It is my belief that they are descended from a form of bovid. Their skin has a leathery texture that reminds me of animal hides, and when in close proximity to a t'au I have often sensed a bitter aroma, similar to the smell of spoiled milk that emanates from ruminants.* They are shorter and less powerful than an average human, and as a result they eschew close combat, preferring to attack their enemies from a distance using highly accurate plasma and projectile weapons.

** I find it amusing to think that Grekh, who regularly derides me for 'diluting my essence by consuming timid creatures', belongs to a species that serves the t'au, beings who might be descended from a form of cattle.*

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The soldiers of the t'au are larger and more powerfully built than the other racial types – Grekh tells me they are the t'au who are descended from tribal hunters. Their devotion to their masters is fanatical and I doubt many of them live to see old age. Some wear mechanised wargear similar, in concept at least, to the power armour worn by our own Adeptus Astartes. These suits of armour vary massively in size. Some are not much bigger than a man, but I have seen others that turn wearers into towering goliaths laden with heavy weapons capable of destroying a rockcrete fortress.

I spent some time amongst the t'au civilian classes when I was employed as an ambassador to broker trading rights through the Tarzus Trench.* During that time I observed some of the types of t'au that do not reach the front lines of battle and have not been seen by many outside of their own kind. I made several sketches of t'au who were shorter and broader than the warrior breed. They wore plain, utilitarian clothing, and whenever I managed to catch sight of them they seemed to be engaged in artisanal tasks and works of engineering. I surmise that it is these stockier, sturdy-looking t'au who produce the gleaming cities and efficient war engines that make such an impression on our more gullible citizens. In sharp contrast, I also observed many t'au pilots, and they were all far taller and thinner than their kin. They, in particular, look so distinct from the other t'au that it is hard to believe they belong to the same species.

The ambassador I dealt with seemed of yet another breed. He was slender and refined in appearance, and the conversation I had with him was infuriating. I spent a pleasant hour with him, feeling as though I was making the most elegant, decisive points and leaving the t'au envoy with no doubt about who was in charge of the situation. His charming, flattering answers convinced me that I was making a deep impression on him. Then, once I was alone again, I played the conversation back over in my mind and realised that I had explained far more of House Draik's workings, history and plans than I would have wished, and that the t'au ambassador, while seeming to say a great deal, had actually revealed nothing. I have negotiated with a host of diplomats, both human and otherwise, and have never made such a fool of myself before. If I ever encounter another t'au ambassador I shall work to a carefully prepared script.

The t'au leader caste, known as ethereals, seem to fulfil a role that is a mixture of general and religious figurehead, inspiring absolute devotion. I witnessed the t'au victory parade on Cyrenica after they defeated the kibris berserker tribes.** There were several t'au leaders present and all of them were treated as demigods by the masked ranks of fire warriors. The parade snaked through

*** For a race that purports to promote peace, it was one of the most ostentatious displays of firepower I have ever seen.*

** I am well aware of the bloodbath that has consumed the Tarzus System. However, I would like to state, for the record, that the deal I struck with the t'au commander was approved by both sides and, when I left the system, there was no indication that the xenos intended to invade Orions Prime. It seems incredulous to me that Governor Annisus expects me to return my fee. Can I be held responsible for the deceit of a species famed for their duplicity?*



the ruined city, smoke still trailing from the kibris buildings only recently shelled by the t'au warriors. I was standing on a high balcony, invited to observe the triumphant display by a diplomat I had met a few months earlier. On the other side of the balcony were several senior t'au warriors.

The parade had nearly reached us when a large group of kibris berserkers* flooded up onto the transitway from a hidden subterranean chamber. They had no chance of survival, and I can only presume they had been left behind by the retreating kibris as a suicide squad with the express purpose of reaching the ethereals. The berserkers were armed with their barbed magnesium carbines and attacked with even more ferocity than I had seen before. They rushed towards the ceremonial vehicle carrying the t'au leaders and seemed on the point of reaching them.

Then the most extraordinary thing happened. Knowing the kibris would be impossible to kill until their berserk state wore off, the surrounding t'au warriors simply threw themselves in front of the magnesium rounds, soaking up volley after volley of the armour-piercing shots, even though it meant certain death. I watched in amazement as hundreds of the t'au warriors calmly laid down their lives for their leaders. Equally strange was the behaviour of the ethereals themselves. They viewed the massacre with a chilling disdain, as though barely registering the sacrifice that was being made on their behalf. Finally, whatever stimulant the berserkers were using wore off and their bodies registered the atrocious wounds they had sustained, dropping to the ground in bloody heaps. By the time the last kibris had died, I guessed that nearly five hundred t'au warriors had sacrificed themselves. And no one paid the fallen any heed, rushing instead to the t'au leaders, desperate to guide them to safety. I have seen devoted soldiers protect their senior officers before, but this was different. It seemed as though the t'au warriors were acting involuntarily. Seeing their deaths made me wonder if the expansion of the T'au Empire is really driven by their 'for the greater good' creed, or whether there is something more sinister at play.



* The kibris are a savage, humanoid xenospecies with physical attributes that suggest a canid ancestry. Their heads have long, bestial snouts and swept-back ears, and their canines are so long and sharp they have been known to tear through flak armour. I have only observed them from a distance, in battle, so I cannot comment on their culture or level of intellect, only that they are such shockingly savage combatants that I would presume they consume some kind of intoxicant beforehand.





The Indwelling Spirit

Grekh is usually very reticent about the cultural beliefs of his race. Occasionally, when he observes me eating the meat of a domesticated animal, he looks appalled and asks why I would dilute my character with the spirit of such a timorous creature. He clearly believes that we are quite literally what we eat. In his few moments of candour, I have heard him refer to the 'indwelling spirit' that resides in all sentient beings. He seems to believe that to grow stronger, he needs to form an intense bond with a strong animal, which he can only do by consuming its essence. If he wishes to become more sagacious, he needs to consume the mind of a cunning creature. And if he needs to understand a place, he needs to devour a being that has experience of that place.

He is feared and reviled on Precipice as a 'cannibal'. That term is clearly absurd. If Grekh eats part of an ogryn* he is not being a cannibal, he is being a predator and, actually, I have only witnessed him eating beings that have already been killed, so he is more of a scavenger than a hunter. Clearly, his behaviour is repugnant to our sensibilities, but I have to admit he has surprised me many times as a result of his peculiar habits.

Most of the information I have gleaned about Grekh's beliefs and past – his description of Akchan-kur's eyries, for example – came about as a result of a peculiar episode on the Blackstone Fortress. Grekh, Isola and I had been returning to the *Vanguard* when we were attacked by a spindle drone. They are vicious, fast-moving machines that have a nasty habit of slicing up anything that is too slow to evade them, but the three of us managed to disable it and Grekh landed a killing blow with the curved blade mounted on the barrel of his rifle.

As Isola and I discussed which exit to take from the chamber (I confess, we were lost), Grekh examined the wrecked drone. When one of the fortress' sentinels is disabled, the fortress reabsorbs the wreckage in a flurry of shifting planes and vertices. I presume this is a way to recycle the noctilith into new killing machines, or perhaps just to stop people like Grekh learning how they work. On this occasion, Grekh was so fast he managed to hack a piece of the metallo-organic compound away and, before the fragments vanished into the undulating floor, he caught a spray of dark, oil-like liquid on his blade.

Isola and I turned around at the sound of the shifting floor in time to see Grekh put the blade in his beak and wipe some of the liquid on his tongue.

I had seen him do far worse, but something about the liquid noctilith – if that's what it was – seemed to unhinge him. As Isola and I watched in shock, he began reeling around the large chamber, thudding against the black, faceted walls like a drunk. He also began talking furiously, in several different tongues. His gibberish included much talk of 'elders' and 'Akchan-Kur' and the 'perch of Nine Hawks'. We tried talking to him, but he was in such a state of mania that he did not hear. Like many chambers in the fortress, the room was littered with wreckage of previous expeditions – in this case, what looked to be the remains of an armoured groundcar. As Grekh staggered back and forth, he picked

** He did in fact eat a whole one, once. It was the first time I have seen him regret his appetite.*

up pieces of the burnt-out machinery and began arranging them near an exit. To my disbelief, he seemed to be making a kind of picture. I glanced at Isola and she shook her head, clearly as troubled by Grekh's behaviour as I was. It seemed that his appetite had finally got the better of him. Whatever the black oil had been, it seemed to have left him deranged.

I stepped closer to look at the shape Grekh was busily making from the wreckage. It looked a little like a face. His own, brutal, avian face perhaps? It was only then, as I saw his sanity fading, that I realised how much I had come to rely on his skills. I wondered whether I should try to subdue him and carry him back to the *Vanguard*. Perhaps he would recover his sanity once the oil had passed through his system.

At that moment, he grew calm again and stepped back from his handiwork. I was about to club him senseless when dozens of shapes rushed through the opening. I jumped back, drawing my pistol as I realised it was a pack of ur-ghuls. Before I could fire, however, the reason for Grekh's furious industry was revealed. As the ur-ghuls ran across the engine parts, reaching for us in a kill frenzy, the bits of machinery rose up around them like an enormous trap. Grekh had arranged the pieces so they were levered together and primed to snap shut under pressure.

The ur-ghuls howled in frustration and began tearing their way out of the trap, but we had plenty of time to gun them down before they broke free.

Grekh then nodded at me and casually sauntered out of the chamber in what we later learned was the direction of the *Vanguard*.



Fire Scorpion

Scorpionis baalum

There are alien life forms on the Blackstone Fortress that I have never encountered anywhere else, and there are also species present here that hitherto have only been seen on their home worlds. Magos Upsilon described noctilith as having magnet-like properties in relation to the warp, but it also seems to have drawn xenos creatures into its mass, like a collapsing star hauling celestial bodies into its death throes. Why should that be? Grekh and his ilk would say it is all part of the fortress' cosmic plan, which I refute entirely, but there must be some explanation for this unusually high concentration of life forms.

A good example is the Baalite scorpion or fire scorpion. It is fierce enough to warrant a detailed description in the *Xenographia Universalis*, but I have never heard any xenologist refer to it existing outside of the Baal System. Such a creature would not be able to conceive of space travel, much less achieve it.

Fire scorpions are similar in appearance and aggressive tendencies to a Terran scorpion, but far larger. Many are ten or eleven feet long and others grow to much greater sizes. Their thick, pitted carapace lends them a natural resistance to projectile weapons and they are armed with a lethal toxin that they can punch through armour via their barbed tail. Once the toxin enters the bloodstream it burns its victim from the inside out, cooking them alive. Although native to deserts and barren, hot climes, they seem to have the ability to adapt to alien environs; I know this for a fact as it was in the frigid, illogical gloom of the Blackstone Fortress that I had my first encounter with one of these Baalite monsters.

We were exploring a relatively stable region of the fortress named the Samnium Trench after a mercenary by the name of Salganus revealed that there was a completely intact xenos vessel of unknown origin at its southernmost extreme. His description convinced me the vessel was an indaaran* cenadensis ship, which would be incredible if true. He had no interest in xenological research and was happy to share the location with me, for a large fee, naturally.

Isola, Grekh and I, along with several members of the Draik House Guard, reached the end of the trench and sure enough, there, at the bottom of a deep fissure, was the ship. The fissure was geometrical, like a vast inverted pyramid, and our lumens struggled to pick out the craft, but I saw enough to recognise it as an indaaran vessel. At the edge of the drop, I found a piece of what looked like indaaran technology. It resembled an ivory sceptre with runes scored up the sides. My excitement at finding it was tempered by the fact that moving it appeared to have triggered a commotion. Having heard that fire scorpions have luminescent carapaces, I triggered an ultraviolet filter on my lumen and

* *The indaaran are a highly advanced xenospecies of which little is known. They attacked and defeated a large explorer fleet in the Ultima Segmentum with a display of firepower beyond anything in the Imperial Navy arsenal. The badly burned remains of an indaaran warrior was retrieved from one of the few vessels to survive the battle. The creature resembled a form of arthropod, similar to the trilobite fossils once found on Old Earth but larger than a full-grown grax.*

revealed a wave of serpentine shapes rushing up through the darkness towards us. As the first of the monsters came into view, we opened fire. Only I knew what they were, but everyone could see that they were not a welcoming committee.

The filter on my lumen picked them out clearly, but there was such a large swarm of the creatures that we could eventually do nothing but flee, firing over our shoulders as we dashed back down the Samnium Trench. It was only when we were halfway back that I spotted the mercenary, Salganus, who had told me about the ship. My optic implant is able to pierce the gloom in some chambers of the fortress, and while I could see him, he was unaware of me. The wretch was hiding above the trench, waiting for us to lead the fire scorpions out so he could raid the indaaran ship himself. He had lied about not having any interest in it.

I cursed him but did not reveal that I knew where he was, so I formulated a plan. I waved Isola and the others out of the trench but then used my knowledge of the area to double back, keeping just ahead of the scorpions as we clambered over ledges and slid down slopes. We took such a circuitous route that we managed to leave the scorpions behind, but Isola was tracking them on her cogitator's auspex array and we could see they were close on our heels. We played this game of cat and mouse, but I kept us in the region of the trench until I saw Salganus heading back to his ship, his men stumbling under the weight of their haul.

I consider myself an honourable man, but I will not be deceived by a rogue like Salganus. The man sent me to my death, so I considered him fair game. I told the others to follow my lead and walked out to meet

him. He was clearly shocked to see me, but I gave him no inkling

I had uncovered his treachery. I thanked him profusely for telling me of the ship and handed him the sceptre, saying I was happy to share one of our finds. He took it with a bemused expression and hurried off into the darkness with his men.

Then we climbed up on a ledge and waited. A few moments later the fire scorpions swarmed past, heading after Salganus, still pursuing the sceptre. I am pleased to say the man has not been seen on Precipice since.

93.





The Tales of Ebrach Rabula

During my youth, I read all six volumes of *Rabula's Tales*. In my opinion, they are amongst the greatest works of the imagination. Rabula was famous in his day as a raconteur and fabulist who could spin a story out of the simplest premise. However, since leaving Terra, I have been surprised to find that many of the goblins and sprites named by Rabula in his stories are the names of xenos species. Stranger still, it is not only the names that seem to match, but the nature and morphology of some of the creatures also seems to fit Rabula's descriptions. Here are a few examples:

Vorni

In the 'Tale of the Chalice', Lord Regius becomes immortal by taking a golden chalice and drinking a single drop of blood stolen from a warrior called Saint Vorni. The blood of Saint Vorni fills Regius with such power that he slaughters his foes, but he ends the story in thrall to Vorni who, it transpires, had sown the seeds of dissension against Lord Regius from the beginning, with the express purpose of possessing Regius and ruling through him.

In the Plian System, Space Marines of the Blood Angels Chapter waged a long and difficult campaign against a xenos race known as the vornni. The vornnic armies were eventually defeated, but many are believed to have escaped the system in warp-capable void ships. Local xenologists have published reports that describe the vornni as hulking, bipedal crustaceans, almost as tall as the Adeptus Astartes warriors that defeated them, and armed with powerful weapons called thermic accelerators.

The Blood Angels have been very reluctant to share any information with the wider Imperium about the campaign, or their reasons for seeking out the vornni in the first place. I did manage to unearth one scrap of information, however: the Blood Angels described the vornnic leaders as powerful psykers with the ability to possess the minds of their enemies.

Ujvar

In the 'Tale of Rags', King Ujvar is robbed of his throne and banished to the ash desert wearing nothing but rags. His soul is so noble that he gives his rags away, one by one, to help those he meets along the way, even though his skin burns as a result. At the culmination of the story it is revealed that the people he helped were all the God-Emperor in disguise. The Emperor replaces Ujvar's rags with a suit of indestructible auric warplate and grants King Ujvar a 'lightning sword' with which to strike down his usurpers. King Ujvar returns home 'bathed in holy wrath' and slaughters all those who betrayed him.

In the Zacca System, on the moon of Abarym, there is reported to be a race of revenants called the ujvar who have no flesh of their own, but clothe themselves in the skins of their defeated foes.

Vibis

In Rabula's 'Tale of the Serpent' there is an evil river snake called Uzal Vibis who tricks Prince Cabo to his death, trapping him in riverweed and leaving him to die. I have since learned that there is a race of sentient morays called the vibis who dwell on the world of Lugodor and are alleged to have built vast cities beneath the planet's many oceans. As yet, the Imperium has not found the resources to root out this threat so, for now at least, the vibis remain in ignorant bliss, unaware of the doom that hangs over them.



Byzaks

Rabula describes a bear with two heads called Byzak whose mood alternates depending on which head is facing forward. In the 'Tale of Lady Vetara', the eponymous protagonist tries to hack off the cruel head but finds that it was masquerading as the benign one. In the Durotorum Sector, I heard rumours of towering, clawed, hairy creatures called byzaks whose heads can rotate three hundred and sixty degrees and have a face on either side.

Maug

In the 'Tale of the Glutton', the greedy 'hero', Morsel Maug, is eventually destroyed by his gluttony, becoming a sentient lake of meat and wine that pleads desperately to be given human form again.

In the Vadrius System there have been several military engagements with a species known as the maug. Early reports from explorer fleets suggested that these amorphous, 'spirit-like' entities were most likely emanations of the warp, but later studies revealed them to be a liquid-based life form: sentient, able to communicate and even able to converse in a crude form of Low Gothic. They seemed capable of summoning weapons at will from their bodies and, once they had been declared Xenos Horrificus and attacked, the maug proved to be almost unkillable. The battle for the Vadrius System rages to this day and, knowing the myriad threats that now face the Imperium, I doubt there will be any resources available to tackle a small-scale threat such as the maug.



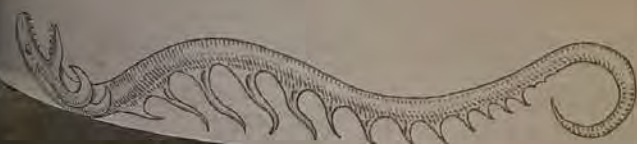
Therion

In the 'Tale of the Changeling', the young hero, Prince Elias, is robbed of his rightful throne by a sorcerer called Therion. Therion murders the current king, then swaps his appearance for Elias', forcing the real prince to flee his kingdom. Elias does not return for many years until he finds and smashes the enchanted mask Therion keeps in his hidden tower.

In the Actaeus System, Imperial Navy escorts were attacked by a mysterious race called the therion. At first they reported that they had the situation under control, but then they became confused by the unannounced arrival of other Imperial Navy vessels identical to their own. Shortly after that, all communication ceased and the ships were eventually reported as lost. Little else is recorded about this dangerous species beyond a few tantalising facts. They are described in an ancient Magos Biologis screed in this way:

Therions are large, blubbery bipeds with tusks that reach from their mouths to their waists. They have an innate psychic ability that enables them to assume the forms of other species. They have the ability to mask their void ships in a similar way.

I do not have the space to list all the species that seem to correspond to characters in Rabula's stories, but suffice it to say they are too numerous to be explained away as coincidence. There are few records of Rabula's life, but I suspect we would do well to find out what we can about him, even if it is just by rereading his stories in an attempt to decipher the codes and riddles contained within. It would also be fascinating to learn how he obtained such a wealth of knowledge. The scraps of biographical information we have make no mention of him ever leaving Terra, so how is it that his fictional creations seem to describe xenospecies that had yet to be discovered?



Oretti

There are many lessons to be learned from xenospecies, just not the ones they might wish to teach. By observing the follies of our foes we may ward ourselves against the same fate. Galactic empires take many forms but many meet the same end: invaded and torn down due to the arrogance and negligence of their rulers. And yet, hazardous though the process is, it is only through conquest that we may preserve our kind. There is no standing still. We must grow if we are to live. If we choose to rest, we can be sure that our enemies will not.

The oretti never had an empire to speak of. They were once masters of their own system and never sought to gain anything more. They are an insecto-hominid xenospecies, with elongated, multijointed limbs and a thick, leathery carapace. They are repulsive to look at, with hooves and a cluster of spider-like eyes, but in truth they are harmless. They have no interest in warfare and their weapons fire a weak particle beam that can be deflected by many forms of armour.

Ugly as they are, the oretti once had a proud civilisation on their paradisiacal home world. They built vast, web-like temples called *hanamets* that housed beautiful works of devotional art; they developed void ships capable of leaving their system. All of this they did without a view to subjugation or empire. Their creed was a peaceful one, and when they did encounter other species, they welcomed them with offers of trade and comradeship.

Perhaps, in another galaxy, there are places where the oretti might have survived and even flourished, gaining respect for their peaceable nature. But not here, not in this galaxy. The oretti home world was invaded by every passing fleet, their population decimated and their beautiful *hanamets* torn down.

Finally, seeing that they were close to extinction, the oretti fled their home world and took their few remaining ships to the stars. Now this once proud race are nothing but scavengers, dressed in rags and eking out their lives by salvaging what they can from abandoned death worlds.

In the *Xenographia Universalis* Wolfenbüttel quotes a rogue trader who claims to have encountered the last few survivors of this quickly dwindling race. Wolfenbüttel recounts how they bartered with the rogue trader, offering her precious metals they had salvaged from the ruins of Helorum Secundus. In exchange they wanted a route to a system in which they could evade persecution.

The rogue trader did exactly as duty dictates: she took the heavy metals and lied to the heretical xenos, sending them to their almost certain deaths in the nearby Messone Nebula. Had the oretti come to their revelation a few thousand years earlier, it might have been humanity pleading to them for aid rather than the other way round.

Since arriving in the Western Reaches, I have encountered a trader who claims to have seen aliens that seem very like Wolfenbüttel's description of the oretti, only they were heavily armed and far more warlike in demeanour. I wonder if this is just a coincidence or whether the orreti have finally repented their peaceful ways and belatedly learned their lesson: the only way to coexist is to conquer.



Barasonilash

The barasonilash are (or were?) four-armed bipeds with short legs, six eyes and a gill-like slit in place of a nose. From the sketches in the *Xenographia Universalis* they do not appear to be the most imposing of creatures and, as I can find no recent records of them, I am not entirely sure they still exist. However, if they do, they may be of more interest than their appearance would suggest.

I have in my possession several transcripts of aeldari myths and legends that claim to refer to wars and events of such antiquity that they even predate the origins of the aeldari themselves. In these prehistoric tales, there are mentions of the same barasonilash seers who have been recorded by some of our own explorer fleets. Can it be that the origins of this mysterious xenospecies predates every other species we know of?

I have considered that the creatures mentioned in aeldari myths may simply have the same name as the species encountered by the explorer fleets, but there is such a similarity between the descriptions that I am inclined to dismiss that idea. Here is the fragment of aeldari myth that mentions them. My attaché, Isola, has done her best to translate what was already an aeldari translation of a much older text, so you will have to excuse the confusing nature of the tale:



In the world of Zamukhan, there was an aged king called Sambre. His rule had been maintained by might and justice since the days of the Old Ones [Old Gods?], but as the eventide of his life washed closer, he saw his generals gathering at his bedside, wearing thin, lustreless smiles. Sambre had no fear of death, for he had seen that he was destined to reach the palaces of the Gabae and observe the cosmos from a throne in the stars. However, the more he looked at those rigid smiles, the more determined he became that none of his generals should rule in his place. Not one of them had challenged him while he had the strength to fight, and even now they were too cowardly to act against him.

As the days of his illness dragged on, Sambre began to dream of a tower on Zamukhan's second moon, Diamun. As his life faded, and the grins ate into him, Sambre's dreams of the tower grew more vivid and a sense of urgency gripped him. He called to his servants and demanded that they carry him to his drackar. He ordered the pilot to fly the drackar to the second moon and, to his amazement, there stood the tower from his dreams. Sambre bade his servants bear him through the ash to the foot of the tower, and there, waiting for him, was a monster called Barasonilash. It had four arms and six eyes, and when it spoke it used neither tongue nor language, but placed its thoughts in Sambre's mind.

Barasonilash told Sambre that his generals would destroy everything he had built and lead Zamukhan to ruin. Then it promised Sambre that, if he did its bidding, it would preserve his life for centuries and grow his kingdom tenfold. Sambre thought for a moment and was about to agree, when he saw that the monster wore the same hard smile as his generals. In that moment, he saw that Barasonilash was as cowardly as the generals and was trying to cheat its way to power. With his final portion of strength, Sambre fired the pistol that had served him for decades. His aim was true and the monster died, screaming curses in Sambre's mind.

Sambre's servants begged to return him to his drackar but he refused, and instead he climbed wearily to the top of the tower. Once there, he found a chair near the battlements and looked out across Diamun. As he breathed his last, he stared into the heavens and realised he had reached his throne in the stars.

Interview with Magos Daedalusus, Technoarcheologist

After my discussions with Magos Upsilon, I found my thoughts returning to his description of the material called pariah stone, or noctilith. When I found time between expeditions, I returned to his ship with a question that had been plaguing me since we had last spoken. He had previously told me that noctilith was so important and hazardous that the Martian Priesthood had been searching the galaxy for it. If that was the case, how hazardous was an entire star fort constructed of noctilith? The Blackstone is the size of a small planet. If pariah stone has some kind of psychic or etheric resonance, what threat did that pose?

I could tell by his expression that I had touched upon the crux of the matter, and he seemed on the brink of sharing more with me, but then he shook his head and muttered in binharic.

In truth, I had already deduced that the Blackstone is far more important than most of Precipice's inhabitants guess. They see it as a treasure trove or an armoury, but it is far more than that. The reticence of Magos Upsilon made me even more determined to understand what I was up against. I pressed him hard for an answer, reminding him of my pedigree and experience in xenological matters. He refused to say more on the matter but did finally relent enough to share a name with me. He revealed that one of his brethren, a technoarcheologist called Daedalusus, was currently on Precipice and knew more about Blackstone Fortresses than anyone else alive.

I tracked down the magos on his ship and, initially, found him as reticent as Upsilon. After several hours of delicate diplomacy, however, I finally managed to prise a few facts out of him. I recorded the conversation and have transcribed it here.



TRANSCRIPT

Captain Janus Draik: We both know the Blackstone Fortress is more than a drifting treasure trove. What is it that brought you here? What is the real danger of the place?

Daedalusus: You describe yourself as a xenologist, Captain Draik, but I'm sure you know that the the Ruinous Powers of the immaterium are the greatest threat facing mankind. When set against the unimaginable malice of warp entities, physical predators are no more than locusts.

Captain Janus Draik: But the fortress is not the warp. It is unpredictable and dangerous, but it is real. I have walked its halls. I have navigated its passageways. It exists.

Daedalusus: Blackstone Fortresses are not the warp, captain. But they are the key to the warp. Magos Alkhul described them as 'reality's quoin', by which he meant they are the galaxy's cornerstone, linking reality to unreality. Pushed one way, they will give us dominance; pushed the other, they will plunge us into entropy.

Captain Janus Draik: What do you mean by 'pushed one way'? How would one 'push' noctilith?

Daedalusus: You come from a distinguished line, captain, and I believe you are a man of honour, which is why I have said as much as I have, but there are matters I must not share. The most holy, sanctioned adepts of the Ommissiah are nearing the end of a long journey of discovery, but to share the fruits of our labour now, with our conclusions unclear, could spell disaster.

Captain Janus Draik: But you are racing against the clock, am I right? I sense urgency in your tone.

Daedalusus: You have seen the cultists on the Blackstone Fortress, captain. They, too, are embarked on a voyage of discovery. And should they reach their conclusions before we reach ours, the ramifications will be far greater than you can imagine. While we are still striving to lever the pariah stone to our will, their vile sorcery is already acting as a catalyst, transforming the polarity of the noctilith so that it will soon--'

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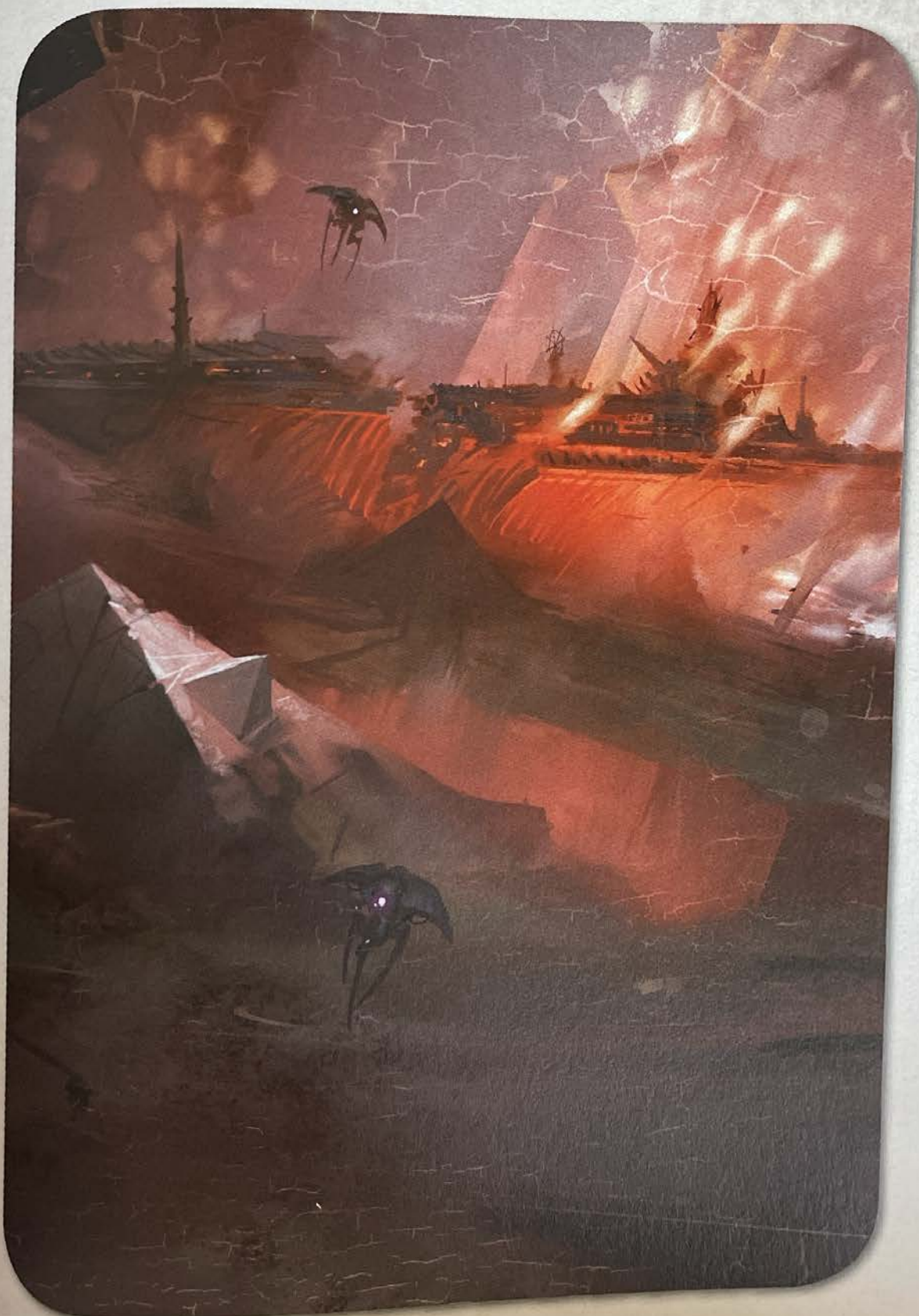
Official Signatures:

Captain J. Draik

Daedalusus

*Must devise a means of more effectively
translating lingua-technis. Never know what
those priests are saying about me behind my back!*

At that point in our conversation, the magos grew agitated and seemed annoyed with himself for saying as much as he had. It was enough to confirm my fears, though. Out here, on the westernmost borders of the galaxy, there is a force so strange and powerful that it will decide the fate of the entire Imperium. It cannot be mere coincidence that at this moment of great need, a Draik is at hand. There can only be one explanation: divine providence has brought me here.



Apocryphorum

Misinformation, rumour and misdirection have long been the enemies of xenology. It has dragged the science into disrepute and even endangered lives. The list of apocryphal tales is too long to be included here. There are a few recurring myths, however, that have been regurgitated so many times that I feel the need to quash them now and set the record straight. Any text that refers to the following species is at best ill-informed, and at worst deliberately misleading. The following xenospecies are entirely fictional and mentions of them should be given no credence.

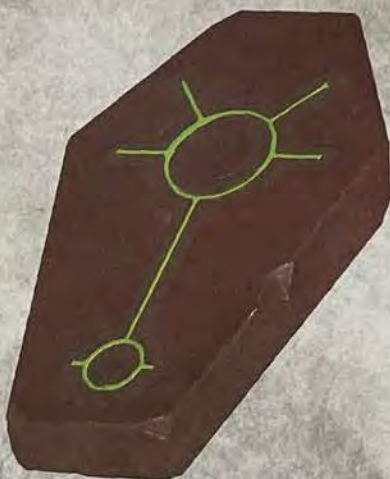
Undead Dynasties of the Silent King

On dozens of worlds I have encountered ridiculous tales of metal-clad revenants who dwell in tombs and periodically rise up to steal away living beings and murder them. These deathless warriors are claimed to be immortal (on account of already being dead) and equipped with objects of incredible technological advancement, gifted to them by the necromantic beings who originally delivered them from their mortal flesh.

Stories of the dead rising from their graves have, of course, been with humanity since the beginning of recorded history, but the credence given to these particular fantasies is dangerous. Fraudulent xenologists have invented such detailed stories of undead dynasties* that entire fleets have been deployed or redirected in an attempt to tackle a non-existent threat. With the Imperium so hard-pressed, we must do everything we can to ensure talk of these dynasties is ignored.

** Complete with an entire, hieroglyphic language which has been scored into the ruins of several large archaeological sites.*

97.



Kond Hounds

These winged semi-canids are a staple of myths right across the worlds of the Neldus Sector of Segmentum Obscuris. The most outlandish tales claim they are humanoid and sapient, with the capacity to produce void-faring ships and plasma weapons. These stories originate with the now discredited *Bibliothèque Xenologis*.

Phycene Skur

The skur are described as beautiful humanoids with serpentine tails and dazzling, mirrored armour. The nomads of Salhad tell of how, while praying in the desert, they saw the skur descend from the heavens, bathed in holy light. The skur then proceeded to butcher the local people, feeding hungrily on their intestines. In place of blood, they had fire, and when wounded they leaked flames. The nomads of Salhad indulge in week-long fasts and mainly ingest hallucinogens when they do eat, so it is incredible to me that their stories have ever been indulged as anything other than fantasy.

98.



Manal-jarr

Humanoid amphibians reputed to have mastered the art of time travel. I was surprised to find that members of the (usually well-informed) aeldari race have fallen for this particular hoax, and have spent valuable time and resources attempting to locate the mythical manal-jarr home world of Naub.

Talopus Slavers

These humanoid giants are alleged to be so fearsome in appearance that their enemies can rarely face them in battle without fleeing. In an attempt to garner glory, a rogue trader by the name of Polignan Syrt concocted an elaborate tale that triggered all the subsequent hysteria regarding the talopus. He boasted that he had slain one of the giants in a void battle just outside Messen IV and that he had retrieved its charred remains from the planet's surface. From the pict captures I have seen, it looks as though he has grafted together various body parts and then burned them to disguise his handiwork. As a result of his absurd claims, several Imperial Navy frigates were sent to Messen IV and were never heard from again. Syrt has also vanished, and I cannot help but think it is for the best.

Zutan Scribes

Sketches of zutan scribes show kraken-like leviathans with many tentacles. All the myths regarding the zutan refer to a race of scholars and archivists, seeking and hoarding information for a purpose known only to them. Several reputable xenologists have refuted claims that the zutan are a genuine xenospecies, suggesting that the tales originated in sightings of oversized octopodiformes.

Auct

A form of colossal annelid or leech that is described as 'swimming' through the void (see image opposite). Legends tell of how they encircle void ships and eventually crush them with their huge girth, before devouring the crew. On the world of Nab, the auct are worshipped as star gods. On midwinter's eve, locals dress themselves in sacks and float down rivers, singing drunken hymns to these entirely fictitious creatures.



Conclusion

I began this disquisition with the idea that the Blackstone Fortress could help me elucidate some lesser-known xenos threats and remove fallacies that have sprung up around others. The unusual situation on Precipice and on the fortress itself has certainly enabled me to do this. I stand by my claim that the *Liber Xenologis* will come to be known as the foremost work in this field.

However, the fortress has a peculiar habit of making one see things in an unexpected light, and as I reviewed the final passages of this book, I developed the disconcerting sense that my gaze has been fixed upon the wrong point. My discussions with the magi, Daedalus and Upsilon, have given me pause for thought. Their description of noctilith as an etheric fulcrum, levering reality either towards safety or into madness, is shocking. Especially if, as they believe, the entire Blackstone Fortress is constructed of the material. Heretical cults have now established many strongholds across the star fort, taming its protean nature and creating nodes of stability from which they can spread their reach. I have seen with my own eyes their cannibalistic rituals and occult rites, and I have also seen their effect. They are conquering the Blackstone Fortress. This point on which mankind's future hangs is being claimed in the name of false belief.



The warnings of the magi were enough to alert me to the truth, but there is another memory that keeps returning to haunt me. When I cannot sleep, I recall a chamber hidden in the depths of the Blackstone Fortress, quite unlike any I had seen before or have since. It resembled a huge clockwork mechanism, with mainsprings the size of void ships and cogs as big as landing platforms, all whirling around each other with such precision that they made no sound. Each of the circular plates had a vast gem at its centre. Black as pitch but glinting in the light of my lumen. I had fallen into the place, alone and unarmed, pursued by a wounded ambull. With the creature bounding after me, enraged by its injuries, I leapt and sprinted across the rotating discs, awed by their size and beauty.

I was a third of the way across the hall when I stumbled to a halt in shock, recognising the shape of the mechanism. It was a microcosm. A perfect recreation of the galaxy, each disc representing a system or nebula that I could recall from Departmento Cartographicae navigation charts. I was so stunned by the revelation that the ambull almost reached me before I came to my senses and continued my escape. Even then, fleeing for my life, I managed to locate the part of the microcosm that marked the Western Reaches. The gem at the centre of that particular disc matched the location of the Blackstone Fortress.

How I would have loved to examine that chamber in more detail. The microcosm described regions of the galaxy known to Imperial cartographers, but also areas we have yet to explore. But the furious ambull left me no time for such luxuries. I leapt from one plate to another and, after sliding down a ramp, found myself in another chamber. By the time I had eluded the ambull and tried to return to the microcosm, it was nowhere to be found, hidden by one of the fortress' inexplicable metamorphoses.

It was only weeks later, as I recalled the words of the magi and their descriptions of the fortress as a potential doomsday weapon, that a chilling thought struck me. The gemstone I saw in that chamber, the one representing the fortress, was one of dozens, perhaps hundreds, that adorned the microcosm.

I stand by my original claim: the Imperium will be destroyed if we do not grasp the nature of our xenos enemies; but I now see that the most pressing puzzle of all is the fortress itself. It is not merely a lens through which we might know our foe, it is the weapon that shall bring us either victory or defeat.

Captain J. Drak



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darius Hinks is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Blackstone Fortress*, *Blackstone Fortress: Ascension* and the accompanying audio drama *The Beast Inside*. He also wrote three novels in the Mephiston series: *Mephiston: Blood of Sanguinius*, *Mephiston: Revenant Crusade* and *Mephiston: City of Light*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novella *Sanctus*. His work for Age of Sigmar includes *Hammers of Sigmar*, *Warqueen* and the Gotrek Gurnisson novel *Ghoulslayer*. For Warhammer, he wrote *Warrior Priest*, which won the David Gemmell Morningstar Award for best newcomer, as well as the Orion trilogy, *Sigvald* and several novellas.

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
Black Library,
Games Workshop Ltd.,
Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Written by Darius Hinks.

Cover design by Micha McMahon.

Internal illustrations by: Alex Boyd, Alexander Mokhov, Artur Nakhodkin, Bobby Rebholz, Brynn Metheney, Catherine O'Connor, Christian Byrne, Dave Greco, David Gallagher, Derrick Chew, Dominik Oedinger, Evan Shipard, Francesca Baerald, Gabriel McAlpine, George Brad, Igor Sid, Jaime Martinez, John Michelbach, Karl Kopinski, Kevin Chin, Lewis Jones, Maria Zolotukhina, Mark Holmes, Marta Dettlaff, Mauro Belfiore, Maxim Kostin, Mharaid Morrison, Michael Manomivibul, Mikhail Savier, Miklós Ligeti, Nuala Kinrade, Oleg Bulakh, Paul Dainton, Phil Moss, Philipp A. Ulrich, Rezenenko Bogdan, Tiernen Trevallion, Tomas Duchek.

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A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 13: 978 1 78999 313 4

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Printed and bound in China.



The Imperium
is beset by horrors.
Xenospecies too numerous
to mention are bent on our
destruction. Only by naming
and studying these predators
does humanity stand any chance
of survival. And by circumstance, or
perhaps by divine will, it has fallen to
me, Captain Janus Draik, Rogue Trader
and first son of House Draik, to codify
the myriad threats aligned against us. In
the westernmost reaches of the galaxy I
have braved the nightmarish pits of the
Blackstone Fortress and the lawless dens
of its orbital platform, Precipice. Through
exploration of those treacherous
environs I have unearthed truths
hidden from even the most learned
Terran scholars. Here, in the
galaxy's first truly comprehensive
work of xenology, I have
delineated the terrifying
face of our foe.