



EYE OF THE STORM

"In the eye of the storm there lies truth, for it is better to perish in the cold depths of the void than to be cast down to the surface of some hateful orb, there to flounder worm-like and craven."

Ishmael the Ancient

One of countless shadow wars fought during the Age of Darkness which would only be known to history by the piecing together of scattered archival fragments, the war for the region to the galactic south-west of the warp phenomenon known as the Maelstrom was one fought far from the front lines and outside of the chain of command of either side. When word of the Horus Heresy reached the individual planetary rulers, most recoiled in horror at the Warmaster's base betrayal, yet none dared declare openly against him for they dreaded the gaze of Horus and knew that should they provoke his wrath, he could crush them out of hand. Several lonely voices denounced such vacillation as craven and dishonourable, imploring the Imperial Commanders of the region to stand together in common defiance of the Traitors, yet these voices were few and quickly silenced.

It was against this backdrop of dread and recrimination that the worlds of the region began to suffer a range of creeping horrors. It began with Astropaths reporting strange echoes upon the ætheric currents and quickly escalated as Navigators guiding merchant vessels along the region's outlying warp routes perceived an oncoming storm front that would be the doom of any foolish enough to attempt to sail its currents. At that time, none could know of the great and terrible rite that the Traitor Primarch Lorgar had enacted at Calth, that in the sacrificial murder of the Veridia star he had brought the Ruinstorm into being, a tempest of such scale and ferocity that the Imperium would be sundered. As the shock wave of the Ruinstorm struck the Pale Stars, terror and insanity erupted across the region's worlds. Entire choirs of Astropaths perished in hideous torment while dozens of vessels were lost to the Warp with thousands of souls cast to its hungry tides. The masses rose up in madness, either in blind anarchy or driven by ranting demagogues and wild-eyed preachers, who in retrospect must surely have bided their time for just such a moment. Religions, sects and cults cast down by the Imperial Truth decades before resurged in force and people whose grandsires had once prostrated themselves before heathen idols spontaneously resurrected the most terrible of practices.

Thus, as the light of Terra was smothered by the oncoming Ruinstorm, so entire swathes of the galaxy fell silent to the masters of the Imperium. The loyalties of the worlds of the Pale Stars remained unknown to Terra, lost to the galaxy-wide clamour of all-consuming

Labelled on ancient void charts as the Sea of Pallid Stars and known to many simply as the Pale Stars, the sickly blue-white orbs of this region were all born of a common stellar nursery and they cast a wan, baleful light upon their satellites. These systems were known by void-mariners to be rich in mineral resources, yet were regarded by some as ill-fortuned, as if birthed of some unfathomable cosmic woe.

It was the 771st Expeditionary Fleet that first charted the region, encountering numerous devolved human cultures and several xenos strains, which the attached XIXth Legion elements purged unto extinction. Later on in the Great Crusade, the 'Bloody' 13th Expeditionary Fleet passed through the area, leaving a red wake behind it that would seed in many of the populace a deep and abiding fear of the Legiones Astartes. At the time of the outbreak of Mankind's galactic civil war, the Pale Stars region had yet to ascend to the status of a sector, but its principal world —Phargos Rex— was host to a Terran Administration mission that was the de facto gubernatorial authority across several dozen developing and frontier sovereign domains.

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civil war. But for the coming of a great, yet unsung hero of the Imperium, the fate of the Pale Stars might have gone unremarked in the story of the great Horus Heresy; that warrior was Nathaniel Garro—the so-called 'Agentia Primus' of the Knights-Errant.

ENVOY OF TERRA

With the Ruinstorm surging across the galaxy, the War Council of Terra sought by any means to gauge the true scope of the unfolding calamity. Blinded as it was, the Council was desperate for other ways to measure the disposition of the Warmaster's hosts and the allegiances of planetary rulers. Astro-telepathic communication was by that point all but impossible, the Warp a howling cacophony that either drowned out their messages or corrupted their content in insidious ways. The only means of assaying the status and allegiance of the scattered worlds of the Imperium would be to despatch envoys and agents to do so in person, even though the Council knew that such a hazardous mission would be the deaths of countless loyal and devoted servants of Terra. One amongst these was Lorn Orpheus, a minor scion of the celebrated Orpheus dynasty of Rogue Traders Militant. Lorn was assigned the Pale Stars as his destination having gained some knowledge of the region while serving in the pathfinder flotillas that ranged ahead of the 771st Expeditionary Fleet during the initial Compliance campaign. The assignment might have been regarded by many as a death sentence, but Lorn was possessed of an adventurer's spirit wedded to a fierce instinct for survival, and saw in it a sure means of rapidly ascending the ranks of the Orpheus Dynasty.

CONVERGENCE

Even as Lorn Orpheus was readying his flotilla at the Luna shipyards, other forces were converging upon the Pale Stars. One was an alliance of Legiones Astartes who had, each for their own very different reasons, renounced or severed their ties to their sire-Legion and obscured their heraldry; the other served an equally shadowed cause, albeit one that most others associated with the Traitors—the Alpha Legion. Which faction came to the Pale Stars first is one detail amongst many now lost to history and none can tell if their appearances were linked or simply coincidental—most likely the tides of the unquiet Warp simply stranded both there at the same moment in time.

The first group would come to be named the 'Dark Brotherhood' by the peoples of the Pale Stars and later other regions, though none can tell if the group itself ever acknowledged or used this name. Very little is known for certain about the Dark Brotherhood, and even less of the circumstances of its formation, but it is clear that this band of what would become known as 'Blackshields' had formed around a warrior known as the 'Nemean Reaver', or simply 'the Nemean', a title likely referring to the impenetrable artificer-wrought armour he was said to wear in battle or to suggestions that he was preternaturally strong and impossible to slay. Of the origins of this war leader very little is certain, though some accounts claim he was a Terran scion of the 1st Legion and a veteran of the Third Rangdan Xenocide, a notion at least partially borne out by elements of the sparse personal heraldry he wore and by the terrible scars that marred his features. The Nemean was a taciturn and brooding warrior and leader,

but he bound the disparate warriors of the Dark Brotherhood into a coherent whole and moved quickly to establish a haven, a sovereign domain deep in the void beyond the spiral arms where he and his brethren might forge their own destiny in a galaxy fallen to insanity.

It was at the trinary star system known as the Eridayn Cataract that the Dark Brotherhood found refuge. A dense shroud of asteroids circled the system's three stellar bodies, concealing secrets and hazards that only the most accomplished of void masters could hope to navigate. The Dark Brotherhood were possessed of such individuals, their small fleet of light but fast and agile vessels crewed by a motley assortment of void-born and captained by Legiones Astartes who had seen service in some of the most arduous campaigns of the Great Crusade. Having established a secure base of operations deep within the asteroids, the Dark Brotherhood laid claim to the entire stellar realm and the boundless natural resources that orbited its three stars. Within months the Dark Brotherhood was aggressively defending its interests, ranging the surrounding warp routes to clear them of any foe that might contest their mastery, from human and xenos void pirates to patrol vessels sent out by the small Imperialis Armada squadron

stationed at Phargos Rex. In late 007.M31, the Brotherhood launched a sudden and overwhelming assault upon the nearby system of 771/51-6. There they brutally purged the human-xenos hybrid pirate clans that had preyed upon the region's outlying worlds since the time of Old Night, the Nemean executing their master by his own hand as an undisputable message to all of that abominable strain. The name of the Brotherhood's brooding reaver lord was soon known across a dozen and more systems, and whispers of his formative empire spread still further. Soon after this event came word of the arrival in the region of a Traitor Legiones Astartes strike force of the Alpha Legion, commanded by Strike Master Ijax, a bloody-handed veteran of the massacre at Isstvan V.

Strike Master Ijax had come to the Pale Stars as an emissary of the Traitor cause, his mission to ensure that the region's planetary rulers declared for the Warmaster. Instead of presenting himself directly at Phargos Rex, Ijax divided his command and despatched lieutenants as envoys across the region, each going before a planetary lord to deliver the Warmaster's missive. Each recipient was informed that their peers were being made the very same offer at the very same moment. In so doing, each ruler was compelled to reach their own decision without recourse

to their fellows, the Alpha Legion envoy standing before them feeding their darkest fears about what the Warmaster's fleets might have in mind for their world while simultaneously appealing to their most venal desires with insinuations of the favour they might earn upon declaring for the Warmaster. The presence of the Dark Brotherhood however forestalled immediate acquiescence. Upon learning of the Nemean and his pocket empire, Strike Master Ijax saw at once the necessity of neutralising this rival faction and an opportunity to seal the compact with the planetary rulers. If the governors would commit their own forces to his command in the joint endeavour of ridding the Pale Stars of the Dark Brotherhood, then the Warmaster would surely bless each ruling house with his unconstrained largesse. The rulers saw no choice but to comply.

SHADOW WAR

The compact sealed, Strike Master Ijax's sub-commanders assumed direct command of the planetary musters of a dozen worlds and their system defence flotillas. While most of these forces were but crudely equipped and barely-trained, the Alpha Legion war leaders soon remade them into highly effective armies, utilising each muster's unique knowledge of its home world and the particular skills



BLACKSHIELD MARAUDER LEGIONARY

UNKNOWN DESIGNATION

IRREGULAR LEGIONES ASTARTES FACTION –
CODIFIED THE 'DARK BROTHERHOOD'

PALE STARS WAR ZONE [OPTERA/DISSOLUTION/LARSA]

This unidentified Blackshield was active across the Pale Stars war zone between 008-010.M31. In the aftermath of the Alpha Legion's ambush of the Conclave of Optera, he fought across the Pale Stars as the Dark Brotherhood sought to consolidate control over the Eridayn Cataract. He was grievously wounded at Dissolution, where he fought as part of the infiltration force that counter-attacked an Alpha Legion strategic holdfast. After Dissolution he does not appear in any account for around a year, suggesting a prolonged period of recovery. When next witnessed in action, at Larsa, he led a squad of Blackshields against the Silver Guard of the Traitor-aligned governor of that world.

Battle Plate

The Blackshield is depicted here as he appeared at the Conclave of Optera, as part of the Nemean's retinue. He wears battle plate constituted from different Legiones Astartes armour marks, including some elements of Mark VI, which at that time was only just entering service across the Legions. Other elements of the armour are specific to what would later be retroactively classed as non-production Mark V, including the improvised externally-mounted power cabling on the chest and upper leg armour. This mixture of intermediate sub-patterns, field modifications and combining of divergent marks means that few examples of Mark V were exactly the same, especially when employed by the often highly idiosyncratic Blackshields. Note the skeletal spread-eagle icon, a common motif by which the Dark Brotherhood was known.



Presumed Icon of the
'Dark Brotherhood' Blackshield Faction



Ceramite bonding stud reinforcement

honed there. Having established a core of defensive armies on the key worlds, Ijax ordered his disparate hosts to press outwards into the Pale Stars, thousands of warriors transported in the holds of a motley armada of cargo vessels attended by Alpha Legion escort ships. The Strike Master's intent was to challenge the freedom of movement the Dark Brotherhood had enjoyed since coming to the region, and in so doing to precipitate an escalation in the conflict, dictated by his own strategic ends.

The Dark Brotherhood were far from idle as the Alpha Legion raised the planetary musters and when the Traitor-aligned fleets pressed into the void, they were immediately opposed by the Nemean's vessels. Across the warp routes of the Pale Stars, the black-hulled war ships of the Dark Brotherhood fell upon their foes, exacting a fearsome toll upon those who would oppose their mastery of the warp routes. The Traitor-aligned ships teemed with militia troops, their holds crowded way beyond capacity, and so the Blackshields' boarding actions were met with such a press of bodies that they were repulsed as often as they were successful. The Dark Brotherhood turned dozens of militia transports into charnel houses, driven by the twin goals of dissuading future attack while capturing what vessels might find employment in their own ragged fleet. The fighting was most intense where Dark Brotherhood and Alpha Legion warriors came face to face, on several occasions upon the burning bridge of some stricken vessel wracked by shuddering death throes. No quarter was given and none sought in such bitter confrontations, and countless Legionaries from both factions went to their deaths rather than concede defeat.

Dark Brotherhood and Alpha Legion war ships clashed across a dozen systems, the conflict spilling onto the surfaces of numerous worlds as the Traitor-aligned militias were deployed wherever their masters willed. The mortal hosts were mostly treated as less than cattle by Strike Master Ijax and his officers, their presence often serving as provocation to incite attack from the Nemean. The Blackshield lord was no fool however, matching the Alpha Legion's cunning with his own so that thousands-strong militia armies were often deployed to isolated regions at great effort to no effect, falling prey to hazardous local conditions or simply starving to death while the Dark Brotherhood committed their efforts elsewhere. At Larsa V for example, transport barques out of Phargos Rex deposited thirty

cohorts of the planetary muster into the rhodium dune seas, which dispersed across the ergs and established a chain of fortified strongpoints. The Dark Brotherhood declined to take the bait however and within a month the entire army of occupation had perished from exposure to the highly irradiated environment.

At Mirdath, three Dark Brotherhood vessels succeeded in bypassing the quasi-sentient out-system defence monitors protecting the Traitor Mechanicum forge-fane that had long orbited in the system's outer reaches. Striking directly for the fane's macro-provender chambers, a Dark Brotherhood boarding force captured and escaped with hundreds of tonnes of high value supplies. During their escape though, they encountered some manner of mechanical horror of whipping mechadendrites that slaughtered half their number before they could break clear. It would later be determined that this creature was the product of the Mirdath forge-fane's inner foundry, the holy-of-holies where unspeakable machine blasphemies had long lain dormant.

At the outlying system of Dissolution, the Alpha Legion envoy ordered the recall of an army of occupation that had been engaged in a decades-long campaign to eradicate a primitive, yet highly pernicious native xenos strain. As the garrison forces mustered in orbit, the long-suppressed xenos rose up against the remaining colonial holdings, achieving in a single day what the garrison had fought for decades to hold at bay, and tens of thousands of settlers were sacrificed to the primitive aliens' chthonic fire-gods. Even as the militia watched its world burn from orbit, the Dark Brotherhood struck and a fierce battle erupted across Dissolution near-space. Thousands of Traitor-aligned militia died as their transports were cast burning to the surface below, but the Nemean's forces suffered concomitant losses, for the Alpha Legion had used the garrison force as bait to draw the Blackshields into an ambush by their own vessels.

Though the war that erupted across the Pale Stars divided the belligerents between those aligned to the Warmaster and their enemies, the Dark Brotherhood fought not for Terra but for their own cause. That cause, so it would later be claimed, was simple survival, the Blackshields having determined that in a galaxy fallen to darkness, survival lay in the seizing of their own destiny. The Nemean was bitterly opposed to the Traitors' campaign to force the local commanders to

declare for the Warmaster, for them doing so was detrimental to his own ambitions of a safe haven for his kin. The populations of the worlds of the Pale Stars knew horror at the war the Traitors had brought to their worlds, but any who looked to the Nemean for deliverance would find only disappointment, the Dark Brotherhood unheeding of their suffering.

THE STORM RISES

With the coming of war to the Pale Stars, there soon followed yet another woe. The turbulence that had afflicted the Warp for so many months now flared into a raging tempest, fuelled, so it seems to us now given what we have learned of the Empyrean, by the shedding of so much blood among the Pale Stars. The planetary musters raised at the command of Strike Master Ijax had borne the brunt of the suffering, and the losses sustained by the Alpha Legion and Blackshields were insubstantial in comparison. As the deaths mounted in increments of many thousands, so the Warp grew ever more restive, immaterial tendrils groping in the darkness towards spilled blood like unseen predators about a drowning man. Later studies would conclude that this phenomenon had been brought about with deliberate intent, but others doubt that Strike Master Ijax was fully party to the fell wisdom possessed by Erebus of the Word Bearers and his peers.

As ever more blood was shed, Dissolution, Phargos Rex, Mirdath and Larsa were subsumed in a seething mass of what Navigators once referred to as Warp/realspace interface, but which now is known by far less mundane terminology. With the storms came further waves of insurrection and insanity more intense than any before, and if but a fraction of extant accounts from this period are to be afforded any credulity, things born of the Abyss now walked amongst Mankind. Nightmares made flesh tore themselves from the shadows and fell upon the peoples of a dozen worlds, and it is said that the streets ran with torrents of blood. Worse still, great swathes of the population of Phargos Rex reportedly joined the unnamed creatures and turned upon their fellows, rendered by warp-touched madness to atavistic cannibals and savage murderers.

WITNESS

It was to this region of blood-stained space that Lorn Orpheus finally came. His flotilla had traversed the tumultuous warp routes from Terra, through the outer marches of

the Segmentum Solar and across the depths of the Orion-Crux void. Fewer than half of the flotilla's vessels survived the passage through the Khymaran Drift, for here they encountered the leading edge of the Ruinstorm as it surged across the galaxy. The flotilla that at last translated into realspace at Phargos Rex bore scant resemblance to that which had departed Terra months earlier. Those vessels that survived were visibly wounded, their hulls scorched black by immaterial fires and their armoured flanks rent and buckled as if they had been caught in the grasping talons of some god-daemon of ancient myth. Limping in-system, it was immediately apparent from the flood of signals, both electromagnetic and astro-telepathic, that the Pale Stars were in the grip of some terrible woe. Among the numerous names and images repeated throughout this torrent of vox and psychic traffic was that of the Nemean, as if the peoples of the Pale Stars sought his protection and protection from him in equal measure.

The envoy of the Council of Terra knew that not only had the ancient tales of the horrors of Old Night been true, but those very horrors had returned. Funeral pyres the size of cities burned across the darkness of Phargos Rex's night side, while a pall of dense smoke obscured the terrors being inflicted upon the surface of the day side. Orpheus however had come too far and risked too much to turn tail and retreat back to Terra, if indeed a return voyage was even possible given the ever-rising intensity of the warp storms and the woeful state of his flotilla. The envoy resolved to travel to the surface and to determine if anything remained of the planetary government or the Terran administration mission that had been based there. But Orpheus was well aware of the risk he was taking, and so he prepared a message packet for Terra, to be carried through the warp storms upon the fastest vessel remaining to his flotilla.

The message that Lorn Orpheus composed for the Council of Terra was as full an accounting of the horrors that had consumed the Pale Stars as he was able to compose. He described the warp phenomena that had assailed his vessels as they braved the storms, of crewmen driven to rabid insanity and the bloodbath that had ensued. He spoke of the apparitions that had tormented them as they plied the turbulent Empyrean and which lingered still at the edges of vision even days after translation. He recounted something of the unfettered, impenetrable insanity that had drowned the vox channels and the flood

of pain and horror which the few surviving Astropaths were broadcasting far and wide. He concluded his message informing them that he intended to descend to the burning surface of Phargos Rex and to seek out any vestige of authority in an effort to fulfil his mission, and to learn the identity of the individual whose name and face appeared in so many communications—the Nemean.

DARK COMPLIANCE

It would be many weeks before Orpheus' message runner reached Terra, the fact that it survived the return voyage at all nothing short of a miracle. In the meantime the horrors that afflicted the Pale Stars intensified many times over. The void boiled as other-worldly energies burst across space, the skies above each planet ripped asunder in a livid display of seething insanity. The anarchy that Orpheus had encountered at Phargos Rex cascaded outwards and subsumed each and every world in the region, millions rising up and tearing down planetary governments before turning upon their own.

Ruling bodies were compelled to flee the rioting hordes and abandon any pretence of control, and many Imperial Commanders found their authority entirely reliant upon the support of the Alpha Legion. Across the worlds of the Pale Stars, Ijax's sub-commanders deployed Legion assets to defend the rulers from their own rebelling populations and, in short order, the Strike Master became the de facto power in the region, able to precipitate the downfall of entire planetary governments simply by withdrawing his forces and allowing the mobs to exact their bloodthirsty vengeance. Even those rulers not under siege by their own peoples were acutely aware that with their planetary defence forces directly controlled by the Alpha Legion, they were entirely reliant on Ijax for protection from the Dark Brotherhood.

At a stroke, the Pale Stars had fallen to the Traitor cause—compliance to the Warmaster's dark empire had been achieved.

ONE OF TWENTY

It might have been expected that the worlds of the Pale Stars would have been lost to the Imperium, as were so many other regions. The Ruinstorm now split the galaxy asunder and hundreds, even thousands of systems were drowned in blood or brutally crushed beneath the heel of Warmaster Horus, the Great Betrayer. Countless worlds were lost for all time, consumed in the raw stuff of

the Warp, their names to be struck from the stellar cartographs and their approaches seeded with navigational warning buoys. Warp travel became all but suicidal and astro-telepathic communication nigh impossible.

No doubt such a fate would indeed have befallen the Pale Stars were it not for the fact that not only did Orpheus' message runner somehow make it back to Terra, but one important detail in his message had caused it to be routed directly for the attention of Malcador the Sigillite, Regent of Terra and the second highest authority in the entire Imperium. That detail was the naming of the leader of the Dark Brotherhood.

The warrior dubbed the Nemean was already known to Malcador, for he was one of a score of Legionaries identified by the former Luna Wolf and member of the Crusader Host, Severian. The Sigillite's intent was to gather each of those named by Severian and muster them into a cadre of warriors directly under his control, a band he would dub the Knights-Errant. It fell to the most senior of these, the Agentia Primus Nathaniel Garro, to go forth into the galaxy and recruit all twenty to his master's cause. And thus Garro was dispatched to the Pale Stars, his mission to return with the leader of the Dark Brotherhood at his side that the Nemean might swear himself to the cause of Malcador the Sigillite.

THE COMING OF THE HERALD

At 017008.M31, a grey-hulled, dagger-prowed warp-sprinter named *Eusebeian Herald* plunged from the churning warp storms closing in upon the outlying system of Optera, a trail of rapidly dissolving warp-stuff forming a kilometres-long contrail in her wake. The *Herald* had been laid down at Saturn by the hands of the most skilled ship-wrights of that domain and utilised hybrid technologies jealously guarded by the Terrawatt Clans of Ancient Terra and denounced as heresy by the Martian Priesthood. Not only had she survived the tempest but she had made the journey in mere weeks and carried her passengers safely through the otherwise impenetrable Immaterial to the frontier of the Pale Stars. It was a voyage few would have dared and even fewer could have survived.

Aboard the *Eusebeian Herald* was a contingent of the Knights-Errant – Garro, formerly of the Death Guard, Zaven, once of the Emperor's Children, and Rubio, a scion of the Ultramarines. Each Legionary had been named by Severian and the Sigillite

had foreseen they would each prove vital in averting the fall of the Imperium and combating what he had prophesised would come in its aftermath. In the Dark Brotherhood and their mysterious leader, Malcador hoped to secure another weapon for his long, silent war against the darkness.

The Conclave of Optera

At Optera, Garro ordered the Astropath assigned to his mission to send forth a signal, its allegorical cipher imprint unique and composed for this specific circumstance. The message could only be understood by an Astropath bound to the service of the Legiones Astartes, and its precise content only deciphered by one whose loyalties lay truly with Terra. The message called for the recipients to gather at Optera and Garro chose as the meeting place a ruined, megalithic structure high atop a rocky plateau overlooking the cratered wastes of Optera IV. There were numerous risks inherent in the sending of such a message,

but in the Sigillite's view, still greater advantage to be won, and so the Astropath's mind-song went out across the storm-wracked reaches of the Pale Stars. Twenty days later, Garro convened his parley.

In the shadows of the cyclopean ruins of the ancient alien fane, Garro and his fellow Knights-Errant waited in silence as the churning skies were split by the contrails of a dozen gunships and landing craft of varying types. Each circled about the ruined fane several times before committing to land, and after an hour, the wide temple plaza had come to resemble the landing apron of a Legiones Astartes operating base, Garro, Zaven and Rubio standing impassively at its centre.

At the appointed time, a dozen assault ramps lowered and from each vessel a group of warriors emerged, some openly bearing Legion colours, others with heraldry deliberately obscured. If Garro and his

fellow Knights-Errant were at all taken aback by the Legion colours represented before them, they hid their surprise behind stony countenances or blank-faced battle helmets. In truth however, aside from the black clad reavers of the Dark Brotherhood, none could have anticipated the presence of Legionaries from two other Legions.

The first such group were clad in the distinctive red and gold of the Legiones Astartes Blood Angels, a Legion which had vanished almost to a man having been despatched to the far galactic east almost five years earlier and not heard of since. It was known that a small honour guard had been drawn by lots to remain on the Legion's home world of Baal, while the remainder mustered at the Nartaba System before proceeding to follow the deployment orders issued by the Warmaster some time before his betrayal had been revealed at Isstvan. Garro was stunned to see before him a captain of the Three Hundred Companies,

Nathaniel Garro,
the Agentia Primus



putting a lie to the tragedy of the supposed extinction of the IXth Legion and its beatific Primarch, the Angel Sanguinius.

The second group of warriors were clad in ivory-white battle plate, each a suit of Mark II Legiones Astartes power armour heavily modified by the Legion's artificers and bearing the lightning bolt icon of the Vth Legion—the White Scars. The status of the Vth was known to Garro, but he would not speak of such things openly, for now at least. The remainder of the Legiones Astartes who gathered beneath the towering columns of the xenos temple were a disparate band indeed. No two warriors wore exactly the same mark or pattern of armour nor carried the same class of weapon. In many cases their battle plate was a heterogeneous admixture of components clearly acquired from a wide range of sources, some elements entirely foreign even to Garro's experienced eye. The one feature common to each and every one of these warriors was the fact that their armour was uniformly black. Here and there however, micro fractures, scars and scuffs betrayed hints of older colours, from blood crimson to sea green, hinting at prior allegiances. Considering the panoply of gunmetal grey in which the Knights-Errant themselves were clad, Garro once again declined to pass comment on the strangers' appearance.

At last, the leader of each group stepped forward into the centre of the gathering and Garro did likewise, the four Legiones Astartes leaders removing their battle helmets so that they could address one another face to face, according to the ancient laws of war.

The leader of the Blood Angels declared himself battle-captain of the 121st Company of the Three Hundred, naming himself Serron. Garro knew that the 121st had failed to assemble at Nartaba and Serron proceeded to recount how the war ships bearing his command had been caught in a fierce warp storm and cast upon the turbulent currents of the Immaterium. Swept along helplessly for what the Blood Angels perceived as mere days, the vessels were ejected violently from the Warp on the fringes of the Maelstrom, which for no explicable reason had been stirred into a raging vortex that cast its baleful tides for hundreds of light years in all directions. The vessels of the 121st had fought valiantly to escape the currents of the Maelstrom and, according to Serron, detected Garro's astro-telepathic call as they traversed the Mirabala Straits. Though Serron's company had known great hardship during their voyage, for them the order to muster at

Nartaba had been issued mere weeks before—meanwhile, over four years had passed in the material universe.

The leader of the White Scars contingent was a cold-eyed warrior, his stony features marked by a web of intricately applied ritual scars. He named himself Nirun, leader of a band of five hundred or so Legionaries drawn from several different Legion sub-groups, known to the White Scars as '*Brotherhoods*'. Garro knew that the Brotherhoods of that Legion were far more to them than tactical divisions—each was a band of warriors so tightly knit that a Legionary could no more transfer between Brotherhoods than he could between Legions. The spectacle of a group of White Scars Legionaries drawn from different Brotherhoods was highly unusual, but Garro perceived an explanation in the warrior lodge tokens many of them bore. Every token carried the same symbol—the serrated beak of a Chogorian raptor. Nirun offered no explanation for his presence in the Pale Stars, and Garro did not seek one, for now at least.

The Shadowed Counsel

And then the leader of the Dark Brotherhood stepped forward and lowered the hood that had obscured his features. The stark light of Optera's sun revealed the warrior-leader's face as a mass of scars that twisted his mouth into a permanent scowl, his eyes jagged shards of black ice. Garro knew instantly that the Nemean was indeed the warrior he had been tasked with recruiting to the cause of Terra, but how he would do so given the presence of the remainder of the Dark Brotherhood as well as the Blood Angels and White Scars contingents was another matter entirely.

FULCRUM

Facing the three leaders gathered at the heart of the ruined xenos temple, their mustered hosts arrayed behind them, Garro began an address he hoped would stir the hearts of each and convince them to return at his side to Terra. Unsure of the extent of their knowledge of the disaster that the Warmaster had brought down upon the Imperium, he resolved to offer a true and complete account of events, knowing that in this matter above all others truth was his greatest ally. He spoke first of the events of Issvan III, eliciting a stunned denial from Captain Serron, followed by grim-faced and stoic acceptance of his words. When he spoke of the massacre at Issvan V, he noted a stirring in the ranks of the Dark Brotherhood, silenced at a stroke by the slightest gesture from their brooding

leader. He spoke of Loyalist and Traitor, terms that were anathema to many of those gathered before him and yet seemingly familiar to others. He described the desperate battles fought along the leading edge of the Warmaster's advance on Terra and the treachery that had been brought to bear on distant Calth, describing it in his own words, for unknown to all but Rubio and Zaven, Garro himself had witnessed the horrors that had unfolded in its immediate aftermath.

All of this the three Legiones Astartes war leaders heeded with little interruption, until at the last Garro reached the crux of his mission to the Pale Stars. The Sigillite had ordered him to recruit the leader known as the Nemean into the ranks of the Knights-Errant, but before him lay the opportunity to achieve so much more. And so the Agentia Primus invited all three leaders and their warriors to return with him to Terra and to serve the Emperor's Regent in the coming war.

His address complete, Garro stepped back to stand alongside his fellow Knights-Errant and await a response. Silence rang out for an age, before at last Captain Serron stepped forward. If it was true that Sanguinius was lost, Serron declared, his grief barely contained as he spoke, then the 121st Company had no place in the galaxy other than at the very forefront of war. Serron would bend knee to no other, he swore, instead stating that he and his warriors would go forth into the fires of war and seek out the foe wherever they might be found.

Garro nodded grimly, knowing from the cast of Serron's voice that the Blood Angel would consider no other path. With those words, Serron turned and departed, the Legionaries of the 121st not hesitating to follow him from the alien temple.

Next, the leader of the White Scars stepped forward to declare his position. His Primarch's wishes in this matter were unknown to him and until such time as he received orders from the Great Khan himself, Nirun would continue on his current path. What that path might be, he would not relate to the Agentia Primus nor any other, and with his refusal of Garro's offer Nirun led his warriors from the temple and was gone. At the last, the Agentia Primus and the Nemean faced each other in the centre of the cyclopean ruins, the wind that keened through the jagged marble columns the only sound. The Blackshield lord had but one question for Garro—what

of his sire? But before Garro could answer, a bright explosion blossomed in the sky far overhead, followed seconds later by the rolling thunder of an explosion—it was a sound that every warrior present had heard many times throughout his service. It was the sound of a space craft destroyed in low orbit by enemy fire. All eyes turned to the skies as debris arced downwards, each fragment as large as a gunship and trailing a churning black contrail behind. Moments later, the shout went up from the ranks of the Dark Brotherhood—a shout accusing the Knights-Errant of a betrayal as craven as any that Garro had laid at the Warmaster's feet. Weapons were drawn as curses echoed about the temple, and a second explosion rent the skies.

Garro's vox-link chimed in his ear and the captain of the *Eusebeian Herald* confirmed what he had already guessed. The Traitors must somehow have broken his Astropath's cipher, a feat that only the Alpha Legion could achieve. In an instant, chaos claimed the formerly solemn gathering. Blackshields bellowed in rage or denial, some at the skies, some at their brothers but the greater number at Garro and the other two Knights-Errant. It appeared in that instant that Garro's entire mission to the Pale Stars stood at the brink of failure, until the Nemean spread his arms wide to ward his fractious warriors back. Locking eyes with the Agentia Primus, the Nemean repeated his earlier demand – what of his sire?

Garro answered with truth—Terra had received no word from Lion El'Jonson, the Primarch of the 1st Legion. The Nemean responded with a solemn nod, but before he could address his band, a shouted curse went up from his warriors and gunfire split the air. The Dark Brotherhood fractured into rival groups and a vicious, close range fire fight erupted. What followed remains unknown, only that the meeting descended rapidly into armed conflict. Hard rounds and las blasts slammed into Garro as he withdrew, Rubio

and Zaven attempting to drag him into cover before the weight of weapons fire grew too heavy even for his artificer-wrought Mark VI battle plate. Garro hesitated, sensing a turning point and an opportunity. Detaching a teleport homer from his belt he locked eyes with the Nemean. The other warrior took one glance at the chaos behind him and then nodded grimly. Garro thumbed an activation rune. With a flare of light and the crump of displaced air, all four were gone, teleported to safety aboard the *Herald* even as the Knights-Errant vessel dove hard through the skies above.

THE BLOOD-STAINED STARS

In the aftermath of the Alpha Legion's ambush at Optera, a bloody and bitter shadow war erupted across the systems of the Pale Stars. The Dark Brotherhood carved their way across the region, slaughtering any force that stood in their way until they vanished into the Eridayn Cataract, not to be encountered again for an age. The Blood Angels under Captain Serron threw themselves into all-out conflict, as if consumed by the need to atone for the sin of their own survival. The 121st Company clashed with Alpha Legion forces deep in the tainted mines of Kyro IV, upon the inner moons of 771/58 and through the xenos-haunted mire-seas of Sidaiva. Serron's force was last seen at Psiom Zeta-1, where it broke suddenly and inexplicably from a battle they were undoubtedly winning and instigated a hasty warp jump along a vector that would have taken the small fleet broadly in the direction of the Segmentum Solar. History does not record for certain what became of the 121st, although rumours persist that at least some of the company's number were counted as present at the very climax of the great heresy.

Of the White Scars that Garro encountered at Optera, still less can be said for certain but one fact alone is known. Niron and his small force clashed with an Alpha Legion element under the direct command of Strike Master Ijax at Pharghos Rex, mere hours before the raging storms closed in upon the system and drowned it in the raw stuff of the Warp. That storm has yet to lift even now, and so the ultimate fate of both Legiones Astartes leaders remains beyond our knowledge. Though none know the reason why, the name of the White Scars leader is entered into the roll of honour of the House of Orpheus, hinting at some confluence of Nirun's fate with that of the envoy Lorn Orpheus.

All that remains then is to complete the account of Garro, Zaven, Rubio and the warrior they had come to the Pale Stars to recruit to the cause of Malcador the Sigillite. The Nemean would take his place among the twenty chosen warriors that Garro had been tasked by Malcador to gather, but that is a tale that has yet to be satisfactorily concluded. Some say that the Nemean mustered with the defenders of Terra and that he stood to the last upon the walls of the great palace as hell itself descended upon the birth world of Humanity. As with so many accounts of those final days of the Age of Darkness, the truth is hidden beneath a pall of ashes and the crushed bones of the greatest heroes of the shattered Imperium.

+Carta Imperialis:
Mare Stellum Pallidus
'The Sea of Pale Stars'+



Fief 771/38/qz

+II: Legio XIX fief+

Sidaiva

+Autochthonic Necrophage Clades+

Psion Zeta-1

+Extinct Pre-Imperium
Human Ruins+

Larsa

+II: Ur-grade
Resource World+

Mirdath

+Out-system Void Forge+

Kyro

+IV: Mining World+
+VI: Recidivist Enclaves+



Phargos Rex

+XX: Regional
Administratum Seat+

Optera

+IV: Devolved Technomad
Scavenger Clans+

771/47-9

+XI: Survivor population
spread across three satellites of
primary gas giant+

771/51-6

+VII: Void-pirate Haven+

771/50

The Eridayn
Cataract

+Macro Asteroid field
Orbiting Trinary System+

Dissolution

+V: Finalis Phase
Xenos purgation+

Key

Fortress Bastion

Forge World

Imperial World

Contested

Astropathic Relay

Frontier/
Unclaimed

Death Rises

Ultimate
Segmentum

BLACKSHIELD RAPID ASSAULT FORCES

Blackshield forces are a heterogeneous mix of Legiones Astartes elements, and in theory have access to the full arsenal of weaponry and equipment the Space Marines were granted at the outset of the Great Crusade. In practice however, most Blackshield groups abandoned the use of heavier war machines such as super-heavy tanks, as well as static defences and heavy equipment that required support or recovery units to retrieve after battle, in particular the range of drop pods used throughout the Legiones Astartes. Instead, most Blackshield forces favoured lighter, multi-purpose vehicles that complemented their particular mode of warfare—rapid orbital insertion followed by highly mission-focused assaults, quickly backed up by the exfiltration of all attack elements. To this end, although no two Blackshield forces were exactly alike, most

made extensive use of Storm Eagle gunships, while most had access to at least a handful of Thunderhawk gunships. The most fortunate could call upon the lighter patterns of Stormbird lander, the most prized being the Sokar pattern.

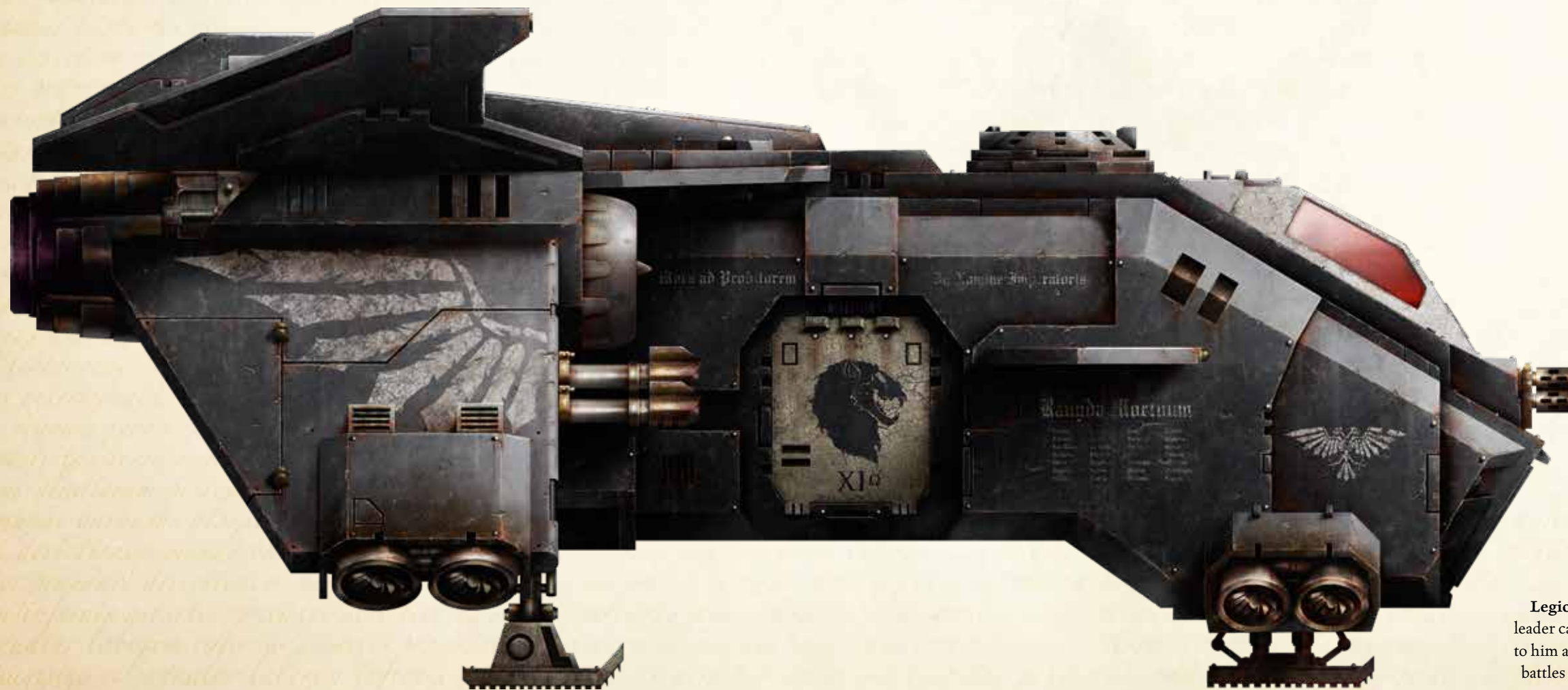
In general, most Blackshield forces deployed only those ground units that could be rapidly set down onto a planet's surface from orbit, limiting ground vehicles to Rhino and Land Raider variants that could be carried by a Thunderhawk Transporter or within the hold of a Sokar pattern Stormbird. Nevertheless, there were several known exceptions and not every Blackshield force operated in this manner; the group known as the Gerasene Host, for example, deployed without warning into the northern sulphur deserts of Treab's World and fought for many months before

departing just as suddenly using craft they are thought to have secreted in hidden caverns near the planet's northern pole.

In common with the Blackshield warriors themselves, most vehicles had their original Legion heraldry deliberately obscured. As the Horus Heresy ground on, many individual Blackshield groups developed their own unique heraldic identifiers or came to use their own often highly idiosyncratic sigils and identifiers. The Dark Brotherhood for example, came to be known for the use of a ragged, skeletal version of the Imperial Aquila, rendered in ghostly white or pale gold. It was by such symbols of death and doom that many Blackshield groups would become known, making for a spectacle as terrifying as any Legion force deployed in the armies of Loyalist or Traitor alike.



Blackshield Jetbike: The Scimitar pattern Jetbike depicted here was encountered by Loyalist forces in several war zones across the Pale Stars region. The identity of the Legionary rider remains unconfirmed, but several noted historian-adepts believe him to be a former White Scars Legionary of the so-called 'Brotherhood of the Foresworn', who subsequently renounced his Legion entirely and joined the ranks of the Dark Brotherhood. This theory is supported by the Legionary's sporting of a pattern of Legiones Astartes power armour helm unique to the Vth Legion, although it is entirely possible that the warrior obtained this from the body of a slain White Scars Legionary.



Legion Storm Eagle of the Dark Brotherhood: This vessel was used by the Blackshield leader called the Nemean at the Conclave of Optera, and bears heraldry and adornment unique to him and which hint at his origins. The text on the vessel's flanks appears to reference several battles of the Third Rangdan Xenocide, a campaign of apocalyptic proportions prosecuted by the 1st Legion and its allies across vast swathes of the galactic north-west.

ALPHA LEGION ASSAULT SERGEANT

IDENTITY UNCONFIRMED

AD-HOC TRAITOR FORMATION

PALE STARS WAR ZONE [PHARGOS REX INCURSION]

The identity of this Alpha Legion warrior cannot be confirmed, for it appears his armour's transponder unit had been set to cycle through myriad different and entirely contradictory imicus/inimicus signal bursts. He is however known by his heraldry, panoply of war and observed tactical proclivities to have served across the Pale Stars war zone in the force of the Alpha Legion commander Strike Master Ijax. He is known to have engaged the Blackshields of the Dark Brotherhood at Optera V and VII, as well as White Scars units at Sidaiva and elements of the Blood Angels 121st Company at Mirdath II/c. The last recorded contact was at Phargos Rex, a mere two days before the warp storms consumed that entire system and nothing of it, its overlords or its population was ever heard of again.

Alpha Legion Armour and Livery

The warrior wears Mark IV Legiones Astartes battle plate, with helm and pauldron wrought by the Legion's master artificers into a form unique to the XXth Legion. In common with the operational doctrines of the Alpha Legion, the warrior's armour bears few if any tactical markings, the intent being to keep the enemy guessing as to which Legion sub-unit they might be facing. The armour shows extensive armorial adornment in the form of variants of the Legion's three-headed hydra icon, and the green stripe on the helm is likely to indicate the warrior's rank as a sergeant.



'Aleph-Null' Alpha Legion Iconography,
Unknown Provenance



'Hydra' Alpha Legion Iconography,
Observed during Late-Crusade

ALPHA LEGION VETERAN TACTICAL LEGIONARY

UNNAMED VETERAN LEGIONARY

UNKNOWN LEGION SUB-UNIT

(UNCONFIRMED 700TH STRIKE-ECHOLON)

PALE STARS WAR ZONE [FALL OF PHARGOS REX]

This unnamed Alpha Legion warrior served under the Legion commander Strike Master Ijax throughout much of the conflict in the Pale Stars region. The warrior's exact position and rank is impossible to discern, for the Alpha Legion typically utilise markings and insignia specifically designed to mislead those attempting to decipher them. The bronze face plate on the Mark V helm suggests that the warrior may have served in a Legion command squad, as this convention was known to be in use across several Legions throughout the later Great Crusade, but this should not be taken for granted given the Alpha Legion's tendency to deliberately obscure tactical markings.

Alpha Legion Armour and Livery

The unnamed warrior is known to have taken part in the ambush on the Conclave of Optera, and was subsequently engaged in battle against mixed Loyalist forces at the Kyro System. The last engagement in which the warrior was observed fighting was fought against the White Scars of the war leader Niron at Phargos Rex, and it is unknown if he survived the battle and the subsequent descent of the warp storm that consumed the entire system soon after. The warrior is clad in the power armour configuration later codified as production Mark V, the source of which is unknown.



Alpha Legion Iconography, incorporating
Hydra and 'Unbroken Chain' Iconography,
Specific Meaning Unknown



Ceramite bonding stud reinforcement

WHITE SCARS TACTICAL LEGIONARY

LEGIONARY KHASAR
BROTHERHOOD OF THE FORESWORN
PALE STARS WAR ZONE [PHARGOS REX INTERVENTION /
FLAME NEBULA WAR]

The Brotherhood to which this Legionary originally belonged had its honorific revoked in 955.M30 following its near-total destruction in battle against the xenos Barghesi. The defeated force was referred to as the Foresworn when mentioned at all, and appears in no official primary Legion records of the Great Crusade. Over six decades later however, elements of the Foresworn appeared fighting for the Loyalist cause, first in the Pale Stars and later in other far flung theatres of war. The Foresworn were but one Brotherhood represented among the ranks of the White Scars that answered the call of Nathaniel Garro and attended the Conclave of Optera, the others equally shrouded in their founding.

White Scars Armour Modifications

Legionary Khasar's battle plate is typical of that worn by the White Scars, being clearly derived from a suit of Mark II 'Crusade' armour, the helm and chest plate substantially modified by Legion Techmarine armourers. The Legion frequently served as far-ranging pathfinders ahead of the Expeditionary fleets of the Great Crusade, and was therefore separated from reliable lines of supply for extended periods. Where most Legions were supplied en masse with new marks of armour, weapons and war machines, the White Scars often retained items they were issued at the outset of a campaign, repairing equipment when damaged, adapting it to their needs and adorning it with elements unique to the culture of their home world of Chogoris.



White Scars Variant Icon, Rite of the Riven Moon



White Scars Legion Icon, Common Armourial Use

BLOOD ANGELS TACTICAL LEGIONARY

LEGIONARY SABRAHAM
121ST COMPANY
PALE STARS WAR ZONE [RAID ON KYRO IV]

Legionary Sabraham was a member of a Legion tactical squad at the time the Blood Angels were ordered to muster at the Nartaba System in preparation for the campaign in the Signus Cluster, but like the rest of the 121st Company never deployed to that operation. When the company's vessels were cast upon the tides of the Warp, its members were spread across the small flotilla, each sub-unit believing for a time that it would meet its end upon the raging tides of unreality, until finally translating to a pocket of comparative calm coreward of the Maelstrom. Sabraham was present at the Conclave of Optera and survived the Alpha Legion's ambush to fight in subsequent battles in the region.

Blood Angels Armour and Livery

Sabraham is depicted here as he deployed to the fighting in the depths of the mines of Kyro IV, where it is thought he fell in glory when his squad was overwhelmed by a savage tide of the eyeless abhuman slaves who worked the mines, turned, so it is believed, into living weapons by the machinations of the Alpha Legion. His Mark IV Legiones Astartes power armour was newly issued at the time of the Nartaba muster, and Sabraham's suit is one of many such sub-types unique to the Blood Angels. The suit's surface is adorned with armorial detail added by highly-skilled Legion serfs, as befits the traditions of this most noble of Legions.



Blood Angels Legion Icon, Artificer Variant



Principia Belicosa Tactical Icon

ARMoured HOSTS OF THE BLOOD ANGELS

The Blood Angels Legion is possessed of the full panoply of war laid down by the architects of the wars of the Great Crusade, and masters in the use of them all. The Legion's forge is noted above all others for the care and attention it lavishes upon its equipment and war machines, from the most ubiquitous boltgun to the mightiest of battle barges. This phenomenon is witnessed most often in the exacting maintenance protocols carried out on its armoured vehicles and, most strikingly, in the adornment applied to their flanks.

The IXth Legion maintains a uniquely skilled cadre of bonded artisan-serfs, its ranks filled with individuals whose names may never be known to the greater Imperium, but who must surely rank among the greatest artists of the age. Their sole task is to render glory to the Blood Angels Primarch, the Angel Sanguinius, and through him the Emperor Himself. This is not done through vanity, as

so many have claimed of the IIIrd Legion for example, but in pursuit of the higher purpose for which the Blood Angels were created—to engender hope and strike awe into the hearts of those long lost in the darkness of Old Night, and to inspire stark terror in those who would reject the gift that is the Imperial Truth or threaten the glorious future the Emperor intends for Mankind.

While the bulk of the IXth Legion's armoured might was mustered at the Nartaba System for deployment to the Signus Cluster, hundreds, perhaps thousands of war machines of all classes remained in reserve at the Legion's fortress at Baal. Throughout the long years that the Blood Angels were lost, their fate unknown to the Imperium, the artisan-serfs continued to produce the most noble and wondrous of engines of war, ready to be wielded in righteous anger against the Traitors when at last their masters returned.



Legion Fire Raptor of the Blood Angels: This gunship is depicted as it appeared at the Conclave of Optera, where it was deployed to provide air cover to the Blood Angels on the ground, but did not at any point land. The level of adornment is typical of the IXth Legion, which in other Legions might only be applied to a vehicle in the personal service of a high-ranking officer.



Legion Spartan of the Blood Angels: This vehicle belonged to the 121st Company of the Blood Angels and served as transport for the company's elite Legion Terminator squads. The mural applied to the vehicle's flank is of a type used throughout the Legion and an example of the work of the master artisan-serf Marcellon of Primus. The vehicle was fielded by the 121st in at least a dozen battles fought across the Pale Stars war zone in the aftermath of the Conclave of Optera, the last of which was the assault on the surface defences of the mining world of Kyro IV.

