

GRAND NARRATIVE
SZABRYNE SYSTEM

THE SZABRYNE WAR

VERMILLION CLASSIFIED DEBRIEF

From the depths of the void they came, fleets of Chaos-worshipping fanatics and alien raiders descending on the worlds of the Szabryne System. Imperial defenders stood ready to repel them. Yet though the loyalists' determination was great, their positions had been weakened by insurrection and the terrifying knowledge that the Nephilim Anomaly drew closer by the day. So it was that the outer Imperial defences and strategic communication networks were found wanting. Cut off without orders or support, garrisons crumbled. Heretics under the banners of Krann the Beast seized thousands of live victims for blood sacrifices whose power whipped local warp-space into a frenzy. Xenos warbands belonging to the loose alliance of Ilthalech Starblade launched countless raids, snatching captives and stripping caches of arms and fuel. Bloodied loyalist survivors fell back on every front.

Yet as the invaders drove deeper into Imperial territory, resistance increased. Knowing a coordinated defence across the entire system was a dangerous dream, General Athnar Castigane III had chosen to sacrifice outlying forces and so lure the invaders into overextending. Now the Emperor's warriors hit back hard. Heretic feints against Askander's Iron Wastes and southern Tzalikar were blunted. Alien raiders were driven back on many fronts and given cause to approach their prey with caution. Most spectacular was the counter-offensive amidst the sprawling Cargorium of Kalzyka, where dozens of heretic warbands – rampaging and dangerously overextended – were isolated then crushed by loyalist forces. So furious was Krann the Beast at this defeat that he threatened his surviving champions; they would redouble their efforts and seize live foes worthy of sacrificing to the Dark Gods, or they would go under the sacrificial knife themselves!



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WARPSHOCK

Hope flourished amongst the defenders. The foe might yet be repulsed. Then, called from the depths of the churning warp by the rituals of Krann's followers, came the space hulk Penitents' Bane. The nightmarish macro-vessel was saturated with unholy energies, and it tore into realspace with such unnatural savagery that it sent a shockwave rolling through the empyrean. The Kalzyka Astropathic Conclave was annihilated as the psykers' minds boiled. Scrapcode gheists infested vox-networks system wide. Imperial communications and faith alike faltered anew.

The hulk was on a trajectory to carry it right through the heart of the Szabryne System. Herein lay an opportunity. Deep void scans and the whispers of covert agents suggested apocalyptically powerful weapons systems still active aboard the Penitents' Bane, capable of bombarding any world in the system. Coupled with the promise of warp-lost treasures in the hulk's depths, it was not long before elite forces from loyalist, heretic and xenos camps boarded the haunted vessel to battle for its riches.

Even as gunfights raged through the space hulk, so fresh assaults and counter-offensives swept back and forth across the worlds of the Szabryne System. Seeking to exploit Imperial confusion and the damage caused by heretic invaders, Starblade's xenos swept down upon the Kalzyka Cargorium and pressed the defenders hard. The mighty forge-temple of Facility Lambda-Rho rang with gunfire and screams as – motivated by the threats of their master – the Chaos-worshippers drove deep into the labyrinthine complex. On the shrine world of Humilitas, loyalist morale wavered as the defenders were driven back and rumours of covert xeno-corruption soured what victories they achieved. Imperial armies did manage to cleanse their foes from the Iron Wastes of Askander, gained some ground in the plague-tainted rainforests of Tzalikar North, and cut a path to the potent macro-batteries of the Penitents' Bane, but such victories alone could not turn the tide.

So the war continued as day-cycles turned to Terran-standard weeks of bloodshed and suffering: a second Chaos invasion of Kalzyka, strengthened with looted materiel from Facility Lambda-Rho, was halted only by the fervour and quick-thinking of local Imperial commanders; loyalist counter-offensives to drive the heretics from Lambda-Rho ground to a halt thanks to hit-and-run xenos raids; Inquisitorial strike teams approaching the source of corruption in Tzalikar North were driven back when fresh waves of heretics poured from suppurating portals and the curse of the Plaguefather ran rampant across the world's surface. Worst of all, Sermona – the heart of the Imperial faith in the Szabryne System – fell to a Genestealer Cult insurrection led by the insidious Orator Jonas.

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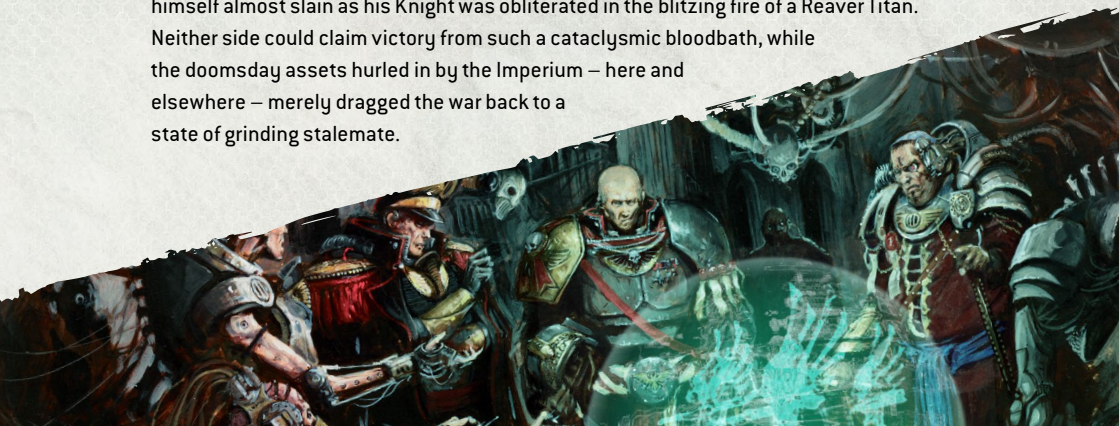
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MIGHT UNLEASHED

General Castigane III could see the wider strategic situation slipping towards disaster. The fringe of the Nephilim Anomaly rolled ever closer. The xenos alliance ran rampant, exploiting their powers of prophecy to strike at countless weak points. Despite the heroism of commanders such as Lady Artemis De Re Atelerix of House Atelerix, who earned an Aquila First Class for her Knights' defeat of a mighty greenskin horde, the foe could not be decisively driven back.

Yet the General would neither despair nor order the retreat. Instead he unleashed carefully husbanded assets and commanded the most extreme strategies to be employed. Imperial air armadas flurried from void-carriers and hidden bases to fill the skies with attack waves and the battlefields below with fire. The super weapons of the Penitents' Bane were turned on heretic and xenos hosts, Imperial casualties caught in their blast zones hailed as blessed martyrs. Meanwhile, on the blood-soaked fields of Kalzyka, the Titans of the loyalist Legios walked in anger. Their orders were simple: drive back Krann the Beast and his host of traitor Titans and Knights, and in so doing hurl the heretics decisively from Kalzyka once and for all.

In the event, the clash proved more nightmarish than any could have foreseen. Treachery once more blighted the loyalists' plans as several Titan Princes – persuaded by Krann's secret offers of power – turned on their comrades. With the traitor forces ascendant and the beleaguered loyalists fighting for survival, the carnage redoubled as Titans fell in flames and Knights were blasted to atoms. Dark entities watched hungrily through the thinning veil of the warp and unleashed their blessings; a crimson plague of unfettered rage that seized the combatants and drove them to indiscriminate, murderous madness. The resultant savagery cost loyalists and heretics alike dearly, even seeing Krann himself almost slain as his Knight was obliterated in the blitzing fire of a Reaver Titan. Neither side could claim victory from such a cataclysmic bloodbath, while the doomsday assets hurled in by the Imperium – here and elsewhere – merely dragged the war back to a state of grinding stalemate.



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THE BITTER END

It was Ilthalech Starblade's xenos who claimed true victory in the Szabryne System. Having exploited the conflict between the loyalists and heretics, and having further manipulated some alien factions while forging strong alliances with others, the Corsair lord had won a clear strategic triumph. The aliens had never sought territorial conquest, but instead had aimed to plunder a destabilised system – this they had achieved on multiple worlds so that the favoured of Starblade's cabal were now well provisioned for their flight from the Nephilim Anomaly. The greater strength of the xenos interlopers turned their prows towards the deep void and powered away, leaving behind embattled loyalists, heretics, and those aliens too warlike or entangled in battle to escape in time.

Krann the Beast, for his part, was berserk with rage. His vision of a tyrannical kingdom guarded from the Nephilim Anomaly by the blessings of the Dark Gods was lost. Yet Krann was perhaps more determined than ever to slaughter as many loyalists as he could before the smothering shroud descended upon the system. After making bloody examples amongst the champions who had failed him, Krann commanded his remaining forces into fresh assaults on the Kalzyka Cargorium, Facility Lambda-Rho and the Iron Wastes. Only his chosen knew that he also sent elite warbands to seize control of the Penitents' Bane, perhaps hoping it would prove a means of escaping the doom descending on the system.

As for Castigane III's surviving loyalists, they had relocated their command headquarters to the Iron Wastes where their grip remained strongest. With just day-cycles, perhaps hours before the influence of the anomaly began to be felt, the General knew his war-weary and demoralised forces would be easy prey for the horror of the stilling. Yet he believed there was still one hope remaining and was determined to seize it. Drawing on supplies salvaged from the Cargorium, and abandoning peripheral war zones, all Imperial forces that could be spared launched a counter-invasion of Humilitas. They would seize back the Sermona Magnificat from the xenos insurgents, the centre of Imperial faith in the Szabryne System, and in so doing prove their worthiness of the God-Emperor's protection.

The prospects for Krann's and Castigane's forces looked grim, but it is a strange and dark galaxy. Either or both might yet achieve some miraculous reversal of fates before the silence of the Nephilim Anomaly descended...