

CHAPTER 1: THE NIGHTMARE SALIENT

“Death and glory, horror and bravery, loyalty and corruption—all these can be found here. But mostly death.”

—Lord General Ovidius

Of the three Salients that divide the Jericho Reach, the Acheros Salient is the smallest in total number of planets, but it has also been the most fiercely contested. Every time the Imperial forces drive further towards the Hadex Anomaly, the Chaos-worshipping Stigmartus push back with twice as much fervour. This back and forth has turned the small stretch of stars now known as the Cellebos Warzone into a bloody meat-grinder, consuming the lives of the millions of Imperial soldiers committed there every year.

The bloody stalemate between the two forces has been a constant drain on the rest of the Achilus Crusade. It has pulled untold amounts of materiel from the other two salients to fuel the endless war against the Stigmartus, and, many commanders believe, left the other Imperial forces unprepared to deal with the arrival of Hive Fleet Dagon.



OVERVIEW OF THE ACHEROS SALIENT

Before the Age of Shadow fell over the Jericho Reach, the area now known as the Acheros Salient was known as the Calitar subsector, and was the political and spiritual centre of the entire Jericho Sector. The capital of Verronus stood at the centre of the Sub-Sector as a shining example of Imperial culture, the Sector Lord himself ruling from one of its monolithic hive cities. The Calitar subsector was a bustling centre of trade and production, and Verronus was its beating heart.

What little has been recovered from the ruined archives now consumed by the Hadex Anomaly indicates that the Age of Shadow had a rapid and devastating effect on Verronus and the surrounding systems. As the warp storms tightened their grip on the sector, trade dwindled and the sprawling hive cities that covered the surface of Verronus began to starve. Rebellion started quickly, and by the time the first Rogue Traders braved the warp storms to determine the Sector's fate, the entire region was in total anarchy.

As the sector plunged even deeper into darkness, small pockets of humanity still loyal to the Imperium remained, clinging to the light of the Emperor. However, with limited resources, and assailed from every side by ambitious warlords and the worshippers of the Ruinous Powers, they inevitably fell. Within a matter of generations, the subsector that had been the crown jewel of the Jericho Sector became a debased hive of murderers and thieves who aligned themselves with the Dark Powers of the warp.

There are many theories throughout the Imperial Forces in the Reach regarding the formation of the Hadex Anomaly, but the only true evidence of its genesis now lies deep in the record halls of Watch Fortress Erioch. While the Jericho Sector descended into anarchy, the Deathwatch could only observe from their Watch Stations, incapable of saving humanity from its own treachery. So as the Space Marines on the Long Watch waited out the dark millennia of the Age of Shadow, they stayed ever vigilant to the movements of the enemies of the Imperium, even as the worlds of the Reach lay in ruins. As the years stretched on, the Deathwatch viewed the Calitar subsector with little concern. They were more concerned with the machinations of xenos races than the actions of Chaos-worshippers and traitors. However in 656. M40, all this changed.

Records stored in the massive halls of Watch Fortress Erioch indicate that the Hadex Anomaly came into being during a planetary alignment late in that year. What little can be gleaned from these documents indicates that a vortex of warp energies burst into real space, consuming the entirety of the Calitar subsector and some surrounding systems, and leaving a permanent tear in reality marring the middle of the Reach. The records state that the vortex was the result of a

sacrificial ritual of horrific proportion performed by cults in the Verronus system worshipping the Ruinous Powers, but no real evidence remains that can substantiate these accounts.

Since the time of its formation, the Hadex Anomaly has haunted the Jericho Reach, casting out its malign radiation and corrupting hundreds of different worlds. Measurements performed over the centuries in Watch Fortress Ormasim indicate that, since its creation, the Anomaly has continued to grow fractionally every year, slowly pulling the worlds of the Reach into its dark grasp.

EARLY ADVANCES

After coming through the warp gate, Lord Militant Tiber Achilus' first priority was to establish a solid foothold in the Jericho Reach, so he set his eyes on the planet of Karlack. The planet had been of little note before the Age of Shadow, and this insignificance had kept it relatively safe from the roving bands of marauders and warlords of Khazant that had ravaged the Reach over the past millennia. The populace still clung to derivations of the ancient rituals of the Imperium, and welcomed the forces of the Crusade with open arms.

A beachhead was quickly established on Karlack as the Crusade forces spread out and secured the other systems around the warp gate. One of the primary objectives of the Crusade from its outset was the world of Khazant. Its warlords were a persistent threat to the rest of the Reach, and the corrupted inhabitants of the world were anathema to everything the Imperium stands for. Unfortunately, the looming threat of the Tau presence in the coreward edge of the Reach was too great a threat to ignore, and Lord Militant Achilus redeployed the majority of the troops in the Reach to Operation Hammerfall—a multi-planet offensive to drive the Tau back towards the Black Reef.

As Operation Hammerfall forced the Tau to fall back, the remaining battlegroups began reclaiming the worlds around the Iron Collar. The battlegroup charged with reclaiming the area towards the centre of the Reach was under the command of Lord General Ovidius, a veteran commander who had served alongside Achilus in countless campaigns across his career. His task was not only to establish a perimeter around the Iron Collar, but also to scout out enemy resistance on the world of Khazant, which still remained a primary target for the Crusade.

Ovidius' initial scouting reports painted Khazant as a valuable world to the Crusade. Centuries of plunder had left the many warlords that now controlled the planet in control of incredible resources and manpower, and the infighting among them left the world open to attack. Meanwhile, Operation Hammerfall had succumbed to catastrophe. Necessary reinforcements never arrived, and worlds that had been left in the wake of the advancing troops and thought compliant began to rise up. Seeing that the Crusade needed a new direction to give the troops a sense of progress, Achilus left the battle against the Tau in the hands of Lorgath Maclir and the Imperial Commanders. He then headed to the centre of the Reach to wage a campaign against the world of Khazant.

THE HISTORY OF THE ACHILUS CRUSADE

This section provides an overview of the Achilus Crusade, specifically as it relates to the Acheros Salient. A broader look at the history of the Crusade can be found in *THE ACHILUS ASSAULT*.

The campaign to take Khazant stretched over a bloody year, costing Imperial forces greatly as the warlords fought back with an unexpected fervour. Finally, the Imperial forces triumphed from sheer strength of numbers, and the remaining warlords fled back towards the Charon Stars. Instead of pursuing his fleeing adversaries, Achilus had Ovidius consolidate his forces in the area to prepare for future operations. They could not have expected that letting these warlords live would create the most dangerous foe the Achilus Crusade would face.

NEW RESOLVE

The unexpected loss of Tiber Achilus to the warp and the appointment of Tetrarchus brought about a complete change in the structure of the Crusade. Tetrarchus' plan to break the Crusade into three separate Salients saw a political battle for leadership of these three different fronts, and many of the commanders who had become comfortably favoured by the old Lord Militant found themselves completely out of the running.

As Tetrarchus began reforming the Crusade, his primary concern was to take the worlds near the centre of the Reach. Not only had they been the former seats of power in the Jericho Sector, but the forces of Chaos that now dwelled there posed a significant risk to the Crusade in all areas of the Reach. Not trusting the monumental task of pushing into the Hadex Anomaly to any other commander, Tetrarchus personally took command of the newly christened "Acheros Salient."

Although this change of leadership frustrated Ovidius, he was not forgotten like so many other commanders under the new leadership. Even though the Lord General had gained his position due to his history with Achilus, he was a wise commander, and Tetrarchus greatly valued his advice. Because of this, Ovidius kept a significant amount of command over the new Salient, acting as Tetrarchus' right hand as the battlegroup began moving deeper into the Reach.

Still fresh from Achilus' victory in the campaign on Khazant, both commanders felt confident in the battlegroup's superiority over the rag tag forces of Chaos scattered amongst the stars around the Hadex Anomaly. At the advice of the Lord General, Tetrarchus spread the battlegroup's forces out across multiple systems, and began a steady advance towards the borders of the Anomaly, sure that even dispersed, their forces would be more than a match for the scattered renegades. This strategy saw rapid results as forces claimed dozens of planets, including Vanity and the Blood Trinity, but left the battlegroup woefully unprepared for the organised counterattack that was bearing down on them.

With remarkable speed and coordination, forces from deep inside the Hadex Anomaly struck out against the advancing

Imperial battlegroup. Consisting of elements of the Khazantian warlords vanquished five years prior, this cult of zealous worshippers (who were to become known as the Stigmartus) struck a devastating blow against the Imperial forces. Ovidius' cruiser was lost in the first strike, leaving Tetrarchus reeling without the advice of his closest counsellor in the Salient. As the Imperial forces desperately tried to consolidate their forces and recover, the Stigmartus warriors reclaimed nearly all the systems near the Hadex Anomaly—giving birth to the Cellebos Warzone.

THE CELLEBOS WARZONE

After the Stigmartus' initial attack, Tetrarchus quickly organised the battlegroup to counterattack, realising that a quick response was the only way to prevent the Stigmartus from fortifying their hold on the Cellebos Warzone. But as the fleet began to move back into the Warzone, it became obvious that these were not the same scattered warlords they had vanquished five years prior. The Stigmartus were a well organised war machine that seemed to have near unlimited resources as they poured out of the Hadex Anomaly into the Cellebos Warzone.

To compensate for the Stigmartus' unnatural amount of resources, Tetrarchus began pulling more forces from the Callixis Sector through the warp gate, and also began relocating materiel from other Salients to aid in the fierce battle for the Cellebos Warzone. Years began to stretch on and little progress was made; Imperial forces would take a planet, only to lose it to a fresh wave of Stigmartus streaming out of the Anomaly. The planets of the Cellebos Warzone quickly became charred battlefields, barely hospitable to life after decades of constant war.

As the years passed, the situation began to destabilise in the other Salients. The Tyranids relentlessly devoured the rimward edge of the Reach, while the Tau fought back with pernicious tactics that confounded Imperial commanders. Tetrarchus' attention was required in far too many places for the Lord Militant to continue devoting all of his attention to the bloody stalemate against the Stigmartus.

Tetrarchus assigned command of the Acheros Salient to Lord Admiral Gorvus Xant of the Imperial Navy, a man who had been instrumental in preventing the Stigmartus fleet from completely overrunning Imperial forces in the Salient. Aboard his flagship, the *Sword of Macharius*, Xant oversaw some of the boldest manoeuvres seen in the Salient in decades. However, his daring tactics were only rewarded with disaster, as he was continuously defeated in ground battles. Under his leadership, the Salient saw a significant loss of ground in the Cellebos Warzone, and many called for him to be replaced.

As the Salient dramatically lost ground, Xant organised a massive push far beyond the Cellebos Warzone, into Stigmartus controlled systems. His plan was to lay siege to the planet of Vespasia and disrupt the flow of Stigmartus troops to the Warzone, giving the battlegroup some respite from the relentless onslaught. This time, Xant's daring plan was successful, but he would pay the ultimate price. During the siege, the bridge of the *Sword of Macharius* was struck by

an orbital defence platform, killing the Lord-Admiral and the majority of his command staff. This turn of events left the strike force directionless as they assaulted the well defended Stigmartus world.

In the void left by the leadership's sudden loss, Magratha von Karlack, then a young Adjutant, stepped forward to lead the remainder of the Imperial forces. From a young age she had been trained to be a figurehead and a leader for the troops of the Achilus Crusade, and she saw this as the perfect opportunity to fulfil her destiny. She gathered together all the Guardsmen still aboard the *Sword of Macharius*, and launched towards the planet with every available drop pod on board the ship. Her bold actions paid off, and the Imperial Guard forces managed to take the keeps of Vespasia, securing a great advantage for the Imperium in the Acheros Salient.

After her decisive victory, Magratha demanded that Tetrarchus put her in charge of the Acheros Salient. The Lord-Commander did not refuse; Magratha had proven herself in battle, and was extremely popular amongst the Guardsmen of the Salient. Since she has taken command of the Salient, it has seen more success than in decades, her bold leadership inspiring the men to new levels of determination and bravery in the battle against the vile Stigmartus.

