

The image is the cover of a Warhammer 40,000 book. It features a close-up, low-angle shot of a Vanguard Adeptus Mechanicus. The character is wearing a red cloak and a helmet with a glowing blue visor. The armor is highly detailed with various mechanical components, including a large circular hatch on the chest with a skull emblem. The background is a dark, industrial environment with some light streaks. The text is prominently displayed at the top and bottom.

WARHAMMER
40,000

ADEPTUS MECHANICUS
VANGUARD

PETER FEHERVARI

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VANGUARD

Peter Fehervari

*The pursuit of knowledge is absoluteion.
The conceit of absolute knowledge is merely hubris.*

Ordinance Mechanica Obscura #01010

The sky bled streamers of poisonous light over the grey-green morass of life below. Like the tentacles of some ethereal leviathan, the radiance touched and tested everything, questing for a foothold upon reality. The jungle shivered beneath its glare and the random chitter of numberless insects became a profane harmony. Like called to like and the tainted planet stirred towards wakefulness in the unclean dawn.

But Omnissiah willing, this world will sleep a while yet, Magos Caul reflected as he cancelled the blasphemous simulation conjured up by his cogitation engines. *I still have time...*

His carmine robes hung in loose folds about his skeletal frame as he floated above the concentric, whirling wheels of his data throne. His quartet of multi-jointed legs was furred up in arachnid repose and his myriad lenses had faded to dull green stains in the darkness of his cowl, disengaged while he gazed inwards at the infinitely malleable regions of the datasphere. The cogitator banks embedded in the wheels of his throne chattered as they saturated his nexus chamber with information from thousands of sensors across the planet.

<Canopus 30,> Caul clicked in binaric cant, switching his visual input to a defence servitor welded to the dome of his bastion. The position was optimised

for the elimination of aerial predators and megaspores, and offered an unparalleled view of the contaminated sky. Through the servitor's eyes he saw the warp-spawned anomaly from his simulation as a numinous spiral behind the dirty clouds of Phaedra's troposphere. As night fell it would deepen into a multi-hued aurora that was vile, though only a ghost of the horror he predicted.

Ghostblight, whispered a voice. It came from the neural cage where the magos's instincts were interred alongside the rest of his humanity, smothered but not quite dead. He dismissed it as he dismissed every shadow of his former existence. His induction into the divine logarithms of the Omnissiah had elevated him above such emotionally charged nonsense.

Hypothesis: the anomaly encapsulates a binary reaction – a feedback loop of corruption, Caul speculated. It draws current from the planet's taint and in turn galvanizes its host to greater virulence. Query: which is the host and which the parasite? Is this a symbiotic conjunction?

The anomaly had first manifested in the sky twenty-seven days ago, invisible to the naked eye, but triggering dozens of Caul's sensor stations. He had failed to determine its origin, but it was growing stronger with every passing hour and building towards a Category Gamma warp storm. Could his fortress withstand a deathworld infused by the immaterium?

The magos redirected his focus to a servo-skull patrolling the perimeter of his base and trained its gaze upon the immense structure he had forged around his explorer ship nearly two centuries ago. The Iron Diadem was a tangle of manufactories and silos mounted upon a stalk of titanium pipes rising from a vast lake. Over the decades Phaedra had assailed the refinery with a tirade of spore tsunamis, silt quakes and hurricanes, yet its lamprey grip on the lakebed had never faltered.

Unfortunately the imminent catastrophe was not one of Phaedra's paroxysms.

Phaedra. Even the name sounded subtly poisonous to Caul. He had remained here only to dissect and codify the planet – *the enemy* – until leaving had ceased to be an option. During his sojourn he had crossed lines that some would call heretical.

But my purpose has always been pure, Caul reasoned. This world exemplifies the degeneracy of the flesh. Its jungles are an inconstant, decaying riot of rage entwined with lust. Know thy enemy and decode it well.

Yet his crusade might soon become untenable, and if he were lost then research of incalculable value it would be lost with him. That was unacceptable.

<Initiating inload enhancement protocol Kappa,> the magos intoned.

A swarm of delicate mecha-filaments uncoiled from his cowl, swaying as they trawled the data-charged air like the feeding tendrils of a cuttlefish – filtering, filing and cross-referencing readings from across his territory, devouring parameters of light refraction, particle density, atmospheric pressure, gravitic arrhythmia and scores of other variables to fuel the ferocious engine of his mind. Caul tore through it all in seconds, slicing and splicing facts into possibilities, rejecting or promoting those possibilities to probabilities, then cycling back to hone the most promising towards a single categorical *certainty*.

It was a sublime effort, yet the answer eluded him like some slippery, chimerical prey.

<Inconclusive.>

Caul withdrew his mecha-filaments and intoned the seventh mantra of Algebraic Concord to dispel the spectre of frustration. Every time he tried to determine when the storm would break, his conclusion was different. Sometimes he settled on months, sometimes weeks, but just as often it was days or even decades. The degree of inconsistency invalidated every answer. Even for a magos the variables were too byzantine – too *chaotic*...

I will not make the attempt again, Caul vowed, but it was an oath sworn only to himself, not the Omnissiah, for he knew he would break it as he had done countless times before. It was the same obstinacy that had chained him to Phaedra – an almost pathological refusal to accept imperfection.

<Timeframe irrelevant/apogee event inevitable.>

My research will be preserved. This time the oath *was* for the Omnissiah because Caul intended to honour it.

Submerging himself in the datasphere, the magos cast his consciousness further afield, leaping from one relay beacon to the next, riding the datastreams that shadowed Phaedra's labyrinthine waterways, seeking the holy warriors he had entrusted with his fate.

The convoy of skitarii war galleys sliced through the slime-encrusted rivers of the Coil in orderly procession, their massive steel watercogs labouring against the ooze while their chimneystacks wheezed black smoke. The five vessels were identical in size and unmistakable in intent, their blunt, cannon-crowned prows and crenellated gunwales giving them the appearance of floating fortresses. Each had set out from the Iron Diadem bearing a maniple of one hundred skitarii warriors and their sacred war machines, together with a support crew of engineers, bonded ratings and deck servitors. Still the voyage had taken its toll

on their numbers. Some had been snared by Phaedra's lazy, lethal wiles – an incautious rating beheaded by overhanging razorvine; another snatched by a wyrmtree lurking on the riverbank, and an engine crew lost to an infestation of swarming skrabs. And more had fallen to the true enemy, whose stealthy hit-and-run attacks had grown more frequent as the convoy neared its destination. The losses were regrettable, but sure to happen. Most importantly, they had been planned for.

Standing on the elevated observation deck of the leading vessel, Alpha Phaestus-IR01 swept the riverbank with his long-barrelled rifle. The wooden stock of the antique weapon was wedged into the crook of his right arm in the age-old posture of a marksman as he scanned the jungle. Night had fallen, but his ocular omnispex transformed the bioluminescent snarl of fungi and petrified coral into a high contrast abstraction – the white heat of scurrying animals and the passive grey of vegetation. It was all irrelevant noise to the veteran skitarii. He was searching for the shrewd motion of sentient life. Enemy life.

His bonded war brethren were deployed around him at equal intervals, each covering a different watch vector. An ignorant observer might have mistaken the skitarii rangers of Squad Irridio for identical clones or stylised simulacra of men. All wore hooded crimson robes over interleaved segments of dark armour, hiding their features behind jutting rebreather masks and bulbous goggles that gave them a pitiless insect-like cast. They had apparently suffered the same catastrophic trauma to their lower limbs, for from the knees down every warrior's legs had been replaced with sculpted titanium augmetics. Only initiates of the Cult Mechanicus would have recognised this stigmata as the Red Planet's due, a hallowed rite of passage shared by all skitarii. They were holy warriors so it was only fitting that they strode the land with the purity of the Omnissiah to guide their path.

Especially a land as corrupt as Phaedra.

<Contact: 1 unit/unidentified. Coordinates follow...> Ixtchul-IR04 reported from his position in the ship's watchtower. To outsiders the ranger's signal would have sounded like a random burst of static, but to his fellow cyborgs it was a data-rich message. Three acknowledgments pinged back instantly, then seconds later a fourth – Brok-IR05, always the slowest of the squad. Alpha Phaestus-IR01 felt no rancour, for this wasn't a lapse on his subordinate's part; Brok-IR05 was simply the least of them, which was why he was designated the squad's '5'.

Every cog has its consecrated place in the machine, he reflected.

His vision flickered momentarily as he interfaced with the lookout's optics, then the dark riverbank was replaced by an eagle-eye view of the river ahead. Through Ixtchul-IR04's eyes he saw a thin figure waiting on a coral outcrop. It stood in a pool of light cast by a saucer-like construct hovering above its head like a diminutive spacecraft. A pulse of pious revulsion spiked the Alpha's brain at the sight of the alien machine, for though it was barely four handbreadths in circumference and appeared to be unarmed the drone's mere existence was an abomination.

It is a mockery of the Ommissiah's sacred engines...

With an almost physical effort Phaestus-IR01 switched his attention from the machine to its master. The alien was motionless save for a slight billowing of its frayed, ankle-length robe. Its arms were crossed from shoulder to shoulder as if in repose, but its black eyes were open wide and seemingly staring right back at him, inscrutable and aloof. There was no mistaking its cobalt skin and the flat wedge of its cadaverous face: *tau*.

The long war between the Imperium and the Tau Empire for Phaedra had bled out years ago, but the last of the aliens were still here, abandoned alongside their Imperial counterparts when the conflict drifted elsewhere. Bitter and desperate, neither side fought for anything beyond survival anymore. Only the holy warriors of the Iron Diadem still walked a true path.

Objective Skysight... The cohort's mission designation flashed across Phaestus-IR01's awareness with the insistence of pain. He neither knew nor cared what Objective Skysight actually *was*. It was enough to know that his magos demanded it and the xenos obstructed it. The rest would become clear in time.

<Initiate protocol Aegis,> Alpha Phaestus-IR01 transmitted to the bridge. Moments later the silent alarm was broadcast across the entire convoy, alerting sentries and rousing the dormant from their meditations. Engines fell silent and the war galleys drifted to a halt. The clatter of metal feet and the hum of activating weapons from the deck below told him that the skitarii vanguard had been summoned to their posts.

As he climbed the steps to the lead vessel's prow bulwark, Alpha Viharok-TH01 felt his mind recalibrating itself to battle mode. The abstract geometries spun by his meditation shift were fading beneath a flood of diagnostics from his squad and the strategic topography calculated by the cohort's Alpha Primus. The neural cogitator fused to his brain stem collated the data, and he frowned as Squad Thorium's tactical efficiency registered at 88.42 per cent. It was an

acceptable performance, but acceptable was *unacceptable* to Viharok-TH01. The unit's tactical algorithms would require refinement.

My vanguard will demand perfection, he knew. It is our duty to the Machine-God.

'The Omnissiah purges!' Squad Thorium chorused as Viharok-TH01 joined them. Their bulky armour was painted black and striated with dirt and corrosion, their tabards stained with promethium and threaded with oxidised metal bolts and techno-fetishes. All wore sweeping sallet helmets of dark iron inlaid with bronze and daubed with their squad rankings. Insects buzzed about them, drawn to the glow of their rad guns, only to pop or dissolve in the baleful energies that suffused the weapons.

Our presence alone brings death to the unclean, the Alpha vanguard observed with pride. We wear the purifying fire of the Omnissiah like an invisible cloak.

He frequently led his squad on absolution pilgrimages. They would march into the jungle chanting the Nine Canticles of Decontamination, leaving only stubborn death in their wake. The paths they walked became enduring scars across Phaedra's skin, for even her most tenacious fungi withered in their footprints. The vanguard bore a sombre blessing, yet they welcomed it despite the ravages it had wreaked upon their own flesh, for under their proud helmets the men of Thorium were cadaverous grotesques devoid of hair or teeth.

But they still had their strength. Nothing else mattered.

Catching sight of the waiting tau, Viharok-TH01 unslung his radium carbine and thumbed the power stud, offering its spirit his fealty. Like many skitarii, he revered his weapon as his master, believing his hands were merely tools to aid its will. In his case there was some truth to it, for his rifle was a priceless relic whose spirit had been stirred to permanent wakefulness by the magos. Such 'cognis' weapons hungered to fulfil their purpose, actively compensating for small flaws in a wielder's aim.

'By thy will I ignite thee and charge thee well,' Viharok-TH01 chanted in jagged lingua technis, leading his squad in the Seventh Litany of Liquidation.

<In thy light I smite with thee,> they reciprocated in reverent feedback.

'For thy spite I will slay or die for thee,' Thorium's Alpha concluded.

Neither fear nor doubt were functioning variables in the skitarii psyche. Where a common man might feel anxiety, the skitarii experienced only anticipation.

Phaestus-IR01's vision glitched again as the cohort's Alpha Primus joined the sensory chain to the watchtower. All Alphas could access their squad members'

optics at short range, but the Primus could interface with every warrior in the force, even across great distances. Phaestus-IR01 held his breath reverently as he felt her icy assessment of the xenos.

<Positive identification: tau water caste,> the Primus relayed over the command band. <Threat level: indeterminate.>

‘I bear no weapons,’ the alien called, as if in answer. Its voice projected confidence, but Phaestus-IR01 detected a tremor of tension. ‘My designation is Por’ui Ybolyan,’ the tau continued. ‘I am authorised to facilitate a conciliation with the respected warriors of the honoured Ommissiah.’

<Xenos morale broken,> Ptoltec-IR03 chattered from Phaestus-IR01’s left. The ancient cyborg’s contempt saturated his code with static. <We will attain their stronghold in 9.25 hours. Purgation imminent.>

‘The enemy is most dangerous when it is cornered,’ another ranger rasped through the rebreather pipe wedged in his throat. While skitarii rebreathers didn’t prohibit mundane speech they certainly *inhibited* it, making flesh-speak a labour that many shunned; Rho-IR02 clung to it with obscure stubbornness. It was rumoured that the former Guardsman hadn’t embraced the Ommissiah willingly, but his brothers knew that was irrelevant now, like every echo of their past lives.

‘The losses our respective forces have sustained in this conflict are without purpose,’ the tau envoy continued, extending open hands to the warships. ‘The Wintertide Cadre and the Iron Diadem are the last significant forces of order on this malignant world. For the Greater Good of both our factions I urge you to cease this aggression.’

It was difficult to read the expressions of a tau, most of which lay in the precise dilation of the mouth and nostril slits, but sickness was a universal trait and Phaestus-IR01 had no doubt that Por’ui Ybolyan was *very* sick. Tau didn’t sweat, but the rash of boils and weeping lesions mottling this one’s face looked like splinterskin to him. He’d lost enough brothers to Phaedra’s blights to recognise the signs – xenos, human or post-human, the flesh was always easy prey to her if left unsanctified.

‘If you will communicate your grievance I shall endeavour to mediate an accord,’ Por’ui Ybolyan offered. ‘However...’ The alien’s words exploded into violent coughing and a perceptible shiver ran through its emaciated frame.

How is this creature still standing? Phaestus-IR01 wondered. *It isn’t even one of their warrior caste.* He expected the retching tau to topple from its perch, but the coughing fit passed and when it spoke again its voice was steady: ‘However,

be advised that further incursion into tau territory will not be tolerated.'

<Contact: unidentified/west bank. Coordinates follow...> Rho-IR02 reported, slipping into code when precision was required.

Phaestus-IR01 switched to his comrade's viewpoint and caught a hint of movement on the riverbank. He crossed to Rho-IR02's position and squinted with a lidless eye, triggering the magnification mode of his omnispect. Was there a humanoid figure crouched in the pixelated skein of the jungle? His rifle trained on the spot as if of its own accord, but he urged it to patience as he relayed the sighting to the ship's nexus. Another alarm pulsed silently through the cohort.

'They're watching us,' Rho-IR02 said.

There was a fanfare of encoded salutes from the vanguard as the Alpha Primus stalked from the bridge, towering over the gathered skitarii like a Space Marine amongst mortal men. Her silver carapace was devoid of ornamentation save for a flanged cog embossed into her breastplate and a vermilion tabard hanging from her waist. Both her arms terminated in broad, double-edged blades that swept over the digital eradication beamers moulded into her vambraces. In place of hands, a pair of mechadendrites sprouted from her hips, rising to sway like restive snakes over her sleek, backswept pauldrons. Every segment of her carapace had been polished to a sheen that matched the mirror finish of her visor, rendering her a gleaming, indecipherable blank.

With a hiss of servos the Primus bent her massive reverse-jointed legs and leapt to the prow rampart. Alpha Viharok-TH01 stepped aside as she took his place at the prow and faced the tau emissary. They regarded one another in silence, each taking the other's measure without the need for words. Finally Por'ui Ybolyan released a long, rattling breath.

'You will not negotiate.' It wasn't a question.

Silence.

'Then let there be an end to it,' the alien said with unmistakable weariness.

There was roar of thrusters from above and a volley of plasma fire surged from the sky to strike the Alpha Primus. She exploded with radiance as the conversion field woven into her armour twisted the heat into a halo of coruscating light. Viharok-TH01's auto-reactive lenses dimmed before the corona could dazzle him, but the furious code-blurts of his squad told him that others had been less fortunate. Their blindness would pass in minutes, but minutes were an eternity in battle. As if to prove this bitter truth, a plasma bolt punched through the visor of the skitarius beside him and crumpled the warrior's head into a molten slag of

iron and bone. More fire streaked towards them from the riverbanks on either side and Viharok-TH01 realised his fallen comrade had been a collateral victim – the tau snipers were targeting the Alpha Primus.

<We are the teeth of the Ommissiah,> she declared in serene code as a barrage of plasma fire burst against her conversion field. <Initiate Purgation Sequence Decensus.’

Across the entire convoy skitarii warriors opened fire in perfect synchronicity, ranks of vanguard from the gunwales and smaller groups of rangers from the observation decks. Together they rained solid rounds and blistering arcs of electricity into the jungle, shredding vegetation and vermin in sweeping swaths of destruction as they chased down and obliterated the snipers. A bloated fungoid tower exploded into burning spore clouds that immolated a pair of lurking xenos. One of them staggered towards the river, but criss-crossing waves of electricity threw him back into the melting fungal pyre.

<War is our sacrament,> the Alpha Primus chanted, amplifying her codecast into a white noise hymnal that sent a current of fidelity through the cohort. She had been fashioned by Magos Caul personally, prised from death’s grip and reassembled piece by broken piece into a perfect warrior. Many of the skitarii revered her as an avatar of the Machine-God, a belief the magos neither encouraged nor repressed. <In its absence we are but empty vessels awaiting the hallowed promethium of spite.>

The vanguard responded with a chorus of hoarse voices and serrated static, singing their praises to the Machine-God as they cleansed the xenos stain.

Something soared out of the sky and landed on the deck behind the Alpha Primus with a clang of metal. Viharok-TH01 swung round and saw a flickered silhouette outlined against the drizzle and flashes of gunfire. It was a looming, vaguely humanoid shape drawn in angular lines that rippled and tore as it moved. The invisibility that sheathed it was imperfect, oozing over its bulk in a patchy tide that revealed plates of dark, smoothly contoured armour. Bizarrely the stealth field had failed entirely around the blocky gun attached to the intruder’s right arm, making it appear suspended in empty air like a phantom weapon. Viharok-TH01 threw himself from the ramparts as the nozzle of the ghostly gun spun up and spat a whirling torrent of plasma.

<Contact: tau battlesuit. Threat level: high,> he transmitted as he dived. <Coordinates follow...>

He rolled into a kneeling crouch behind the tau assassin and opened fire with his carbine. As the battlesuit turned towards him, Squad Thorium answered their

Alpha's summons and hammered the intruder with radium rounds from the ramparts above. The sighted and the blind struck with equal precision, their aim guided by the firing vector Viharok-TH01 had relayed. The battlesuit's stealth field seethed erratically under the barrage and the Alpha saw its carapace buckling in the brief snapshots of visibility. He gritted his teeth around his rebreather in defiance as its burst cannon locked onto him.

My service will terminate here, he thought, but this xenos filth will not long outlast me.

'The Ommissiah condemns!' he spat aloud, drawing upon a primal well of hatred stemming from his former life.

A silver giant jumped from the ramparts, crashing down into a feral crouch beside the battlesuit. As she rose, the Alpha Primus sliced upwards with a humming, razor-edged blade. There was a screech of tortured metal and the tau's 'ghost' cannon clattered to the ground – along with the now visible arm that still wielded it. The damaged battlesuit leapt away with surprising grace as its jetpack flared into life, but the Primus lunged after its stuttering silhouette and rammed her blade into its breastplate, pinning the assassin as its feet rose from the deck. Struggling to break free, it clawed at her visor with its surviving arm, but found no purchase on the polished metal. The Primus thrust deep and the tip of her blade punched through the assassin's back, tearing open a wellspring of crackling electricity and steaming blood. A moment later the battlesuit was torn asunder as she fired her wrist-mounted eradication beamer within its chest cavity.

<Expurgation sequence complete,> the Alpha Primus transmitted. A ripple of electricity surged along her blade, oxidising the blood that stained it.

<Permission to land and pursue the xenos,> Viharok-TH01 chattered as he climbed to his feet.

<Negative. Irrelevant,> the Primus said. <Mission proceeds.>

Desultory volleys of gunfire could still be heard from the rear of the convoy, but there was no return fire. The attack was over. Por'ui Ybolyan had disappeared.

'It was *kauyon*,' the Alpha Primus reported later. 'Standard tau tactical methodology: draw out and ensnare your enemy.' She paused, considering. 'Sever its head.'

She dominated the data-rich nexus of the bridge like a resplendent statue, standing rigid on the command dais as she communed with her master.

‘You are not the head of the cohort,’ Magos Caul replied from his aerie in the Iron Diadem. While every skitarius was linked to the magos through its noospheric aura, only the Alpha Primus was blessed with fluid two-way communion. The neural data tether lacing her skull connected them intimately.

‘The xenos underestimate our resolve,’ Caul said. ‘They underestimate *me*.’

‘Conjecture: they did not anticipate success,’ she said. ‘Postulate: desperation.’

The magos never doubted the Primus’s insights into the tau. The blue-skinned xenos were among the most subtle of the Imperium’s enemies, yet they were transparent to her. She had studied his archives on the aliens obsessively, absorbing every facet of data, but he knew that wasn’t the crux of her understanding. She had more reason to loathe the tau than most, even if she only remembered it at a blood-deep, visceral level.

She is my masterwork, Caul reflected with sober pride, an exemplar of order forged from anarchy... and ignominy.

There had been no victory for either side in the long war for Phaedra, only a sudden and inexplicable cessation of supplies and communication; simply surviving had required considerable flexibility from those caught up in the meat grinder. During the final years Caul had been obliged to cooperate with the tau, but he had done it in the Ommissiah’s name, seizing the opportunity to study their technology. The depth of their heresy had appalled him, for their machines were diabolical contrivances imbued with thought, devoid of spirit. It was an affront to the Machine-God, yet it paled beside Phaedra’s biological stain.

Compromise was a valid stratagem to secure my research, Caul reasoned. Nevertheless he would pay his penance when the last of his former associates were expunged. It was pleasing that their annihilation would fulfil a binary imperative, for the tau held the key to his escape from this doomed world.

Dawn. A code pulsed through the cohort and the skitarii galleys surged forward at full thrust. The Alpha Primus became her ship’s figurehead, riding at the prow with her mirror-mask tilted into the spray and her blades hammered into the deck like monstrous pitons. Her bodyguards flanked her on either side, their legs splayed wide for balance as their silver-trimmed robes gusted in the wind. Both were female Alpha-level rangers who had been by her side since she was inducted into the skitarii. She remembered nothing before that time, not even her own face, though it must surely be a horror beyond endurance, for her helmet was a hermetically sealed puzzle box, its visor a rigid facade.

I have been reborn as the wrath of the Machine-God incarnate, she thought.

That is the only truth that matters.

Abruptly the river yawned into a gaping estuary that disgorged the vessels into the open seas of Dolorosa Azure. Here the continent fragmented into scattered archipelagos that thinned out as the galleys reached deeper waters.

<Enemy base sighted,> the Alpha Primus codecast as the white walls of the tau enclave spilled from the horizon at precisely the coordinates the magos had predicted. Little escaped the web of men and machines that served as her master's intelligence network. She knew he had seeded informers among the humans serving the tau, nurturing traitors amongst traitors. Doubtless that was how he had identified their prize.

The Skysight... Even the Primus didn't know what their objective really was or why it was so important to her master.

As her ship hove closer, she noted the gargantuan, semi-sentient whirlpools surrounding the island and clicked her approval. The xenos had chosen well, for their base lay at the heart of a tidal minefield. The only safe approach was a narrow channel between parallel reefs that kept the whirlpools at bay.

That is where the tau will strike, she decided.

Suddenly the magos was with her, assessing the path ahead through her eyes, melding his intellect with her martial instincts to compute a strategy. A moment of hesitation, then previously concealed mission parameters were exloaded to her.

<Initiate formation Aversus: Maniple Epsilon advance to forward position,> they commanded in harmony. <Activate infiltration protocol Furtus.>

A skitarii speeder tore away from its mother ship, diverting sharply from the route the rest of the convoy was taking. Three more followed in its wake, each bearing a squad of rangers. The compact boats were absurdly vulnerable in the convulsing waters, but their spirits were as resolute as their pilots.

Rho-IR02 was hunched over the controls of the lead speeder. Piloting routines had been installed in every ranger's cortex, but the psych-simulators had deemed him the most capable mariner in Squad Irridio. It had been a question of latent instincts.

We will need every scrap of the Omnissiah's wisdom for this, he gauged as he sketched a path through the maze of whirlpools ahead, *but this is a good plan.*

The bulk of the cohort would pass through the sheltering reefs and strike directly at the tau enclave, forcing the aliens into open battle. Meanwhile a small unit of infiltrators would circle round to the far side of the island to secure

Objective Skysight.

<Fact: Enemy force unlikely to exceed three hundred units,> the Alpha Primus had briefed them. <Postulate: minimal numbers will be reserved for sentry routines during battle.>

If the Primus is wrong we will die, Rho-IR02 thought. He was incapable of fear, but he was one of the few skitarii who could still conceive the idea of the Primus making an error. Then the first crosscurrents tugged at his speeder and his attention narrowed to more immediate matters.

The convoy of war galleys was half way through the reefs when the attack came.

A sleek hover tank burst from the concealing waters in the lead vessel's path, its thrusters roaring as it rose above the waves. The Hammerhead's slime-streaked carapace was battered and one of its engine nacelles was cracked, but it manoeuvred smoothly to bring its jutting railgun to bear on the intruders. Water shrieked into steam as it spat a shell wreathed in spirals of indigo light. The slug punched through the prow of the leading skitarii ship like an iron blade through flesh, virtually disintegrating the vanguard manning the forward turret.

Simultaneously its flank cannons raked the galley's deck with a barrage of plasma bolts that sent the defenders ducking for cover.

Armoured figures rose from hiding atop the reefs on either side to rain more fire down on the invaders. The lenses set into their faceplates were arranged vertically, giving them a soulless, almost robotic, look, but their nimble movements belied it.

A warrior in lighter armour guided one group, coordinating his comrades' fire with a spectral beam that marked targets with pinpoint accuracy. The marker light itself was harmless, but the concentrated volleys of plasma that followed it were lethal. Keeping low, the tau spotter chose his victims with the judgement of a born hunter, singling out enemies that displayed notable authority or skill. The light fell upon the Alpha of Squad Kobaal as he directed his men at the starboard ramparts. A moment later a storm of plasma fire hammered into him, reducing him to a pair of smoking titanium legs.

The treacherous light drifted on.

Two rangers of Squad Uridion were marked and erased from the upper deck in quick succession. Recognising the danger, their squad brothers synchronised their targeting algorithms and hounded the spotter with a union of bullets and electricity, but the alien slipped between the deadly lattice with inhuman grace.

<Attention Uridion: aerial threat,> the magos signalled, catching sight of

something through the faltering optical sensors of a dead ranger.

Uridion's Alpha, Exoss-UR01 ducked instinctively, but his surviving troops looked to the sky with weapons raised. A neutron beam struck Gelon-UR03 square in the chest, detonating his torso into a red mist of superheated viscera. Voxhul-UR05 was snagged by the shoulders and hauled into the air by a swooping insect-like monstrosity. Struggling to bring his weapon to bear, he glimpsed row upon row of multi-faceted eyes crowning a maw of thorny mandibles. He hesitated, momentarily mistaking the alien's chittering for code, then its talons let go and he was plunging towards the sea. Before Phaedra claimed him, Voxhul-UR05 saw his killer struck by an arc of avenging electricity from the ship. He chanted a mantra of praise as its smouldering carcass plummeted after him.

Kneeling, Alpha Exoss-UR01 switched his aim to another of the bipedal insects. There were at least twenty of them circling the convoy, like thorny scavenger birds out of nightmares. They rose and dived in alternate waves, striking in concert with the fire warriors attacking from the cliffs.

The Tau Empire is an unclean alloy of xenos filth and techno-heresy, Exoss-UR01 thought as he tried to lock on. His chosen target was fluttering about to confuse his aim, but his targeting systems hunted it tenaciously. Twin diamond indicators were overlaid across his optics, spinning towards convergence as he tracked the creature. They blinked red as they melded into one, and then he fired. The lash of his arc rifle charred the flier's wings and it dropped like a stone.

Directly above...

Exoss-UR01 tried to duck away, but the unwieldy permacapacitor strapped to his back threw his balance and he stumbled, taking the full weight of the xenos across his chest. He crashed onto his back and a spike of hard chitin lanced into his abdomen, tearing through his lower spine.

<Designation: Vespid Stingwing,> the magos broadcast. <Xenos mercenary. Threat level: moderate.>

Exoss-UR01 heaved at the carcass pinning him, the carbonized chitin cracking open to reveal pallid flesh. As he thrust it aside a pulse round slammed into his left shoulder, almost tearing his arm from its socket. The pain inhibitor wired into his brain clamped down on his nervous system and flooded his senses with digital arias of fortitude.

I will endure and abjure the xenos!

Then the ship quaked as the Hammerhead tank struck again, this time punching through to the vessel's innards. A chain reaction of detonations ripped

through the galley and the observation deck pitched violently, rolling Exoss-UR01 to the level below amongst a heap of the dead.

<Alpha UR01: proceed to forward observation vector,> the magos commanded.

<Acknowledged,> Exoss-UR01 confirmed as he struggled to escape the mound of corpses. The damage to his spine had turned his titanium legs into dead weights and he couldn't find any leverage—

Someone grabbed his wrists and hauled, tearing him free in an explosion of agony that brought an involuntary gasp to his lips. His eyes misted with blood and smoke leaked from his nostrils as the pain inhibitor increased its current, doing irreversible damage to keep him conscious.

<FoRtHeOmNisSiah...> his rescuer gibbered in broken code. The hulking vanguard was a dead man walking, his chest plate a mangled tangle of blood and iron. Only faith had kept the warrior on his feet, but this final effort finished him and he toppled over as Exoss-UR01 crawled past. The deck was ablaze and strewn with smouldering corpses.

I am the last of Maniple Epsilon, Exoss-UR01 realised.

The crossfire from the cliffs had moved on to target the second ship in the convoy, but Maniple Delta would prove a more formidable opponent. Exoss-UR01 felt no shame at the admission; it was simply a statistical *fact* that Delta's tactical rating was 4.27 per cent superior to Epsilon's. Nor did he resent the fact that Epsilon had been sacrificed to draw out the enemy.

The least capable are the most expendable, he thought as he crawled towards the ragged crater in the ship's prow. All the forward sensors had been destroyed so he would become the convoy's eyes. Hoisting himself up, he saw the Hammerhead backing away, matching its speed to the galley's lethargic drift. He sensed hesitation in the hover tank: its pilot knew it had killed its prey, but was uncertain how to put it down.

'Skitarii machines are forged to endure,' Exoss-UR01 croaked, unaware that he had lapsed into fleshspeak, 'even in death.'

Like the skitarii themselves...

Something tugged his attention towards the prow gun emplacement. The Hammerhead's opening attack had annihilated the gunner and dislodged the massive weapon from its mount, but the lascannon was still intact. Wheezing blood, the Alpha heaved himself over to the weapon, though with only one arm he'd be unable to adjust its firing arc more than a fraction. Reason told him it was hopeless, but faith said otherwise. As he put his eye to its cracked scope he

felt the gun's spirit brush against his own and understood.

You are cognis... awake and thirsty for vengeance.

The Hammerhead was almost in his sights. He nudged the weapon and it moved with a fluidity that should have been impossible, as if his touch were merely the spur to its will. Together they locked onto the tank's cracked engine nacelle. Exoss-UR01 saw water hissing from the Hammerhead's railgun as it prepared to fire again.

He fired first.

For Epsilon and the Omnissiah!

The tank's engine housing ruptured, tearing a jagged wedge out of its carapace and spinning it out of control. Gushing flames, it careened into the reef and its railgun tore a scar through the living coral. The weapon detonated in a nova of light that stripped away the vehicle's canopy and incinerated its crew.

<Heavy armour purged,> Exoss-UR01 reported.

There was a reverberating clang as something rammed into his ship's stern – the second galley, shoving its dead brother further along the channel.

Turning Maniple Epsilon's tomb into a shield, Exoss-UR01 realised as his mind flickered out.

The Alpha Primus pounded across the upper deck of her vessel, her blades slicing the air in tandem with her strides as her quicksilver mind computed parameters of velocity, thrust and inertial drag a thousand times a second, honing her charge with every step.

Omnissiah guide my stride, she prayed.

She leapt at the last possible moment, launching herself across the gulf towards the coral escarpment on the galley's starboard side. Her twin blades lashed out to embed themselves in the lip of the cliff, and she hauled herself up and over like a silver mantis. She was moving again in seconds, racing along the narrow crest of the reef that paralleled her convoy, leaving her own vessel behind and drawing level with Maniple Beta.

There were no enemies this far back. The tau had concentrated their ambush at the centre of the channel, where the invaders were at their least manoeuvrable, exactly as she had predicted. They were neither numerous nor well equipped so they would wield their forces like a scalpel, not a sword.

The war for Phaedra was a sham on the part of the Tau Empire, Magos Caul had told her. *The xenos committed few of their own warriors to its prosecution and those they did were deemed mediocre or troubled. There were no ethereals*

or talented commanders to lead them and only a handful of battlesuits, yet impoverished as those forces were, these survivors will be their inferiors in every way. That is why they were discarded after the war.

It was a logical deduction, but the Primus was not convinced. Her master's equations had omitted one crucial factor: desperation.

The tau are survivors, she had demurred with frigid conviction. Hardship will harden them. She occasionally wondered what torments the xenos had visited upon her to grant her such insights. *Was I their prisoner, or was I a traitor?* The insidious thought filled her with rage. *Was I a gue'vesa?*

Moments later she spotted the first squad of fire warriors. They were crouched low in a coral caldera, sniping at the ship in measured bursts. One wore a crimson-streaked helm that contrasted starkly with his white armour, marking him as a leader.

Shas'ui... the Primus remembered. They call them shas'ui.

The aliens didn't register her presence until she was among them. She beheaded the first and second with symmetrical slashes of her power blades, then cleaved the arms from their shas'ui as he turned. He fell to his knees, flailing about with his bloody stumps as she stalked past. The remaining xenos attempted an orderly retreat, loosing snap shots as she followed, but their long rifles were unwieldy at close range and her conversion field devoured the few shots that found their mark. She lunged and impaled the nearest warrior, then sliced up through his chest and helmet, bisecting him as she tore her blade free. The next panicked and lost his footing on the slick coral. Flailing wildly, he crashed into the one behind and they both plummeted from the cliff.

The purgation had taken seconds.

<For the Ommissiah,> the Alpha Primus offered, ignoring the impotent curses of the mutilated shas'ui bleeding out behind her. Then she was moving again, seeking the next group of xenos.

Seeking retribution.

'We are the last,' Rho-IR02 said, turning his back on the empty expanse of water where the last of the skitarii speeders had disappeared. One by one, the other pilots had miscalculated and their boats had been swallowed by the whirlpools surrounding the island. 'Squad Irridio alone endures.'

<Confirmed,> Ptoltec-IR03 clicked. <Contact with Squad Astatine terminated seven point five seconds ago.>

<Mission proceeds,> Alpha Phaestus-IR01 commanded.

Rho-IR02 assessed the beach where Irridio had landed. It stretched towards the tau enclave in an unbroken swath of sand and seaweed. In the distance he saw a string of bulbous watchtowers threaded by a high, white wall. There were no sentries visible, but that didn't preclude sensors.

'There is no cover,' he said.

'The xenos will not expect an attack from this quarter,' the Alpha replied. 'They will trust the tides to ward this side of the island.'

'This is dead land,' Ixtchul-IR04 declared.

<Dead land: definition?> Phaestus-IR01 queried.

'Dead land... eats the soul,' the squat ranger slurred, as if he didn't understand the intuition himself. 'Nothing grows here.'

It's an echo, Rho-IR02 realised. Most skitarii experienced such shadows of their past lives, but for the most part they made no sense and were best ignored. Ixtchul-IR04 had been forged from local Saathlaa stock and the planet still exerted a nebulous grip on him.

<Data logged,> the Alpha said. <Tactically irrelevant. Mission proceeds.>

Since stealth wasn't an option the squad advanced at a march, spreading out in a wide arc with their rifles raised. The sediment of bloated seaweed popped beneath their tread, disturbing swarms of scuttling skrabs that gnawed at their metal legs. The air was leaden, but flashes of lightning threaded the sky, teasing out rumbles of thunder.

The xenos were careless to leave this beach unguarded, Rho-IR02 decided. Despite the whirlpools it seemed unforgivably lax... and unlike them. His memories of the long war were buried under deep strata of reprogramming, but he hadn't forgotten how fiercely the tau could fight. *No, this is not...*

There was a clang of metal on metal as he stepped down on something hard. He froze and looked down. His right foot rested upon the seaweed-smear dome of something buried under the sand. *A mine.* The others had halted, waiting for the inevitable killing blast, but it didn't come.

'Remain still,' Phaestus-IR01 commanded. His omnispex flashed to blue diagnostic mode as he scanned the ground. 'The detonator may have failed.'

The mine emitted a low hum and pressed up against Rho-IR02's foot – almost as if it were trying to *rise*.

'Alpha...' the rigid warrior began, then stopped as he saw a clump of seaweed stirring over the squad leader's shoulder.

Not mines...

<Drones,> Ptoltec-IR03 signalled as he opened fire.

Rho-IR02 yelled a warning as a saucer burst from the ground in a cascade of sand and skrabs behind the Alpha. Like the Drone they'd encountered on the river it was small, roughly the size and shape of a tank gunner's circular hatch, but the dual carbines jutting from its undercarriage marked it as a killer. The Alpha swung round as it fired and his back erupted in a rash of burning exit wounds as the machine carved twin trails of ruin through his chest.

<Alpha down,> Rho-IR02 reported as he opened fire. His bullet drilled through the dying Alpha's throat, ending him with merciful swiftness, and punched into the drone behind. The saucer's electronic babbling rose to a high-pitched twitter as the invading servitor bullet subverted its power cells and *twisted*. Arcs of electricity raced across its shell as it span about on its own axis, whirling faster and faster until it tore itself apart.

More drones were rising from the sand around the squad, their domes shrouded in seaweed and barnacled with coral. Their movements were sluggish as they tracked the intruders with erratic bursts of plasma, but their chatter was growing more confident by the second, as if they were taking bearings from one another to sharpen their focus. The rangers didn't give them the chance to fully awaken. Working in data-linked communion, they designated and eliminated targets with glacial precision, always prioritising the most alert machines.

<Vector 213: Terminate... Vector 119: Terminate... Unit IR03: Evade...>

A bolt of plasma seared past Ptoltec-IR03, setting his robe alight, but the ancient cyborg ignored it, holding fast to his assigned firing vector.

How long have they been buried here? Rho-IR02 wondered as the last of the hovering machines exploded. He stamped down on the one trapped beneath him then stepped back, letting it surge up and into the squad's crossfire. It exploded with a screech of tortured electronics.

<Hostiles purged,> Ptoltec-IR03 confirmed, casting off his burning robe. The armour beneath was blackened, but the ranger's noospheric aura was radiant with battle lust. <The Ommissiah will not be mocked.>

Rho-IR02 turned to the tau base, expecting an alarm to sound, but there was nothing. He squinted, searching for movement, but he didn't have the Alpha's advanced optics. *The Alpha...* He glanced at the ruin that had been Phaestus-IR01, feeling nothing except concern that the squad's efficiency had been compromised. Yet he lingered, uncertain why.

<Squad succession protocol initiated,> Ptoltec-IR03 said. <Rho-IR02: designation incremented to status Alpha/acting.>

The elder cyborg knelt beside Phaestus-IR01's corpse and unsheathed a

serrated blade. With brutal efficiency he hacked their fallen leader's ocular omispex free. The squad didn't have the means to install the augment, but it would have been wasteful to discard such a precious artefact.

<Your command?> Ptoltec-IR03 said, handing the bloody omispex to his new Alpha.

<All squad designations incremented,> Alpha Rho-IR01 answered. <Mission proceeds.>

Four ships had survived the gauntlet of the reefs, though Delta's had paid heavily to break the blockade. Riding low in the water and venting flames, it limped alongside its fellow vessels as they landed on the shores of the tau stronghold.

The aliens had fortified this vulnerable stretch of the island well, assembling the walls of their base from solid geodesic blocks buttressed with soaring, saucer-like watchtowers. Fire warriors manned the towers, while scores of lightly armoured human auxiliaries lined the parapets. The walls converged upon a forward-slanted bastion that housed a spiral portal whose maw could accommodate a heavy battle tank.

The fortifications were of incalculable value on a world where coral was the most durable material, but they were intended for an army of thousands and not the meagre hundreds that remained. The place dated back to the first years of the war, when the tau had staked a serious claim upon the planet, but those days were long past.

A binaric fanfare howled from the Mechanicus ships as their landing ramps crashed down and disgorged the skitarii cohort. Platoons of armoured vanguard led the attack, advancing up the beach in rigid formations. The front ranks unleashed contaminated volleys of radium rounds, alternating their fire to maintain a steady fusillade against the defenders. Smaller squads of rangers followed behind, shielded by their comrades' numbers and heavier armour as they sniped at the watchtowers.

'By cog and code we spite the xenos,' Alpha Viharok-TH01 chanted in lingua technis, his mind ablaze with euphoric war routines.

<Purge the stain,> Squad Thorium responded in pious code.

'With iron and radium we smite the xenos.'

<Purge their strain.>

The enemy gate coiled open like a metal heart valve and a squadron of sleek hover tanks glided from the fortress. They wove across the dunes in graceful, crisscrossing arcs, churning the sand into swirling dust devils beneath them.

These Devilfish were lighter than the Hammerhead that had assailed the convoy earlier, but their burst cannons were devastating against infantry. They cut an arc of ruin through the invaders, scorching away iron and flesh with indiscriminate ease, but the vanguard were remorseless in their advance. As one warrior fell another stepped forward to take his place and soon the divine blight of their radium weapons began to take a toll on the xenos tanks. One of the Devilfish slipped out of its evasive dance to drift aimlessly over the dunes. Another's movements grew sluggish and its fire dropped to sporadic, uncertain stutters.

They have been anointed, Viharok-TH01 thought, recognising the signs. While the tanks were impervious to the vanguard's standard rad carbines, every seventh warrior wielded an antique jezzail rifle that could pierce weakened armour. The structural damage they inflicted was negligible, but every shell was blessed with a killing aura that lingered. A single serendipitous bullet could excise an entire tank crew if it penetrated their cabin.

The xenos will die in ignorance, the Alpha reflected, *never knowing that the Ommissiah's radiance has touched them.*

On the far side of the island the only sounds were the staccato splatter of rain and the low hum of Brok-IR04's lascutter.

<Perimeter wall attained,> Alpha Rho-IR01 reported. <No hostile contacts.>

The other members of the infiltration team kept watch while Brok-IR04 worked at the tau barrier, slicing out a man-sized portal. The wall was a threadbare assemblage of interlocking hexagonal plates that had loosened in many places, leaving gaps in its surface. Peering through the cracks, the rangers had spotted insulated cables running from the palisade towards the compound beyond, but there was no current running through them. Either the generators were down or they'd been rerouted.

The xenos were dying long before we arrived, Rho-IR01 guessed. *If we hadn't come they would have been gone within a year.*

Brok-IR04 prised out the wedge of metal he'd loosened and the squad slipped into the enemy compound.

'Take a look,' the Alpha ordered Ixtchul-IR03, indicating the nearest watchtower. He was the most agile amongst them, capable of a swiftness that belied his iron legs. He nodded and loped towards the watchtower.

<Xenos defensive quotient sub-optimal,> Ptoltec-IR02 said, scanning the deserted expanse of the inner walls.

'This wasn't meant for us,' Rho-IR01 said, watching as the Saathlaa ascended

the watchtower's winding ramp. 'This barrier was intended to keep Phaedra out.'
But she was already inside, he sensed.

Up in the tower Ixtchul-IR03 sliced the air in a *negative* gesture. The hand signal was another echo of the warrior's past, but it communicated his message as clearly as code: he'd seen no enemies.

<Received. Return,> Rho-IR01 sent.

It was beginning to rain in earnest now, turning the coral sand to sludge. Behind the gathering storm clouds he spotted a hint of dancing colours. He'd noticed the aberration before, but only ever at night.

What is that? He found he couldn't avert his gaze from the nebulous chaos. There was something in there... something...

<Alpha?> Brok-IR04 asked.

Rho-IR01 realised the others were gathered around him, Ixtchul-IR03 included. When had the scout returned from the tower?

How long was I staring at the sky like a broken servitor? Rho-IR01 thought. His head was throbbing with the afterimage of prismatic shadows.

He went rigid as new mission data poured into his mind from the magos. The brief communion cleansed him of confusion and he cast the tainted clouds from his mind.

'A prisoner,' he said. 'Objective Skysight is a prisoner.'

The beachhead was secure and the cohort was drawing closer to the xenos fortress, leaving a trail of the dead and the dying in its wake. Wounded vanguard limped, staggered or crawled behind their intact brethren, driven by the magos's will until they expired. Scarlet-robed rangers stalked past them, sometimes crushing their fallen comrades underfoot as they sniped single-mindedly at the enemy.

<Converging on perimeter wall,> Alpha Viharok-TH01 reported. His gaze was locked on the sealed spiral gate ahead. <Breach imminent.>

Twin whorls of light lanced a pair of vanguard to his right, sundering them into ragged sludge. He traced the missiles' contrails back to their source and saw a hulking battlesuit standing on the roof of the gatehouse. Massive cannons jutted from each of its shoulders, dwarfing the moulded block of sensors that served as its head. Its white carapace was striped with red and a black snowflake adorned its breastplate, marking it as a leader.

<Broadside battlesuit,> the magos identified remotely. <Threat level: high. Priority target.>

Sniper-rounds streaked towards the battlesuit as entire squads of rangers switched their focus, but the xenos giant was sheathed in an energy shield that blunted their strikes. The few bullets that punched through shattered against its carapace, discharging in ephemeral threads of electricity. As if angered by the assault, the Broadside turned on the snipers. Its twin cannons flared with indigo light and gouged a smoking crater out of the ground where Squad Lithios had been a moment before.

<Jezzail troopers, focus fire,> Alpha Viharok-TH01 commanded.

Throughout the vanguard every seventh warrior turned his sacred jezzail rifle upon the battlesuit, adding its wrath to the galvanic volleys of the rangers. The Broadside's shield began to pulse erratically under the sustained fire.

<Purgation imminent,> a score of skitarii predicted concurrently.

With a scream of thrusters two more battlesuits soared up to the bastion's ramparts to flank their beleaguered comrade. They were similar to the Broadside, but subtly sleeker and more compact, exchanging massive cannons for more manoeuvrable wrist-mounted guns.

<Crisis suits,> the Alpha Primus said, identifying the tau reinforcements through Viharok-TH01's eyes. Her body stood rigid and secure in her ship while her mind shunted from warrior to warrior on the battlefield. <We must commit the ballistarii.>

<Negative. They are primary assets,> the magos replied.

<Cohort attrition status stands at sixty-one point seven per cent and rising,> she computed.

<Acceptable.>

<The battlesuits are a destabilising variable,> she pressed. <They must be negated without delay.>

Silence. The Primus understood her master's reluctance. She knew how precious – *how irreplaceable* – the ballistarii were on this forsaken world, but ultimately even they were expendable.

<Magos?>

The cohort snapped to a halt as a signal pulsed through the warriors.

<Ballistarii deployed,> the magos relayed. <Initiate Protocol Equites Priori.>

In austere harmony the skitarii widened their formations, opening pathways through their ranks. A monstrous pounding sounded behind them, growing louder by the second until it became a thunder of pistons and venting steam. Moments later a towering bipedal engine strode past Viharok-TH01, bathing him

in an exhaust of incense and voltaic code-psalms. A Skitarius was hunched in the machine's high saddle, manning its las cannon while a bonded mono-servitor steered in obedience to the gunner's will. Four more Ironstriders matched its step, charging past the vanguard lines in unison.

'On iron we stride!' Viharok-TH01 bellowed after them.

Alpha Vhaal-FE01's skull was filled with thunder as he rode into battle – the tireless clockwork thunder of his Ironstrider's hooves and the eager red thunder of his own heart. Unlike his fellow riders, the Alpha was permanently bonded to his mount, the scorched husk of his body woven into its frame like a princeps at the heart of a Titan. Only three memories of his former life lingered: first, he had been a rider, though of what and when, he was clueless. Second, his final ride had ended in fire and pain. And third... Third was just a number that he cherished without understanding: 214. Somehow that triptych of shadows had conspired to make him the finest ballistarii rider in the cohort.

His machine swerved aside as an explosion tore through the ground ahead. He glanced up and saw the Broadside battlesuit's smoking railguns tracking him, angling for a killing shot. It had recognised him as a primary threat. The realisation sent a thrill of satisfaction through his cortex.

Fire... Pain... 214...

Both Crisis suits ignited their jetpacks and leapt from the bastion, soaring towards the ballistarii like humanoid spacecraft.

<Focus fire: Broadside battlesuit,> Vhaal-FE01 directed his squad.

The five ballistarii struck in concord, assaulting the massive battlesuit with a cannonade of heavy laser fire. Despite their headlong charge their aim was faultless and the lasbolts pounded the Broadside in rapid succession. Its shield collapsed and its carapace ruptured, spewing fire. The vanguard roared their approval in raw fleshspeak as the burning giant toppled from the bastion.

Then the Crisis suits were upon the ballistarii. One dived across Gyrax-FE04's path, angling to strike him with its claw-hammer feet as it landed. Its weight crushed the skitarius into pulp and tipped his mount over. The fallen Ironstrider's legs continued to pump mindlessly against the sand, whirling the construct around in circles like a broken toy as the Crisis suit stomped past it.

The second battlesuit unleashed a torrent of flames from its weapon as it came down, scorching Akosh-FE03 into oxidised bones. Encased in the Ironstrider's lower recess, his mono-servitor pilot survived to enact a pre-set emergency protocol. Spinning the machine around it raced for the ships, trampling a pair of

advancing vanguard in its haste.

Prioritising the Broadside had been costly but necessary, Alpha Vhaal-FE01 decided, as he circled the second battlesuit. He swung his lascannon round to target it while his mount loped just ahead of its flamethrower's blazing arc. As he duelled with the xenos a tenebrous thought surfaced from the sludge of his past: *I have been here before.*

He opened fire, punishing the heavier war machine with a slow, but steady stream of las-bursts, allowing his cannon time to cool between every shot. There was plenty of time. His enemy had no shields, so every hit – and they were all hits – bit deep into its carapace. The xenos should have retreated, but the Vhaal-FE01 had it hooked, tantalizing it by *almost* slipping into its arc of...

Fire.

He nodded unconsciously as he struck again, knowing this would be the killing shot.

Pain.

The Crisis suit buckled and erupted into flames.

214.

The infiltration team fanned out as they entered the compound's outer precincts, weaving parallel paths through a hovel of ragged plasteel shacks that appeared to be Imperial in origin.

This is where their human allies are penned, Rho-IR01 guessed.

Looming beyond the shantytown he saw the bulbous towers and cupolas of the tau enclave. They rose above the squalor of the human district like heretical monoliths, glimmering with a pearlescent sheen that was utterly alien.

<Contact: 1 unit/battlesuit,> Ptoltec-IR02 transmitted from somewhere up ahead.

<Hold position,> Rho-IR01 replied, speeding his pace.

As he pressed deeper into the compound the plasteel shacks gave way to windowless geodesic spheres and bulging ovoid towers. Like the perimeter walls, the xenos structures were assembled from hexagonal plates of white alloy that seemed to shrug off rain and dirt, but even here the decay was apparent, revealing itself in missing tiles and collapsed walls. And then there was the mould... Ixtchul-IR03 hadn't been entirely correct about nothing growing on the island, for the grey blight was rampant. It mottled the smooth facade of the buildings and congealed into fuzzy slime between the tessellated plates. A heavy antiseptic stench hung about the place and there were signs of constant cleaning,

but Rho-IR01 sensed the tau were losing this battle. The sounds of distant gunfire made him wonder how they were faring in their other, more pressing battle against the cohort.

He found Ptoltec-IR02 near an enormous, sensor-studded dome. The elder cyborg was crouched behind a Hammerhead that appeared to have been abandoned in mid-repair. Acknowledging his comrade's click of caution, the Alpha peered round the tank and spied a tall battlesuit standing beside a recessed hatch in the dome. The warrior's armour was dented and discoloured, but the weapons attached to its arms were clearly intact and its sensor lenses glowed softly.

This place is valuable to them, Rho-IR01 guessed. Even with the cohort at their gates they left a guard. This is where the prisoners will be.

<I have circled the structure,> Ptoltec-IR02 said. <There are no alternate entry points.>

'We have to attack together,' the Alpha whispered.

<Tactical proposition: we strike from multiple positions to diffuse our footprint,> Ptoltec-IR02 suggested.

'Agreed.' Rho-IR01 scanned the area, trying to formulate a plan. His thoughts were still occluded by the shadows he'd glimpsed in the sky.

<I have determined the optimal strike vectors,> Ptoltec-IR02 offered.

<Permission to transmit, Alpha?>

'Granted.'

Rho-IR01 circled round to the coordinates his comrade had assigned him and took cover behind a stack of containers to the battlesuit's right. Ptoltec-IR02 remained by the tank, staying close to their target to compensate for his arc rifle's shorter range. First Ixtchul-IR03, then Brok-IR04 appeared, each ranger stalking silently to his designated position. The Alpha offered a silent prayer to the Ommissiah and lined up the battlesuit in his gun sights.

<Purge,> he signalled.

Squad Irridio opened fire as one.

They all aimed true, but only Ixtchul-IR03's bullet pierced the sentry's carapace, lodging deep inside its left-hand weapon. Though Ptoltec-IR02's arc rifle couldn't inflict any structural damage, its electricity wreaked havoc on the battlesuit's sensor array and shattered both its lenses. The blinded guardian reacted instantly, its weapons jerking up to spew streams of superheated plasma in wide arcs that incinerated everything in their path. The ferocity of its response caught Brok-IR04 by surprise and a plasma burst hit him square in the chest. He

staggered back with a smouldering crater in his breastplate and tried to fire again, but the arc swept back and scorched away his head and shoulders.

The others reacted more swiftly, ducking as the searing enfilade lashed towards them. The hab-sphere concealing Ixtchul-IR03 was shredded, burying him under a heap of molten debris. An instant later the servitor bullet he'd planted inside the battlesuit's weapon triggered a critical overload. Both the weapon and the arm bearing it were consumed in a white-hot eruption that splashed the sentry's chest with plasma.

'For the Omnissiah!' Rho-IR01 yelled, targeting the bubbling patch of armour.

<Purge the unclean,> Ptoltec-IR02 acknowledged, bathing the battlesuit's chest in electricity. He ducked behind the Hammerhead as return fire chased after him, but the volley tore through the damaged tank and its engine exploded, throwing him across the compound with bone-shattering force.

<IR02: Inactive...> the elder ranger reported.

This abomination is destroying us, Rho-IR01 realised as his comrade's biometric readings flatlined.

<Initiate Doctrina Omniscentia,> the magos signalled.

Rho-IR01 screamed as a hallowed war routine ignited in his brain and spread like cognitive wildfire, rewiring and quickening his neural pathways. His world liquefied into nonsense then crystallised into a vista of sudden absolutes.

I am His wrath made manifest.

His next bullet pierced the battlesuit's carapace with almost molecular precision and drilled through to the pilot's skull. An instant later reality collapsed back in on itself and Rho-IR01's mind began to shut down.

...

<... RhO... ach... I... rHoacH... I... I...>

...

An arc of bright pain lanced through Rho-IR01, jolting him back from oblivion.

<Proceed to objective,> the magos commanded.

The ranger realised his titanium legs had kept him standing while he'd blanked out. The battlesuit he'd fought was also standing, but its arms hung limply at its sides.

It's dead, Rho-IR01 decided. *As dead as Squad Irridio...*

He flicked through his fellow rangers' biometrics. Ixtchul-IR03's still showed activity, but he was trapped under a pile of fused metal. The others were gone.

I am the last. Inexplicably Rho-IR01's eyes wandered towards the siren sky.

<Proceed to objective.>

<Confirmed.> Rho-IR01 strode past the lifeless battlesuit and slammed his hand against the dome's hatch sensor. He shivered as his master's will passed through him to wrestle with the xenos door mechanism. It was a swift, unequal struggle and the hatch spiralled open. Murky blue light spilled from the space within, pulsing softly. Raising his rifle, the Alpha stepped inside.

The chamber beyond was vast, yet smaller than its outward appearance had suggested. Its inner walls were composed of some kind of variegated, gnarly stone, not the smooth metal Rho-IR01 had expected.

Coral, he realised. *The tau built a dome around one of Phaedra's ruins.* *Why...?* The thought process terminated abruptly as his programming cut in. Questions were irrelevant to his function. Only facts mattered. He appraised the chamber with clinical efficiency. The aliens had transformed the ancient temple with their techno-heresies, threading the coral with flanged pipes and glowing conductor strips that connected panels of softly humming machinery. And bodies.

Rho-IR01 paused, trying to make sense of what he saw. The upper walls of the temple were lined with corpses – row upon row of them, neatly stacked and held in place by cocoons of translucent fabric. They were all human. Somewhere in Rho-IR01's mutilated mind a voice kindled by the sky-blight raged at the *horror* of this place, but he had lost the capacity to listen. Dismissing the bodies, he scanned the ground level. A cluster of bulbous power generators occupied the centre of the chamber. Insulated conduits extended from the machines to a circular platform suspended from the vault of the temple. Whatever was up there, it was devouring enormous quantities of power.

Up there... Under the sky...

<Proceed to objective,> the magos pressed. <Ascend.>

There was a metal ramp fixed to the walls. It spiralled upwards, offering access to the gallery of corpses. Rho-IR01 climbed, his tread filling the chamber with clattering reverberations.

They're not dead, he realised as he reached the first body. It was a woman, emaciated but still breathing. Intravenous tubes coiled about her form, insinuating themselves into her nostrils, mouth and wrists, feeding her just enough nutrients to withhold death.

<Negative identification,> the magos said. <Proceed.>

Rho-IR01 moved on to the next captive, a shaven-headed, tattooed apparition who might once have been a giant.

<Negative identification. Proceed.>

A copper-skinned man... <Negative...> A scarred Saathlaa native ...

<Negative...>

So it went until he stopped in front of a man with the sunken, brittle features of a living corpse. Even by the standards of the sleepers he was hideously atrophied, his skin stretched to parchment across an oddly distended skull. A metal circlet was clamped around his head, widening at the front to cover his high forehead.

<Positive identification. Secure Objective Skysight.>

The sleeper's eyes opened as Rho-IR01 cut him free. They were feverish.

Enraged.

'Give it back!' the prisoner hissed, clawing at his rescuer with palsied hands. His feeding tubes tore free as he lunged forward, splattering them both with dark blood. 'It's all I have...' He shrieked as Rho-IR01 hauled him from his cocoon, then a spasm rippled through his body and his eyes fluttered white. The skitarii caught him before he could fall.

<Objective Skysight secured,> Rho-IR01 reported. As he threw the sleeper across his shoulders he noticed a snapped cable trailing from the back of the man's skull. The other end protruded from the coral wall.

The xenos have wired them all into the temple, he realised. Into Phaedra...

There was a whisper-thin sigh from above, like the last breath of a living body as it became a corpse. Rho-IR01 glanced up at the shadowed platform in the vault of the temple. Everything terminated there: the conduits from the plasma generators... The web of skull cables... The truth of this profane xenos experiment...

<Secure priority asset,> the magos commanded.

Incapable of disobeying his master, the Alpha turned his back on the mystery. Like questions, answers were irrelevant.

As he descended his thoughts turned to the sky.

The battle for the gates was over. Alpha Vhaal-IR01's Ironstrider stepped over the smoking wreckage of the last Crisis suit. Its pilot had fought with skill, claiming another of his squadron before it died, but the sheer weight of the skitarii numbers had compromised it, allowing Vhaal-IR01 to make the killing shot.

214... and counting... he thought fleetingly.

There was a roar of triumph from the vanguard gathered outside the fortress as

the gates finally relented to the magos's will and spiralled open. The warriors surged inside and Vhaal-IR01 heard gunfire from within, but it was sporadic – merely the dregs of a defence. This battle was done, but the xenos had not died easily. Five hundred skitarii had set out from the Iron Diadem, but fewer than a hundred would return.

<Alpha FE01: proceed,> the magos commanded. <Secure extraction point.>

Vhaal-IR01 rode forward, following his brethren through the gatehouse and into the hexagonal, multi-tiered expanse of the fortress beyond. The vanguard filled the cavernous chamber with jagged battle hymns as they exchanged fire with scattered bands of defenders. Most of the surviving enemy were human traitors. All were extraneous to the ballistarii's current mission.

Responding to the neural lash of Vhaal-IR01's will, his servitor quickened their mount and they loped across the tessellated hall, ignoring the desultory fire that came their way. The inner gates of the fortress fell to the Alpha's third shot and they burst through to the compound beyond. As they raced through the abstract geometry of the tau enclave, passing pale clusters of spheres and domes, the Alpha spun about in his saddle, alert for hidden enemies. He expected none, but the vile xenos structures unsettled him despite the dictates of his programming.

Fire... Pain... 214... It was Vhaal-IR01's personal mantra to the Omnissiah and he chanted it over and over as he forged deeper into the unclean territory.

He found the lone ranger standing beside a vast dome. A scrawny figure was slumped beside his metal legs, evidently unconscious.

<Objective Skysight located,> Vhaal-IR01 reported.

<Confirmed: extraction shuttle in transit,> the magos replied. <Estimated arrival quotient: seven point two five hours.>

The ranger didn't acknowledge Vhaal-IR01's coded salute. He was staring at the sky and his noospheric aura had dimmed to a somnolent smog. The ballistarii rider followed the silent warrior's gaze and caught sight of something swirling behind the clouds. *Something...* He averted his eyes sharply. *Nothing. There was nothing there.* Evidently the ranger had been damaged during the final phase of his mission.

Vhaal-IR01 switched to sentry mode and waited for reinforcements.

The shuttle swept over the dome precisely seven point two six hours later. The same journey had taken the cohort almost two weeks by river, but there had been no alternative, for the craft could carry no more than a dozen troops. Most of the skitarii would be returning to the Iron Diadem as they had come.

<Objective Skysight secured,> Alpha Vhaal-IR01 reported as their fragile prize was carried aboard the shuttle.

By the magos's decree the cohort did not linger on the island. There was a storm coming and the skitarii were required back at the Iron Diadem. In the haste of their departure the shadow haunted dome at the heart of the xenos enclave was forgotten, along with the broken ranger who stood beside it with his eyes fixed upon the sky. Long after his brothers were gone, Rho-IR01 was still looking.

And in time the sky looked back.

<Shuttle circling for descent,> the Alpha Primus reported.

<Confirmed,> Magos Caul said. <Deliver the asset to the Nexus Chamber.> He returned his attention to the diagnostics of his re-engineered bastion, hunting for errors in the adaptations he had made. Since the warp anomaly's first appearance in the sky he had laboured to restore the Iron Diadem to its original, space faring configuration. Its dormant engines had been purged, sanctified and ignited many times and its machine-spirit had been unchained from the rituals of the refinery. It was as eager to be gone from this world as its master.

'Together we possess the heart and the mind,' Caul cajoled the ancient ship. 'Now we only await the eye.'

I was a fool to let myself be blinded to the stars, he admitted.

Losing his Navigator had been a grave error. He had guarded her from the planet's perils fastidiously, but she had simply worn out with the passage of time. Distracted by his research, Caul had forgotten that mortals were so vulnerable. Without a Navigator his ship would have been lost in the immaterium, so he had been trapped on this world, biding his time until a replacement could be found. But once again his work had consumed him and the urgency of escape had faded until the coming warp storm forced his hand.

It is a sign from the Omnissiah, he decided. *A push. It is time that I returned to the Mechanicus.*

With renewed focus he had directed his intelligence network to scour the planet for a replacement Navigator. Countless Imperial and rogue factions had spiralled down to Phaedra during the long war. Perhaps one of the precious mutants could be found among their detritus? And with perfect, almost ironic concordance, he had found his prize in the enclave of his former associates, obliging him to expunge his shame in order to escape.

Yes, the Machine-God's iron hand was undoubtedly at work here.

The Alpha Primus escorted the prisoner alone, for only she and the Diadem's consecrated cyborg guardians had access to the magos's sanctuary.

They are a wretched breed, she thought, regarding the wizened creature limping ahead of her, *yet the Imperium would collapse without their gift.*

Her prisoner hadn't spoken, but she could read the fury coiled up inside his puny frame, though its focus was unclear.

'If you attempt harm upon the magos you will suffer,' she warned in sibilant fleshspeak. Despite his fragility she knew her charge was potentially lethal, for it was certain death to gaze upon the thing locked away behind his metal circlet.

The xenos were wise to bind this creature's void eye, she thought.

<Approach,> Caul commanded as they entered the nexus chamber. He floated above his data throne in his customary spider-lotus position, flanked by a pair of heavily armoured cyborgs that had more in common with tanks than men. Their arms were fused into massive cannons that tracked the newcomers restlessly as they approached. To the Magos's bodyguards even the Primus was a barely tolerable intruder. She appeased them with a coded psalm of identification and thrust her captive to his knees before her master's throne.

'I have a ship,' the magos informed the withered mutant without preamble. 'You will guide it through the immaterium.'

The prisoner was silent.

'Repeat: I have a ship and I require a Navigator.'

A harsh laugh burst from the Navigator's lips. A moment later the sound became a low, almost feral whine. And then he was giggling. It was a wild, hopeless sound that had nothing whatsoever to do with humour.

He is dead to fear, the Alpha Primus realised. *Dead to everything...* With a flash of blood-deep insight she sensed the truth of things: their prize was quite insane.

'They stole it,' the mutant snickered. 'The tau... they stole my eye... you see...' He trailed off uncertainly and his gaze slithered to the Primus, fixing her with sudden calculation. 'Can you get it back, do you think?'

With a howl of white noise the magos lashed out with his mechadendrites, snaring the creature and hauling him into the air to hang suspended above his data throne. His noospheric aura blazed and delicate arcs of electricity played about his form as centuries of self-control fractured.

'You lie,' he said. His flesh voice was the rasp of a desiccated corpse. A swarm of mechafilaments surged from his cowl and wrapped around the prisoner's skull, insinuating needle-sharp points into his flesh.

‘I’m blind,’ his captive said solemnly. Delicate rivulets of blood were leaking from his torn scalp, but he was as dead to pain as he was to fear.

‘You lie,’ the magos repeated, but under his denial the Primus sensed a gnawing *dread*.

‘They said my eye was too dangerous,’ snickered the prisoner. ‘They said it had to go... for the Greater Good.’

<Unacceptable,> Caul chittered. <I will not be denied.> His mechafilements tightened in reflexive rage and the prisoner’s circlet snapped apart.

<I will nOtTtT...> The magos’s words distorted into a jagged howl of null-code as he gazed upon the terrible truth the mutant had been hiding. His noospheric aura flared into a brief, bright nova then imploded in nothingness. Silence.

<Magos?> the Primus asked. There was no answer. Her master and the Navigator in his embrace had become a frozen tableau. Then she saw the scrawny mutant’s form begin to tremble. At first she thought it was pain that wracked him, then she realised it was mirth.

‘I lied,’ he said. And then he was laughing again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Fehervari is the author of the novel *Fire Caste*, featuring the Astra Militarum and Tau Empire, and the Tau-themed Quick Reads ‘Out Caste’ and ‘A Sanctuary of Wyrms’, the latter of which appeared in the anthology *Deathwatch: Xenos Hunters*. He also wrote the Space Marines Quick Reads ‘Nightfall’, which was in the *Heroes of the Space Marines* anthology, and ‘The Crown of Thorns’. He lives and works in London.

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