

WARHAMMER
40,000



A FARSIGHT ENCLAVES SHORT STORY

REDEMPTION ON DAL'YTH

PHIL KELLY

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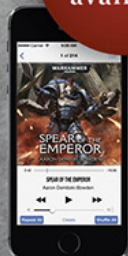
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REDEMPTION ON DAL'YTH

By Phil Kelly

CORE ASSEMBLY HOUSE, GEL'BRYN
DAL'YTH (T'AU SEPT WORLD)

‘These are no mere statues, dear cadets, but rival lords of war.’

Magister Por'klai made the gesture of the unveiling hand, his slender fingers stretched towards the spherical force field the Dal'ythans called the Clash of Empires. Its duelling inhabitants, a fire caste hero in a vintage XV8 battlesuit and a monstrous Imperial Space Marine with his crackling broadsword raised high, stood frozen in the act of killing one another.

The dynamism of the t'au battlesuit's posture, twinned with the roaring, hideous visage of the human grotesque, spoke volumes. The two warriors stood upon a thin section of tunnel, its underpiping exposed by the faint shimmering sphere delineating the tableau.

‘These adversaries live on, held in stasis, immortal and unchanging. They have inspired generations of the fire caste for over three hundred tau'cyr. A living monument to our victory over the Imperium here upon Dal'yth, they show the Hero's Mantle in action, and the bravery of those who wear it.’

Por'klai's audience, a tight knot of fire caste cadets no more than twelve short tau'cyr of age, stared up at the piece with rapt attention. It would be the high point of their day, a fitting reward for their excellent results in training and a thrill they would remember for the rest of their short lives.

‘The monument does not merely commemorate the sacrifice of Sha'kanthas, one of the Second Sphere's most lauded heroes. It *contains*

him. It *is* him, in fact.’

This time, there was a murmur of appreciation; Por’klai considered it sufficient enough to continue. His legs were already aching, and he had given the same speech hundreds of times to bright new cadet classes over the span of several tau’cyr. He would give the raconteur’s craft his all, of course; he always did. But already the air shimmered with intense heat – a record year, if the earth caste were to be believed. He would be glad to move further into the mushroom-like domes of the muster complex and take his rest in the refreshment zone that overlapped its southern edge. His usual vice, an ice-cool *dzincta*, would be more than welcome.

‘Is it true that Monat Sha’kanthas once served the Traitor?’ asked Kha’lithra, making the cupped hands of the inquiring student. A fierce young cadet, since entering the muster complex she had let her war face gradually be replaced by wide-eyed awe.

‘He did indeed,’ said Por’klai, his expression darkening. ‘Sha’kanthas was Farsight’s first tutor, and during the Battle of Gel’bryn City, it was the Traitor that gave him his war name. Yet the rot spread not from his teachings. Before Dal’yth, Tutor Sha’kanthas went on record many times as to the rebel’s true nature. His servitude was an artefact of its time. It does not diminish his sacrifice as a *Monat* assassin, nor his victory in stopping the so-called “Scar Lords” in their subterranean strike on Shas’ar’tol High Command.’

‘The Imperial war leader uses blade and shield,’ said Cadet Tsh’varian, mystified by the anachronism. ‘With such a primitive mindset, how can they hope to deny us?’

‘A good question, young Tsh’varian. The humans are great in number, and they have a callous disrespect for their own lives. That can sometimes make them dangerous.’

‘Can the warriors hear us?’ said Kha’lithra.

Por’klai chuckled. ‘No, cautious one, they cannot. They are caught in a single moment that they cannot escape.’

‘Oh,’ she said, biting her lip. ‘Is it human war-tech that holds them so still?’

‘As the glacier holds the ancient skeleton in its wintery grip, this *gue’la* force field holds both hero and villain in place,’ said Por’klai. ‘The stasis field is a fluke of technology, a brute’s little-understood weapon triggered

as a last resort. By seeking safe haven in timelessness, the Imperial savage has unwittingly left us with a work of art.'

'But how do we know they cannot hear us, honoured por?' asked Kha'lithra, the olfactory chasm running down the front of her face puckering in consternation. 'The class before us said there was a flicker in—'

Por'klai scowled, making the cutting hand. 'The earth caste have assured us of the field's integrity, ever since the day they scooped these warriors from their mutual tomb and elevated them to the glory you see before you. The Imperial stasis field has held unchanging for eight generations. Do you doubt the expertise of the earth caste?'

Casting her gaze downwards, the cadet made the closing-book gesture of the matter settled. 'No, magister.'

'Perhaps you question the vigilance of the water caste?'

'I... I offer contrition, magister.'

'Excellent. Then let us make our way inside.'

Por'klai ushered the cadets onwards; they went in good order, as ever. A few of them nodded their thanks to him, eyes still shining and eager. The magister felt a subtle warmth within his chest. Maybe he could stand a few more tau'cyr of instruction duty after all.

Behind him, the force field atop the monument pillar flickered and spat.

There was a blur of light. Tutor Sha'kanthas gave a wordless cry as he triggered a kill shot. His battlesuit's plasma rifle was inches from the gue'ron'sha war leader's face. Nothing happened. The Imperial brute brought his sword down, cutting the rifle's cylindrical barrel in half. Sha'kanthas raised his fusion blaster, eye-stabbing its crosshairs. It blipped in alarm. Readouts scrolled red text.

••• DATA DISCONTINUATION ••• TRANSMISSION UPDATE DENIED
•••

Sha'kanthas felt a solid impact as the brute's shield slammed into him. There was a moment of weightlessness as his suit fell away from some manner of ledge. For a moment he saw the violet-and-white sky of Dal'yth. Then the XV8 righted itself, putting distance between him and his assailant.

Where were the tunnels? How was he suddenly outside?

He opened a priority channel to the command cadrenet. ‘Commander Farsight,’ he said, ‘close strike abort. Primary target used teleport device. Still engaged, but weapons scrambled.’

There was no reply. The cadrenet was dead.

Sha’kanthas cast a glance at his battlefield disposition suite. His surroundings were some manner of urban inzone. Civilians scrambled away in all directions. His gaze darted back to the Space Marine king, who was gaining the edge of the high podium they had occupied moments before.

He tried his rifle again. Still unresponsive.

The Imperial brute landed with an audible crunch, the plaza cracking beneath the boots of its bulky powered armour. Raising his fist, the gue’ron’sha took a shot with the barrel-shaped weapon system on the back of his gauntlet. A pair of tiny self-detonating rockets hurtled out. Sha’kanthas turned his shoulder, and a shell gouged a crater from the multilayered alloy of his suit. The gue’ron’sha barked something unintelligible, then broke into a run.

Sha’kanthas called up more crosshairs, this time settling on the beast’s unhelmeted face. Why the Imperials were so ready to expose their most vulnerable locations, he would never know. To them, bravery and foolhardiness were one and the same. The monster had already been horrifically disfigured by some old wound, half of his chin missing to expose a row of yellow teeth jutting from a ropy bed of muscle and sinew. A flick of the eye, and the whole gnarled head would be no more than vapour.

He took the shot—

Nothing.

••• TRANSMISSION UPDATE DENIED ••• SYSTEM LOG
UNTENABLE •••

‘T’au’va’s grace,’ cursed Sha’kanthas. ‘This is unacceptable! Commander Farsight, please reply!’

••• SIGNAL LINK DEFUNCT •••

The beast was nearly upon him. He leapt backward as its longblade came scything round, a killing diagonal swipe that would have opened his battlesuit a split second before. There was a clatter from behind as he collided with a cluster of hover-platforms. Civilians screamed as they

hurried to clear the immediate surroundings. He boosted upwards out of reach, gaining a moment with which to catch his breath.

A knot of fire caste warriors, dipping into food cylinders a moment before, pulled their tables into a rough barricade. They hastily formed a two-tier gun line. Pulling pulse pistols from side holsters, they levelled a fusillade at the rampaging human warrior.

The monster raised his shield and charged towards them. Plasma shots that would have seared straight through an ork's torso splashed from the ornate shield in a cascade of clashing energies. The gue'ron'sha's stamping run gathered momentum to smash through the barricade, bowling over the warriors behind it.

One, two, three swings of that oversized broadsword. The first of the fire warriors lost a hand at the wrist, then half of his cranium an eye-blink later. Grey matter oozed out from a skull seeping blood. The second had his throat cut so deep his head hinged away from his chest like an open casket. The third, shouldered so hard he was taken from his feet, was cut bodily in half even as he flailed through the air. Blood arced, jetted, sprayed thick.

Sha'kanthas was already boosting in. In the space of time it took him to close the distance, three more t'au lives met a brutal end. One t'au warrior fired point-blank at the invader, but it passed straight through his heavy cloak to glance from the bulky power unit behind. The fire warrior caught a heavy elbow to the throat in return. The follow-up blow from the pommel of the human's sword caved in his skull. The blade swept around in a three-quarter spin. Two more t'au went to their deaths, their mangled corpses falling amongst the ruin of their team.

His battlesuit's jets roaring, Sha'kanthas smashed bodily into his heavily armoured foe. The human did not sprawl, as he had hoped, but instead staggered to one knee. Sha'kanthas kicked out, but the gue'ron'sha deflected the blow with his shield, righting himself with a deep growl of anger.

The last two fire warriors ran, disengaging as fast as possible. The human shot one of them in the back with his wrist-mounted gun. The shell pierced the fire warrior's lumbar armour and detonated a moment later to end the poor infantryman's life in an explosion of viscera, blood and fragments of spine.

The beast grinned, its ruined lip gaping. Sha'kanthas lined up a shot once more, but the weapon system yielded nothing.

'-- YOUR GUNS --' spooled Sha'kanthas' autotrans as it made sense of the creature's guttural growls. '-- THEY DESERT YOU -- ALLOW ME TO DIVEST YOU OF THEM --'

The broadsword came around hard. Sha'kanthas parried it with what was left of his plasma rifle, and the barrel was sheared through to the point it was nothing more than a smoking stub.

'Die in flames, savage.' Sha'kanthas jabbed forward with his fusion blaster, intending to physically smash the hulking thing's face into the back of its skull. The human beast was fast despite its size. It turned, the blow glancing from the curvature of its massive shoulder pad. That lethal sword came around once more in a blur of ice blue, hacking a thick wedge from the midsection of the XV8 and crazing the left-hand screens of his control suite.

Pulse rifle fire shot in from above, slamming into the giant warrior as a group of student marksmen fired from a commanding position on the balcony. Their shots spun the brutish warrior away from Sha'kanthas to put a spear's length between them. He boosted backwards, hastening for the building's core structure where the comms antennae would be directly accessible. His suit was glitching badly -- perhaps due to some scrambling element of the Imperial warrior's teleport field -- but he had to get word to his fellow commanders. If the gue'ron'sha war leader got loose amongst the civilians of the muster point, it would be a massacre.

Sha'kanthas saw the Imperial warrior turn his shield towards the marksmen on the balcony, covering his massive bulk with a canopy of inches-thick metal. Beyond the fire caste students, a loose group of earth caste civilians were hastening to get through the iris portal to the complex's interior. The brute raised his gun-gauntlet over his shield and sent two shells winging towards them. One detonated amongst the fire warriors as another burst an earth caste civilian apart like a sack of wet offal. Two more, this time aimed at the balcony itself. They tore great chunks from the supporting structure, and with an ominous crack the entire platform gave way, sending the marksmen toppling down to break amongst a cascade of rubble on the floor below.

'No!' shouted Sha'kanthas, flick-sliding his autotrans to broadcast in

Imperial Gothic. ‘Your fight is with me! Or have you no honour?’

At this, the brute turned.

‘— — THERE IS NO HONOUR IN CRUSHING AN INSECT — —’

The monstrosity came on, despite his words, to finish the job. Sha’kanthas fell back down an arterial corridor, leading the giant after him towards the comms hub. If he could keep its attention, keep that perfect distance between predator and prey, he could protect those around him without firing a single shot.

Just as well, given that his XV8 was a suit of armour without a blade.

The complex’s core was close, now. Sha’kanthas could see the tall pillar that manually interfaced with its antennae and satellite arrays visible at the heart of a raised torus. It glittered faintly with readout displays and holo-mite images waiting to be enlarged, understated in appearance, yet powerful enough to send a broadcast across the star system and beyond.

Sha’kanthas burned the last of his thrust fuel to reach the communion console, then flicked his suit to direct interface and placed its antenna in broadcast uplink mode. The timing of his message would be critical if it were to reach the high commander. As one of shas’o rank, his ident should see the data conveyed far and wide.

‘Commander Farsight! Request reinforcement. Rogue gue’ron’sha war leader at Gel’bryn muster complex. Garrison assets insufficient!’

Holo displays winked, his ident failing to process. He could still hear the thumping footsteps of the Imperial giant in the middle distance. The sharp crack-boom of its solid-shot weapons and screams of garrison personnel hinted at a panorama of destruction.

Primitive weapons, those gue’ron’sha guns. Yet they worked, and with horrible efficiency, each rocket-propelled shell making a hideous mess of those they hit. It was more than he could say for the systems of his Hero’s Mantle, scrambled entirely by whatever strange tech the Imperial had used to translocate them. Here, the very complexity of the battlesuit’s systems was working against it, and he had no idea how to remedy the situation.

Still no reply from the cadrenet.

‘T’au’va shine a light,’ swore Sha’kanthas. ‘Please reinforce. Anybody! A Monat cannot fight without his gun!’

A solid shot hit him from behind, detonating on the thrust pack of his

XV8 to send him veering away from the console. He turned, eye-flicking a crosshair on reflex over the grimacing monstrosity advancing upon him, but his weapon readouts were still stubbornly red. Those of his jetpack flared crimson alongside them.

•• THRUST VECTOR SUITE CRITICALLY DAMAGED ••

Feeling desperation well up in his throat, Sha'kanthas forced his XV8 into a loping run away from the advancing Space Marine. He moved around the balcony and fled into the atrium-like hub behind. If the complex was anything like its equivalent on Vior'la, it would have armed escort units at its heart for those times the ethereal caste made their diplomatic forays.

Another shell struck him, this time at the waist. One of the gimbals was fouled in his hip; he could see the tiny holo of the XV8 on his damage control suite flaring red to show it was badly compromised. The Crisis battlesuit, which had wrought such havoc in the battle under the city, limped out of the comms room as best it could.

If he was to stand any chance of victory, he would soon have to leave it behind altogether.

Magister Por'klai could not help but dart a glance down the corridor they had fled down, despite the fact he knew he risked catching a stray shot. There was the Imperial monstrosity, in the comms hub, stamping its way towards the atrium in which they were taking shelter. Ahead of it came an XV8 battlesuit, its weapon systems buckled and shorn away as it fled the battle.

'Sacred T'au'va,' whispered Por'klai. 'It's unstoppable.'

'The statues live,' said Kha'lithra, her teammates around her echoing her words as if they were a mantra. 'The statues live!'

'But how is the intruder still active?' said Tsh'varian. 'Should he not have been slain?'

'Hush,' replied Por'klai. 'You should not be here, child. Move back to the exclusion zone.'

'We are fire warrior cadets,' said Kha'lithra, sticking her chin out. Her diminutive fellows nodded in support, desperate to be seen as a capable asset against the Imperial revenant stalking towards them. 'We can make the difference.'

‘I doubt a team of sub-*la* will fare better than an XV8.’

‘Do you have the access codes to the weapons display cache in the secondary muster hall, honoured por?’ said Tsh’varian.

‘Of course not,’ he replied, making the sign of the pinched-out flame.

‘I do,’ grinned the boy, his eyes alight.

‘More Farsight than Shadowsun, this one,’ muttered Por’klai.

In the corridor ahead, the XV8 limped out into the atrium, lurching left as it entered the wide, flora-fringed entranceway. There was a harsh detonation upon its shoulder. The battlesuit staggered into a pillar, smashing down an array of light sculptures in a spray of glass and shrapnel.

The XV8 righted itself, and then – as another detonation tore its sensor head from its shoulders – sagged downwards as if suddenly exhausted. Its plexus hatch burst open, and a tall, wild-eyed battlesuit pilot burst out.

Drones, coming in low from the upper dome of the atrium, swooped past him to open fire at the Imperial monster lumbering down the corridor. One was shot out of the air, the other bisected by a lunge of the invader’s power sword.

‘Move!’ shouted the battlesuit pilot, his face streaked with sweat and blood. ‘Get away!’

‘Is that... is that Sha’kanthas?’ said Kha’lithra.

‘It cannot be,’ said Por’klai. ‘No. It cannot be.’

‘But look, magister,’ said Kha’lithra. ‘It is.’

Sha’kanthas stumbled away from his battlesuit, gasping with a mixture of raw adrenaline and fear. The Imperial beast was less than a hundred yards behind him. One clear shot, and a solid shell would detonate between his shoulder blades, killing him in a spectacular eruption of gore. He could feel the very possibility burning into his psyche, hovering like a knot of hot potential in the middle of his spine. Yet he had to lead the warrior away from the civilian areas, even if he was to be little more than a declawed lynx to the invader’s raging, frenzied bear. He could not let fear overtake him, despite it closing its cold claws around his windpipe and stopping him from swallowing down the rising tide of panic. A moment of such weakness, and his people would pay the cost in blood.

In the plaza ahead, a tall water caste magister in strange, unfamiliar garb

stood amongst a knot of fire caste cadets. They were looking intently at him, as if he were a ghost.

‘Move!’ he shouted at them. ‘Get away!’

They did not move. In fact, one of the youngsters beckoned him in close.

‘Tutor Sha’kanthas!’ she shouted. ‘You must come with us. There is a weapons display beyond us!’

He was about to refuse on principle, but then turned in his flight, making the gesture of swift furtherance so the young cadets moved off. A shell blurred past him, perhaps a hand’s breadth from his shoulder. Thank the T’au’va, it detonated not amongst the cadets, but on a tall florasynt tree at the centre of the atrium. Wood splinters pricked the side of his face as he hurdled the low beam of an abstract sculpture. A moment later, he heard a deafening boom from the other side of the atrium, and a series of screams. He glanced over to see an illustration façade shot to pieces, exposing a knot of cowering air caste students. They cried out in fear as the Imperial brute growled in animalistic rage in their direction.

Desperate to keep the beast pursuing him, Sha’kanthas snatched a winking notation disc from the water caste magister as he caught up with the knot of cadets. He veered left away from them once more and hurled it hard at the brute’s head. The disc flew most of the way there, then smoothly reversed its direction, swooping back to emit a bright, chiming tone.

‘You appear to have hurled me, master user,’ it said. ‘May I return myself to your service?’

Sha’kanthas blinked in disbelief, casting about himself for something he could use as a weapon. His eyes alit on the stones of an elemental garden; snatching up a jagged, roughly triangular rock, he threw it as hard as he could at the side of the brute’s head. It struck home hard on his temple, laying open a flap of flesh and causing blood to ooze down his cheek.

The Imperial scooped up a slew of gravel from a florasynt bed and rubbed it into the open wound, grunting out something in his guttural tongue.

‘He thanks you for the scar,’ said the water caste magister, his tone querulous, ‘and says his Emperor will be pleased.’

‘These humans are animals,’ said Sha’kanthas. ‘Now move!’

Pushing the magister before him, the battlesuit pilot hustled down the

narrow corridor across the atrium, the fire caste cadets arranging themselves as an escort detail around them. The sound of explosions in the atrium faded, replaced by the rhythmic stomping of the Imperial warrior at full advance.

‘Get to the museum,’ said Sha’kanthas. ‘Full spread, burning rain configuration.’

The cadets exchanged puzzled glances, but did not react.

‘Burning rain, I said!’

‘Forgive them, shas’o,’ said the water caste operative. ‘Your military cant is some three hundred tau’cyr old.’

Sha’kanthas had no idea what he was talking about. His mind was entirely occupied by acts of survival, firing corridors and ballistics angles. Should the brute start firing down the corridor after them, the cadets would be gunned down in short order. They would give their lives quite happily in the name of the T’au’va. But their blood would be on his hands.

‘Just get behind that vestibule wall!’ he shouted, pushing two of the cadets towards it.

‘We cannot!’ shouted the fierce-looking girl amongst them. ‘The exhibits are this way. There is an original XV8 there!’

‘It is a relic,’ hissed her companion, Tsh’varian. ‘Its hardware will be incompatible.’

‘And what do you think he is?’ she replied.

‘Very well,’ said Sha’kanthas, changing direction after the girl. ‘If there is an intact battlesuit in the complex, guide me to it. It could save many lives.’

As they ran onward, he caught snatches of their conversation.

‘They have guns there, Kha’lithra, near the Traitor’s Denouncement,’ said Tsh’varian. ‘And my data stream maintains we are the only fire caste on-site.’

‘None of us are above *la* rank,’ said the girl.

‘We have the Hero to draw his ire. Together, we will prevail.’

‘Here he comes!’ shouted the water caste magister, his voice shrill with fear. ‘Heads down—’

There was a loud purr of repulsor engines as a Piranha arced down through the air above them. Small enough to pass through the arterial corridors, the T-shaped craft had scrambled through the complex and

flown right over their heads. The craft's gunner opened fire with the drones on its wingtips.

Sha'kanthas felt a measure of hope. The Piranha's pulse carbines would struggle against Imperial power armour, but if they kept the monster pinned in place, the fusion blaster at the craft's tip could finish the job. The craft's wing drones detached as it came in close, flying wide to baffle the intruder's target priority.

The Space Marine ignored them. He leapt up onto the lip of a communion table and sprung right for the craft, sword blurring. The tip of the blade took the nose of the craft clean away. Twisting mid-leap, the gue'ron'sha shot the Piranha in the wing before landing in a skidding crouch. The craft veered, wobbled, and went out of control to smash headlong into the wall beyond, smoke gouting from its wreckage.

Sha'kanthas ran onwards, privately glad of the distraction even if it had cost two more t'au lives. Only a warrior clad in the Hero's Mantle could truly hope to match the invader, but the Piranha had bought them time. Though there would inevitably be some XV8 reinforcements inbound by this point, the intruder would likely have slain another score of t'au by the time they arrived.

Ahead was a large hall, faceted like a gemstone but with all the hard edges smoothed into perfect contours. In its heart was a wide variety of exhibits covering the glory of the fire caste. Sha'kanthas passed a holo schematic; the hall was one of four such places, each focused on one caste and intended for the edification of the others. They all adjoined one another around a central ethereal garden that lay just beyond the hall, a place for quiet contemplation on the sovereignty of the celestial caste.

This day, quiet contemplation was not a likely outcome.

The fire caste's hall had been built around the evolution of t'au military achievement. Holo strats of famous t'au battles ringed the outside, intended to be seen in sequence and each supported by artefacts from that time. The pinnacle of the spiralling exhibit was occupied by the most advanced battlesuit Sha'kanthas had ever seen. It was taller and more anatomically advanced than the standard XV8 – one of which stood at its waist by way of contrast – and was labelled under the banner of the Third Sphere Expansion.

But there had been no Third Sphere Expansion. Not yet.

Sha'kanthas put it from his mind. Thank the Greater Good, both battlesuits had their plexus hatches open, the better to show their inner workings to those t'au cadets who would seek a surface understanding of their glory. He ran up the spiralling ramp, past the time-sequential exhibits, towards them.

In doing so, he saw the truth.

Two-thirds of the way along the ramp, he passed the display pertaining to the Damocles War, and the Battle of Gel'bryn City. History had marched on without him. He had not been translocated by the Imperial's field, but stilled completely. Frozen in time, and only now released, three hundred tau'cyr later. But that was not the worst of it.

Beyond the display, he saw exhibits on the Farsight Expedition, each more damning and hurtful than the last. They were titled the Great Treason.

His eyes widened, heart hammering in his chest. His thoughts of pursuit from the monster still screamed from his hindbrain, but for a moment, they had been put aside.

Farsight the Rebel. Farsight the Traitor. It was all there, plain as day.

Had he known it all along? Had his first instincts back in Mont'yr Battle Dome been correct? The one to whom he had offered his sword during the Dal'yth war, who had given him the honour name Sha'ko'vash – Fire's Worthy Cause – was himself unworthy. Had he been a false prophet of the T'au'va?

Grimacing, his mind reeling at the barrage of truths, Sha'kanthas vaulted the rail and climbed up to the battlesuit exhibits. He made his way not to the huge, multi-paned masterpiece at the hall's centre, but the smaller, standard XV8. *The wise warrior fights with the blade with which he has trained.* It was something Farsight himself had taught him, when the student had become the master, so long ago. Be it from the lips of a traitor or no, the maxim held true.

Sha'kanthas stretched, put a foot on the battlesuit's knee, and leapt smoothly into the control cocoon. Kicking away the elegant scaffold that projected informational holos around the machine, he slid into the pilot's recess and closed the plexus hatch. Taking a deep breath, he used the command cadre's activation protocol.

Thank the T'au'va, the machine leapt into life.

The suit had been kept as a working example, a classic XV8 like those he had trained with on Vior'la, to show how far weapons tech had come. To Sha'kanthas, it was like putting on an old glove; it would have enough power to make at least one killing shot. It was a testament to the singular communality of the t'au that such a powerful weapon of war could be left on standby without reservation. Only one with the right to wear the Hero's Mantle would dare step inside, and even then only in extremis. That was something the selfish barbarians of the Imperium would never understand.

'Sha'ko'vash.'

The voice came across the command-and-control link as he initiated the XV8's war systems and tore the battlesuit free from its moorings in the exhibit. Its deep, authoritative tones echoed from across the span of history, piercing his mind.

'Honoured Sha'ko'vash. Have we communion?'

It was the voice of the Traitor, unmistakable despite the timbre of age. Whether it came from a recording, some remote link, or perhaps even from beyond the grave, was not clear.

'O'Shovah,' he whispered back. 'You cannot be here. You were found to be a rebel, and denounced.'

'You called for me on a wavelength I have not used since the Dal'ythan campaign. So do I respond. Listen well, for I am not as far away as you might think. Events on Prefectia came to a head. Thanks to O'Vesa, I can reach you on a tight-beam relay via the muster complex itself.'

'You and your commanders forsook the Greater Good,' he said, a measure of his old bitterness spilling into his tone. 'I knew you would.'

'I forsook the sept worlds, old friend. Not the T'au'va. And if there is blame to be had, it belongs at my door.'

'The Dal'ythan campaign still burns.'

'Then the earth caste found a way to free you?'

'No. But I am free nonetheless. As is the target you sent me to kill.'

'Durian? The Chapter Master of the Scar Lords?'

'He has escaped the prison of his making, and is raging as we speak.'

'Then put him down! He is the last of his kind. A ghost.'

'It is not so easy,' replied Sha'kanthas through gritted teeth. He punched in the ident codes for the command suite as its autosect software scanned his eyes for retinal link. 'He is too resilient. All engagements have proven

fatal.’

‘Have you at least identified a weakness? Is there a distraction you could use? These are things you taught me to look for, long ago.’

‘There is another battlesuit here, on display,’ he said. ‘An XV86, whatever that might be. It looks flight capable. Yet there are none here who could pilot it.’

There was a booming crash as the gue’ron’sha war leader smashed his way through the inner cordon. With a double boom his gauntlet spat out two shells. They ignited and shot out towards the two cadets hunkered down to his right as they tried to prise open a weapons display. A split dec, and they would all be dead.

Sha’kanthas lunged. With a squeal of metal, the vintage battlesuit lurched from the displays and extended its arm to echo the movement. The twin shells detonated on the battlesuit’s forearm, flinging it out wide. Other than bathing the youngsters in a backwash of heat it did not harm them.

‘Enough!’ shouted Sha’kanthas, his voice booming from the XV8’s speaker grilles as he stamped down onto the spiral ramp. The gue’ron’sha war leader barked an unintelligible war cry, a fierce joy in his tone as he pounded his way up the slope towards him.

Sha’kanthas drew a bead with the suit’s plasma rifle, held his breath as the crosshairs slid into place, and fired.

The Space Marine raised his shield at the last moment. The energy bolt splashed over its rim to burn away a good inch of his skull.

He came on nonetheless.

‘Buy time,’ said Farsight. *‘Distract. And trust to your fellow t’au.’*

The giant stormed forward once more, shield in front and massive blade raised. Sha’kanthas leapt forward to meet him, putting himself in between the cadets and the brutish invader. He saw one of them run past him and clamber into the XV86, another persisting with the weapons cache.

The gue’ron’sha war leader swept his sword down hard, cutting the knee from Sha’kanthas’ battlesuit. He leapt forward, injured leg raised to slam the shield and send the brute skidding backwards. The impact jarred him even in the control cocoon; it was like charging a rockcrete bunker.

‘Surrender or die,’ said Sha’kanthas, eye-swiping the translation suite so it broadcast the message in Imperial Gothic. ‘Put down your weapons. You are alone on an alien planet, three hundred cycles past your time, and your

warrior brotherhood is dead.’

‘— — THEN I CHOOSE DEATH — —’ spooled the autotrans as the gue’ron’sha recovered his footing. ‘— — YOUR SPECIES PROFESSES TO WANT PEACE, BUT YOU WOULD SLAUGHTER US AS BEASTS IF YOU COULD — —’

The brute lunged, covering the distance between them with shocking ease. He cut the XV8’s arm from its torso as if it were no more than rotten wood. Sha’kanthas made a clumsy punch with the XV8’s outsize arm, but the warrior ducked the blow, laughing darkly, and slid past him.

A cry came from behind. ‘I can’t get it to work!’ said Tsh’varian.

‘Keep trying!’ came Kha’lithra’s reply.

‘*Sha’ko’vash,*’ came Farsight’s voice once more. It was old, and heavy with the wisdom of years. ‘*Get your adversary to shield against your feint. Allow those he sees as lesser threats to seize their moment.*’

‘No,’ said Sha’kanthas, turning. ‘Why should I disgrace myself by listening to you? I shall give my life to buy time.’

‘*Tutor, please. Allow yourself to survive.*’

Sha’kanthas saw the Space Marine raise his double-barrelled gauntlet once more. He kicked out to spoil his aim, but he was too late. The gue’ron’sha blasted a shell straight into the cockpit of the XV86. It detonated, the blood of its would-be pilot spilling from within to paint angular white limbs red.

‘Tsh’varian!’ shouted Kha’lithra.

‘*Distract the foe! Raise the shield!*’ came Farsight’s voice.

Sha’kanthas took the leap. He jumped high, the XV8’s powerful limbs propelling him upwards; though its long-dormant jets did not catch, the gue’ron’sha lifted his shield on instinct to ward away the blow from above.

There was a blaze of light from near the weapons cache. The human war leader fell back, dropping his sword to clutch one-handed at the ruined wreckage of his neck. The female cadet, Kha’lithra, advanced with a pulse carbine blazing at his chest, sending the war leader stumbling backwards blindly.

‘You cannot prevail, human!’ Her voice was taut, high, but utterly sure of its righteousness. ‘Our destiny is to inherit the stars!’

Sha’kanthas raised his arms high. His XV8 mimicked him as he stepped forward. He brought its heavy metal fists down hard, and smashed the

reeling Space Marine's head like an egg. The giant toppled back, slid down the ramp, and was still.

When he was sure his enemy was dead, Sha'kanthas slid the communion link with Farsight to full priority, intending to isolate his broadcast location.

It was already cold.

**** Two kai'rotaa later ****

Sha'kanthas looked up at the vintage XV8, inert once more and back in its informational scaffold in the shadow of the XV86. The cutting-edge Coldstar suit had been cleared of the unfortunate cadet's remains and reinstalled, along with a holo of commemoration dealing the entire post-stasis incident. Sha'kanthas had not reported Farsight's involvement in it, nor made further investigation as to the source of the broadcast, though he was still not quite sure as to why.

The water caste were calling the incident the Coda of Immutable Truths. A lyrical name for a messy business, thought Sha'kanthas. How very like the por to mask such a dire mistake with poetry. Of late he had heard it implied amongst certain members of the fire caste, albeit in terms that could be easily disavowed, that the culture of the Farsight Enclaves had no need for half-truths. One day, he would find out for himself.

Still. In unity, in hegemony, there was strength. This had been proven on Dal'yth three hundred tau'cyr ago, and just recently it had been proven again.

Sha'kanthas looked up at the new exhibit at the centre of the hall. The dismembered, half-dissected corpse of the Space Marine Chapter Master stared back, an exploded diagram of defunct power armour and plasticised, autopsied human flesh that had been annotated by extensive holo-informationals. A ghoulish spectacle, perhaps, but educational. In knowledge there was power; this Sha'kanthas knew.

Twinned with belief in the T'au'va, it was unstoppable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Kelly is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Farsight: Crisis of Faith*, the Space Marine Conquests novel *War of Secrets*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Blades of Damocles* and the novellas *Farsight* and *Blood Oath*. For Warhammer he has written the titles *Sigmar's Blood* and *Dreadfleet*. He has also written a number of short stories. He works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham.

An extract from *Farsight: Empire of Lies*.



Commander Farsight weighed his honour blade as he surveyed the horde of orks charging up the ridge towards him. With his pulse pistol held lightly in his other hand, the t'au commander adjusted his stance an inch, relishing the sensations of the equatorial desert's sand trickling between his broad, hoof-like toes. The Vior'los sun beat down on his leathery grey skin, keeping his war spirit hot.

It was glorious, this moment. The meditation before the lightning strike.

'First target, shas'o?' he asked Brightsword.

The young warrior straightened a little at his side, uncomfortable without his signature XV8. He had accented the rectangle of his sinistral shoulder armour with stylised blue flames, a youthful affectation to mirror that of his famous battlesuit.

'Crux point of body mass and proximity, then descending order as usual, wise one,' said Brightsword. His smooth, bald head twitched like that of a hunting bird as he read the horde's disposition and leadership structure. 'Though perhaps "patronising one" would be more fitting.'

Still work to do with this latest clone, thought Farsight. Brightsword's pride ran deep in the genes. 'We shall discuss appropriate responses later. Ob'lotai?'

A large disc-drone in gleaming black dipped its rim in salute, its profusion of antennae swivelling as the artificial intelligence tracked the oncoming enemy. 'Maximum disruption, commander. Retain high ground. Isolate and confound.'

'Just so,' said Farsight. He gave a curt nod. Though the pupil had long ago become the master, his original battlesuit tutor – or rather the AI that replicated him – was reliable as a master-forged blade, even outside his

Broadside battlesuit.

The charging beasts were perhaps twenty metres away, bellowing loud and frothing at the mouth as their heavy-set walkers stamped up the ridge behind them. Farsight could not smell them, despite the fact he was downwind. He made a mental note to consult O'Vesa after the battle; every sensory datapoint was important. He tensed his muscle groups, relaxed, and tensed again, feeling the reassuring weight of the pistol in his hand.

His heart pounded. This was it.

'Are you sure about this, high commander?' asked Brightsword.

'The sight must be seen.' He swallowed. 'As much for the water caste's droneorders as for Master Puretide's memory.'

An electric moment passed, one last breath before the killing began.

'Kauyon,' said Farsight.

The first shot was Brightsword's. A tiny sphere of plasma sizzled into the open jaw of a monstrous ork, blowing its brain out the back of its bald green head. Farsight broke left as the giant tumbled into the dirt, two more of the bestial things tripping over its corpse. The greenskins close behind leapt, axes raised against the harsh blue sky. Farsight shot one in the forehead even as Brightsword bullseyed the other.

Ob'lotai 4-0's droneform rose smoothly upwards, hidden compartments on the hovering disc's underside sliding open. Miniature smart missiles shot from within. Each the size of Farsight's index finger, they detonated amongst the ork ranks, causing a string of perfectly placed explosions that sent liquid flame and gobbets of dark fluid spraying in all directions. The foremost aliens were hurled back from the ork front line, but the greenskins behind flowed around them, Ob'lotai's firestorm forming a bulwark that slowed their assault but did not stop it.

Farsight glanced over at Brightsword, just for a fraction of a second. The young commander was moving smoothly along the ridge, taking placed shots one after another as the orks scrambled up towards him. So far, the ratios looked good. They were leading them, misdirecting them, robbing them of momentum.

'Coldstar, attend me, please,' said Farsight. His XV8's own artificial intelligence gave a brief blip of acknowledgement via his ear bead cadrelink. Farsight nodded curtly. 'Commander Bravestorm, move in. The bait is taken.'

‘Inbound,’ came Bravestorm’s curt reply. The cadrenet carried his throaty tones so clearly it was as if the hero of Blackthunder Mesa were standing right next to him.

Despite their slowed advance, the orks were getting too close, braying and roaring so loudly it offended Farsight’s ears. One of them lunged for him, but he had read its stance, and was already ducking beneath it, taking its legs with a tangle-trip he had mastered on Arkunasha. He came up in a smooth half-circle that saw his pistol lined up perfectly with another of the beasts. The shot took the top of its head clean away even as he pivoted on his heel to bat aside the weapon of another.

A massive warrior-leader shoved its way through the throng, bawling for its kin to follow it. Farsight shot it in the chest, then chided himself. That tactic would stop a human, but not a charging ork. He adjusted his aim a fraction and shot it in the throat instead.

Still it came forward, half its neck missing and its engine-axe revving so the dirty metal teeth whirred along its edge. The boxy pistol in its other hand bucked violently as it disgorged a clatter of solid shot. One bullet clipped Farsight’s pulse pistol, jerking it out of his hands and shocking his fingers with a ripple of pain. The pistol skidded down the slope behind him. Instead of retrieving it – a fatal mistake at such close quarters – he readied his Vior’lan honour blade in the Stance of Seven Deadly Cuts.

The sword felt unfamiliar, almost like an enemy in itself. He had not used such a primitive weapon since those days on the slopes of Mount Kan’ji, decades ago. He remembered asking Master Puretide, as a youth – with the earth caste’s technology, why would they ever need a blade?

The giant ork stormed in, swinging its engine-axe. Sand shifted underfoot at its sheer weight. Farsight’s parry was off-kilter. His blade was batted aside as if it were no more than a thin reed. The commander leant over with the momentum, placing one hand down on the sandy dune before pushing himself back up after the juddering, saw-toothed axe roared overhead.

Well inside the ork’s guard, Farsight reversed his grip on the sword and rammed it upwards with the point under the beast’s chin. It pierced the thing’s lantern jaw, came out of its eye, and withdrew in a spatter of red.

Critically, it missed the creature’s brain.

The commander felt the beast’s knee hit his gut, then took a backhand

blow to the chest that sent him sprawling backwards with the longblade spinning from his hand. Reeling, the high commander saw something coming in fast from his left: another ork, which shoulder-barged him on its way towards Brightsword. He fell, spinning, to the ground. The giant closed in. The Vior'los sun disappeared behind the creature's bulk as it raised its axe.

Disarmed and on his back, Farsight reached for the sword, scrabbling in the sand and finding nothing for a terrifying second.

A vision seared through his mind, bursting from some hidden mental scar he thought long healed since an Imperial warp drive had addled his mind in the Damocles Gulf. He saw a world of broken statues, and a flat disc of fire. He was reaching for a far larger blade as a red-skinned monstrosity bore down on him, screaming its war cry as skulls rattled on the chains bound to its wings.

Blood for the Blood God.

Then his gauntlet closed around the honour blade's hilt.

Farsight shook his head and knelt as he took up the sword, bringing it round to lock his muscles in the Guard of Stone. This time the angle was true, and the power of the ork's blow was turned against its wielder. The honour blade, its edge the sharpest the earth caste could devise, cut straight through the metal of the ork's axe, sending the engine-blade thudding into the sand.

The ork growled. It swung the axe's heavy steel haft anyway, and hit Farsight hard.

The force of the impact hurled him away, bright Vior'los daylight lancing into his eyes as he flew through the air. Through the pain he had a flash of memory – Mount Kan'ji, and harsh lessons under a punishing sun.

'Reinforce,' he gasped.

There was a sudden sense of displaced air, the sound of jetpack engines ripping the hot sky. Farsight heard hissing hydraulics from behind him as he fell backwards off the ridge's crest. His ribs burned and his lungs emptied of air as he slammed into the control cocoon of his customised XV8, but he squared his shoulders on instinct as it compensated for his weight. As restraint bars slid around Farsight's torso, a spike of old pain came from his hip, where the flesh met his cybernetic leg: a reminder of a battle lost to Arachen skitterlings long ago.

Stunts like this were the province of younger warriors, but he had a reputation to keep.

Coldstar swung the fascia of the control cocoon up into place, hex-screens leaping into life as the battlesuit overlaid a dozen targeting solutions across the ork horde below.


Click here to buy *Farsight: Empire of Lies*.

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