

WARHAMMER 40,000



ASTRA MILITARUM HUNTERS

BRADEN CAMPBELL

HUNTERS

Braden Campbell

Mihalik was recalling his first encounter with the devil when the wind shifted slightly, rippling the tall grass in which he and Covone were lying. They took the opportunity to move forward again. Glancing to the sky, he noted that clouds were slowly rolling in, obscuring the stars. That meant the wind would continue to pick up and the two of them would be able to cover substantial ground. If the grass stopped moving, then they would have to as well. Although the cammo cloaks they each wore would make them all but invisible, the tau sentries wore helmets with amplified vision and their perimeter drones were equipped with motion trackers. To stay completely hidden, he and Covone had to move in conjunction with their cover. When the brush moved, they moved. When the world was silent, so were they. Adapting oneself to the environment; that was the Catachan way.

The way of their enemy, on the other hand, was very different. The tau had arrived on Cytheria weeks ago, thinking it to be largely undeveloped and unpopulated; a perfect world for them to colonize. The Catachans, who for generations had used its vast grassy plains and dense, lethal jungles as training grounds, begged to differ. They mustered nearly every piece of armour they had, and threw it at the interlopers. When it was over however, the tau's accuracy and superior range prevailed. Had the planet been occupied by a different regiment, things would have likely ended in capitulation. But this was a Catachan world. The struggle to evict the tau was devolving into a series of guerilla actions, and although such a prospect would have seemed grim to most other soldiers, it was one the Imperium's famed jungle fighters relished; how the aliens would deal with it was the big question.

Something pulled at the leg of Mihalik's pants. He froze and looked over his shoulder. Behind him, Covone tapped the minicomp on his wrist, and then held up a pair of fingers. Mihalik understood the gesture. They had two hours until the sun would rise. They had to be in position and ready to fire by that time, or the entire mission would be a failure. He nodded to Covone, responded with a hand signal of his own that said they were very close to their target, and continued snaking his way forward.

Throughout the night, their goal had been to reach a particular tree that stood two hundred feet inside the overgrown park. It had a wide trunk to hide behind and a large burl of roots that would make an excellent rifle rest; and, it had a car smashed into it. At some point during the tau's occupation of the town, one of the local civilians had apparently driven his ground car up over the curb and ploughed it right into the tree. The front end had crumpled horribly and the chassis was angled sharply upwards, creating a sheltered area better than any duck blind either Mihalik or Covone could have ever built for themselves. Had the hand of some benevolent god reached down and placed the wreck there for them, it couldn't have made a more perfect firing position.

Thirty minutes of hard crawling and they finally arrived. Their clothes were damp. The skin on their chests and elbows was raw from constant contact with the ground. Their faces and hands were covered with insect bites. They dragged themselves underneath the wreck, and rolled over on to their backs, staring up into the dark.

'I knew what time it was,' Mihalik hissed. They were the first words he uttered all night.

'What?' Covone was panting.

Mihalik didn't know if the other man was short of breath because he was out of shape or because of the gaping wound in his chest where the tau had stabbed him earlier. A bit of both, he suspected bitterly. 'I said, I knew what time it was. You didn't have to stop and tell me.'

'I just... thought I... should remind you.'

'Well you didn't have to. I need a spotter, not a babysitter.' There was a moment of quiet between them before he asked Covone how he was feeling.

‘My ribs are on fire,’ he said. ‘I think... I think this wound has opened up again. My bandages are soaked.’

‘That complicates things,’ Mihalik groaned. ‘We haven’t got any more replacements. Can you hang on ‘till we’re on our way back out of town?’

‘You just worry about yourself,’ Covone growled.

Mihalik’s fuse was running as short as Covone’s. ‘I will then,’ he snapped. ‘Get me my ranging info.’

‘Don’t order me around. I know my job.’ Covone began pulling out his equipment. From a tubular case hooked to his belt, he pulled out a battered macro-lens and a short computer cable. One end he snapped into his minicomputer, the other into the electronic viewer. Mihalik wondered, not for the first time, how ancient and revered these two pieces must have been. Then he focused on his own gear.

Many snipers across the Imperium swore by the long-barrelled lasgun; it had pinpoint accuracy and covered the distance from shooter to target almost instantaneously. However, its major drawback was that the searing, white-hot beam of light could be easily traced back to its source by even a casual observer. Mihalik had no intention of making things that easy for the tau, and so he had instead decided to use a bolt-action rifle and solid slugs. In his mind, bullets more than made up in reliability what they lacked in technological extravagance. For days, his rifle had been cocooned in a camouflaged, waterproof sleeve. Now, he unwrapped it carefully, attached a suppressor to the end of the muzzle, and checked the ammo feed. He had five rounds in the magazine, with six more clips on his bandoleer. It was more than enough, an orgy of munitions in fact, but he had no intention of being killed this day for lack of firing back.

The quiet of the night was soon disturbed by an explosion, far off in the distance. Mihalik and Covone both paused in their preparations and lay in frozen silence. A minute went past. A second detonation rolled through the air from the most distant corner of the town. Then a third and a fourth.

‘Paskow’, Covone whispered.

‘Give ‘em hell, brother,’ Mihalik muttered. He would have toasted the man’s success had there been anything to raise a glass with. But his canteen was long

gone now, lying drained and destroyed in the hallway of a filthy hab block. He suddenly remembered how thirsty he was. *Golden Throne*, he thought; *even Covone's detestable homebrew would have tasted like a sweet nectar right about now.*

'This stuff is terrible,' Mihalik said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Why does it taste minty?'

Covone shrugged and took a sip from his own tin cup. His head shook reflexively as the contents worked its way down his gullet. 'Probably because I made it out of fermented firepine needles. It's all I could find. You don't like it, don't drink it.'

Mihalik looked over his shoulder. Beyond the open tent flap he could see the rest of the camp. The jungle foliage here was not so thick as to completely block out the rain, and small waterfalls poured down through a canopy of red leaves. Catachan soldiers, some under Mihalik's command, some under Covone's, huddled beneath tarpaulins and waxed canvas sheets strung between the trees. The ground was a thick soup of mud and rotting leaves that clung to their boots and trouser legs. They sat quietly cleaning their weapons, or sharpening their combat knives. A few cooking fires burned low and smokeless. There was no complaining. They were jungle fighters after all, every one of them. This type of environment was where they were most at home. Still, Mihalik could clearly see that there were no sparring contests, no racist or bawdy jokes being told. The men were quiet, dour, joyless. Weeks of constant retreat, and defeat at the hands the tau were dragging morale into grim and dangerous depths. Mihalik's included.

He turned back to Covone. 'Oh, I'll drink it', he said, and poured the remaining contents of his cup down his throat in a single swig, concentrating so as to not throw it back up. 'Beats going sober in this place.'

Covone pointed and said, 'Here he comes. Finally.'

Outside, Catachan soldiers were arriving, streaming in from a half a dozen narrow pathways in the otherwise unbroken foliage. Their heavy boots were caked with mud; their battle fatigues were filthy and torn. Each of them wore a green armoured plate over their left shoulder, emblazoned with a white winged

skull and the number XXVI. Several of them, upon entering the clearing, collapsed down to sit in the muck, lacking even the energy to stumble or crawl underneath a shelter.

Among them was a tall figure who wore a red scarf tied around his forehead, as well as a secondary one on his right bicep. He had dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks were hollow. He spoke briefly with one of Covone's men, who by comparison looked as fit and energetic as a first-season recruit; and then, he entered into the tent.

Covone extended his hand to the newcomer. 'Paskow,' he sighed. 'I was getting worried.'

'Couldn't be helped,' the man replied slowly. He clasped Covone's forearm in familiar greeting. 'We've been falling back from the plains for a week now. On foot. We managed to hold the blues up as long as we could, but it cost us all our transports.'

'Well, we sure as hell owe you one,' Covone said. He poured a fresh cup of his homemade alcohol and offered it. 'You bought us the time we needed to relocate up here to the mountains. Ezra, have you two ever actually met?'

Mihalik shook his head. 'Mihalik, leader of the Catachan 51st, the Black Vipers.'

Paskow nodded. 'Leader, Catachan 26th, the Lurking Cobras.' He drank from the cup slowly and unflinchingly; its burning aftertaste affecting him not in the least.

Covone and Mihalik exchanged a glance, both wondering how burnt out their compatriot might be.

When he was done, Paskow exhaled slowly and said 'The Black Vipers. Heard you took a real pounding in the initial assault wave.'

'I lost a lot of good men, yeah,' Mihalik muttered. He hated to recall the ease with which the xenos invaders had overrun one position after another. His sniper corps had never shirked their duty though, never wavered in their resolve. They kept on shooting enemy squad leaders and identifying important personnel right up until the last second when some alien weapon barrage engulfed them in a fiery blast.

Covone sat himself on an empty ammo crate, and motioned for Paskow to do likewise. ‘So here we are,’ he said, ‘The last remaining leaders of Cytheria’s defense force.’

‘Risky to have us all meet in one place,’ Paskow muttered. His weariness radiated out through every part of him, including his voice. ‘The tau could end us right here and now if they wanted.’

‘Risky? Stupid is more like it,’ Mihalik grumbled.

Covone spread his hands in apology. ‘I had no choice. Four days ago, the last of the satellites went down. The planetary comm lines all belong to the tau now. If we’d done this over the air, even short-range radio, they’d have able to listen in. Besides, they can’t come into the jungle. Their forces are all geared for fighting in open country.’

‘You certain of that?’ Mihalik raised his eyebrows and looked at Covone sternly. Since the day of their first arrival, he had seen the foe employ a wide variety of military hardware, most of it so advanced and alien that it hurt his brain to even try and consider it. ‘I’ve seen them hit a target with a volley of missiles launched from beyond visual range. *Beyond visual range*, Covone. It’s not natural.’

‘Robots, too,’ Paskow said. ‘Like a big dinner plate turned upside down, and with some kind of pulse weapon attached. Not much on their own, but they field so many of them...’ His eyes lost focus for a moment as he relived some previous disaster known only to him.

‘They’re crafty alright, I’ll give them that,’ Covone said. ‘But I think I’ve figured out how to stop them dead in their tracks.’

Paskow sat forward intently. All the depression was suddenly gone from his voice, replaced with vitriol. ‘How?’

Covone leaned in and spoke in a low voice, as if afraid that, even here, the enemy might be eavesdropping. ‘The tau have a chain of command that’s totally inflexible. Every soldier looks to his squad leader for orders and obeys them without question. Every squad leader looks to his company commander for guidance, and the commanders...’

‘Who do they answer to?’ Paskow asked eagerly.

‘That’s just it. We had no idea. For all we knew, they operated like we do, with senior officers conducting their own operations, working largely on their own initiatives. But...’

Mihalik snickered. ‘Headless snakes.’

Covone and Paskow looked at him, and after a second, he elaborated.

‘Back on Catachan, when I was just a kid, I apprenticed under this old veteran, Kirsopp. He used to say that we were headless snakes; that a Catachan army couldn’t be crippled by taking out a single, all-encompassing leader because we had none. Some ancient expression about a serpent’s head and its body.’

‘It is the smartest way to run things,’ Paskow agreed.

‘Which is why it’s so surprising that the tau don’t do it too,’ Covone smiled now and reached for a brown leather carrying bag that lay near his feet. From it, he withdrew several grainy, black-and-white pics. They had obviously been taken at a very long range, but in each of them, the central figure was a tau. He wore complicated-looking, multi-layered robes with a laughably tall collar piece that stretched up behind his head. Around his neck was a clunky medallion. He carried a thin staff in one hand that was crowned with an apparently purposeless, asymmetrical design. His face was completely alien – no discernable nose, beady little eyes, and a wide slit for a mouth.

‘Some of my men snapped these while doing long-range recon,’ Covone handed the pics to Paskow, who squinted at them intently. The alien’s bearing and attire struck some chord of familiarity within him.

‘A priest?’ he guessed.

Covone nodded. ‘They call them Ethereals. Near as we can tell, they’re the tau’s ultimate authority on this world. We take this guy out, and their whole army will drift like a rudderless swampboat.’

Mihalik looked at the other two. They were both smiling now, swept up with the promise that the war for Cytheria might actually turn in their favour with one quick stroke. Yet, he was apprehensive. He plucked the pictures from Paskow, and scrutinised them.

‘Covone,’ he said, ‘I must’ve sniped a dozen priests in my life, and not one of them whose passing caused a whole army to freeze up. Can this... guy... really

be so important?’

Covone’s eyes narrowed as he regarded Mihalik. ‘Two platoons died bringing me this intelligence,’ he said coldly. ‘I trust it.’

‘Where were these taken?’ Paskow cut in.

‘Bloedel Park, in one of the civilian colony sites. It’s tau central now. Their engineering teams have put up a landing field and command post there. I guess they thought it was better to build on empty land instead of demolishing half the town.’ Covone shrugged. ‘More efficient, maybe.’

Mihalik furrowed his brow. True, using the colony’s largest open area was the fastest way for the blues to establish a principal command. On the other hand, it also meant that their most important leaders and decision makers were hemmed in on all sides by pre-existing buildings, any one of which would make excellent cover for snipers or heavy weapon teams. For a supposedly intelligent species with a highly disciplined army, it struck him as being a really stupid move.

‘What exactly are you proposing, Covone?’ Mihalik asked, though he already knew the answer.

‘That we go in and get him.’

Paskow’s thirst for revenge was suddenly tempered by caution, a trait shared by all experienced Catachans. When a man spent his entire life fighting where the environment could kill as easily as an enemy’s weapon, if not more so, he either took the time to consider everything before acting, or he died in vain.

‘This is no simple undertaking,’ he said slowly. ‘How will we even get there?’

Covone held up a finger. ‘We have exactly one Valkyrie left, stashed nearby under a mountain of cammo sheeting. It can take us to an insertion point outside the town, well beyond their anti-air defenses. If we survive, it’ll be there to ferry us out.’

‘We’ll have to infiltrate through the occupied portions of the colony site, and only the Emperor knows what kind of security they’ll have in place.’

‘That’s why it’s got to be just us three. Any larger a party will be caught for sure, but three men, three highly experienced men, with cammo cloaks and essential gear only, might just be alright.’

‘What makes you think we’ll ever catch him out in the open?’ Mihalik asked

Covone bitterly. ‘If this priest is so precious, what’s to say the blues don’t move him into a bunker a mile below the ground, or some such place?’

‘He gives daily sermons, out on the landing field, for all the tau to hear. Draws quite the crowd, I’m told. All about the glory of the Greater Good.’

‘The what?’

‘The Greater Good. It’s their little version of the Ecclesiarchy.’ Covone reached back down once more into his carrying bag, and withdrew a data slate. He tossed it to Mihalik, who caught it with one hand. ‘I got it from this. Xeno archives. Most of it is two hundred years old or more, but there’s a fair amount of stuff in there we can use.’

Mihalik looked up coldly. ‘You keep saying ‘we’. Who died and made you planetary governor?’

Covone rose to his feet. ‘If you have a better idea how to turn things around, by all means, let’s hear it.’

Mihalik wished like hell at that moment that he had an alternative plan, but he didn’t. Like all the others, he was tired of falling back, sick of being beaten by the blues. He wanted nothing more than to kill every last one of them, but Covone’s mission was a one-shot, all-or-nothing, stab in the dark based on centuries-old data and some sketchy field intelligence. It was like walking into a blind alley, and Mihalik hadn’t reached the ripe old age of thirty-six by allowing himself to be railroaded. He was a Catachan sniper, who led a regiment of other Catachan snipers. Hit and fade was the mantra he lived by, and he always made certain that he had an escape route in everything that he did.

He shook his head, and began to skim through the data slate. ‘There’s just something that bothers me about this,’ he muttered.

‘Like what?’ Paskow asked.

‘I don’t know. Something. Maybe I just don’t like having only one option.’

Covone sat back down again and started planning with Paskow as to what specific equipment they should be taking. Mihalik in the meantime, began reading the data slate in earnest. It was nearly an hour later when he finally found what he was looking for, and when he showed it to the others, they couldn’t help but agree with him.

In the hour before sunrise, they were nearly caught.

Covone was busy with his spotter's duties; surveying the area thoroughly, identifying potential problems, and taking measurements of the wind and weather. Mihalik lay very still, listening to the various sounds beyond their hiding spot. It had been nearly an hour since they had heard the last of Paskow's demo charges rumble through the streets like distant thunder. The colony was now deathly quiet, save for a pair of venomdoves cooing softly in the branches above them.

Covone coughed. Compared to the quiet that preceded it, the sound was like the cracking of a whip. Mihalik's head snapped around, his eyes wide and ferocious. He saw his spotter, face down, his right arm wrapped tightly in front of his mouth and nose. Covone's body shook with another, more muted cough. Several moments went by until he was certain the fit had passed. He pulled his arm away slowly, opened his mouth, and let a stream of mucousy blood rain out. Then he nodded to acknowledge that he was alright.

Mihalik's eyes narrowed. He was about to whisper something when there came a sudden flapping of wings. The venomdoves had been spooked away, and not by the spasming of Covone's punctured lung.

Together, they peeked out through the knotted roots of the tree. At first, they saw nothing; but then the clouds began to break, and in the gloomy indigo light that preceded the dawn, Covone and Mihalik could just barely make out the silhouette of a tau patrol. There were twelve of them out there, standing perfectly still in grass that came up to their shoulders. Their rifles, held at the ready, looked long and flat and lethal. Tense minutes went by, until the aliens apparently decided they hadn't heard anything unusual after all, and continued on their way.

Mihalik slowly released the breath that he'd been holding and counted to ten. Then, he stared at Covone, who was once again draining blood from his mouth onto the ground. His fury turned to genuine concern, and he asked to see the wound.

'It's nothing,' Covone hissed, and returned to his information gathering. Mihalik could hear the other man's breathing though - raspy, gurgling, and

getting worse.

Things had started out well enough. The Valkyrie had landed in a jungle clearing far outside the range of any tau defense. Paskow and Covone descended the rear ramp briskly, and took a few moments to make a final check of their gear. Mihalik walked the perimeter of the landing zone, ensuring that everything else was in place. Then, the three of them made their way to the outskirts of the colony. For as long as they remained in the jungle, they didn't encounter a single tau. However, as soon as the trees gave way to fields of grass, it all changed.

Crouching within a thorny bush, the three men looked across a freshly ploughed field. Fifty or more humans, backs bent, were planting yellow stalks into the copper-coloured earth. Their faces looked joyless. High above them floated several of the dinner plate robots that Paskow dreaded so much. From a large speaker mounted beneath, it spoke in oddly accented Gothic.

'Embrace the Greater Good. Do not complain about your work, but consider its benefit to all of society. There is unity between tau and man, between the higher and lower ranks, and between military work, political work, and rear service work. It is imperative to overcome anything that impairs this unity.'

'What the hell?' Mihalik breathed.

'They're enslaving the civilians,' Paskow spat into the dirt.

Covone grunted. 'They call it *cultural assimilation*.'

They skirted around the field, uncertain of whether the robots would identify them as enemy soldiers, or simply see them as three more humans in a town filled with humans. The afternoon was growing late when they finally entered the colony proper. They crept along back alleyways, their cammo cloaks making them appear as sections of crumbling brick wall or heaps of trash. Every so often they would risk looking out onto the streets, where throngs of people went about their business. As they got closer to Bloedel Park, the number of tau standing about increased.

Finally, as the shadows grew long, they crossed a parking lot filled with derelict ground cars, and slipped through a metal door set into the back of a hab block. It was dark and cool in the hallway beyond, and all three men took a minute to gather themselves. Mihalik drank deeply from his canteen. Covone

tapped at his arm-mounted computer. Paskow stuck a hand into one of his deep pockets and withdrew a small bottle. He snapped the lid off using only his thumb, and dumped a cluster of four white pills into his mouth. Mihalik watched him swallow the lot.

‘Stay awakes,’ Paskow said lowly. He held the bottle out.

‘Can’t,’ Mihalik said, shaking his head. ‘They make my hands shake.’

Covone looked at the two of them. ‘Alright,’ he said. ‘This place is occupied. Minicomp counts three hundred life signs. But, the other side of the building faces directly onto the park.’

‘I counted five stories from the outside,’ Paskow said as they began to walk down the hall. ‘I’m thinking the fourth floor?’

‘Should work,’ Mihalik agreed. ‘The top floor is too obvious a choice, and there’s no way we’re going up to the roof with no cover overhead.’

The climbed a stairwell littered with garbage. On every landing the three of them took note of several large posters, recently applied. One showed a tau in full combat armour, his head tilted up and away in a heroic pose that rang across all cultural lines. DO NOT FEAR was printed in blocky Imperial gothic across the top, and beneath it, THE TAU ARE YOUR FRIENDS.

‘Some friends,’ Covone said. He was pointing at a second poster the read, REPORT ALL SEDITIOUS BEHAVIOUR.

They emerged on the fourth floor. The halls were empty, but from within the apartments they could hear the sounds of people preparing their evening meals. The smell of boiling cabbage in the air was oppressive. Covone pressed his ear to one of the plain, brown doors and whispered, ‘This one faces the front, but it’s occupied.’

‘Screw it,’ Mihalik kicked it down, and the three of them strode into the shabby space beyond. There was a tiny kitchen to their immediate left and past that, a single large room furnished with well-worn couches and cots. Tattered blankets served as curtains. In one corner, a family of four cowered suddenly before the intruders.

Mihalik and Covone ignored them completely and crouched down by the window. They pulled back the corner of one of the blankets and peered outside.

Paskow, on the other hand, pushed back the hood of his cloak and held up his hands.

‘We’re not here for you,’ he told the family. ‘We just need some space. It’d be better if you went into the kitchen and stayed there.’

Wide-eyed and trembling, they scrambled away as they were told. Paskow joined the others.

‘Aren’t you the community hero,’ Mihalik jibbed.

Paskow didn’t so much as smile, but tightened his jaw and ground his teeth as he bit back a response.

Covone glanced at his minicomp. ‘It’s sunset now. That gives us about ten hours until the Ethereal makes an appearance,’ he said.

‘This is a good spot,’ Mihalik replied. ‘Might be a bit windy this high up, but I can compensate. Let’s get set up.’

Paskow had been carrying the heaviest bag, and he dropped it to the floor with a deep thud. Mihalik carefully took the large bundle that contained his sniper rifle from off of his back, and leaned it against the window frame. Covone glanced over his shoulder, then rose and walked to where the apartment door still hung open. He was in process of closing it, when he realised that something was missing. He had just enough time to look around and ask, ‘Where’d that family go?’ before a squad of six tau soldiers barrelled in.

Things happened very quickly after that. The apartment was cramped and offered limited fields of view, but Mihalik could see Covone dive sideways into the kitchen while somewhere off to his right, Paskow opened up with his lasgun. Two of the alien soldiers ran into the main room, their long rifles blazing. Mihalik and Paskow were couched low however, and the pulsing blasts missed them entirely. The window and wall behind them, burst into shards of glass and chunks of plaster. Mihalik’s rifle was still in its waterproof cocoon. He drew his fang, and with a loud gasp, hurled the short sword-sized knife at the closest tau. It punched clean through the alien’s armoured chest plate and embedded itself up to the hilt in a fountain of blue gore.

There were more shots from Paskow, and the sound of a struggle in the kitchen, but such things were happening outside of Mihalik’s tunnel vision. He

dove forward, grabbed the dead tau's rifle, and began spraying the doorway. Through the brilliant flashes of white, he could see the remaining blues pitch forwards and die. He stood up, the xenos gun still in his hands, and then realised what he had done. He dropped the rifle with a sharp cry, and furiously wiped his hands on his pant legs. He had touched a xenos weapon. No, worse, he had actually used one. His hands felt dirtied, and his stomach heaved.

'Sorry, sorry,' he stammered. 'I wasn't thinking.'

Paskow laid a hand on his shoulder sympathetically. Occasionally, terrible things had to be endured in the course of a war.

From the kitchen came the sound of body hitting the floor. The two men rushed around the corner to find Covone leaning against the counter top. He had a laspistol in one hand, and his fang in the other. He was panting heavily. There were two gutted tau sprawled across the cracked tile.

Paskow pointed. 'You're hit.'

Covone looked down at his chest. There was a knife sticking out of his lower ribs. It was long and flat, and had an ornate handle wrapped in black leather and adorned with golden studs. It looked more ceremonial than practical.

'Aw, damn!' Covone sagged to the floor among the bodies.

Mihalik crouched down next to him. He whipped the red scarf from his forehead, wadded it up into a ball, and stuffed it in Covone's mouth. Their eyes met, and when Covone nodded quickly, Mihalik yanked the tau blade out in a single, fluid motion. Covone kept quiet, to his credit, and bit down hard on Mihalik's scarf. Paskow appeared and began to dress the wound with a roll of sterile bandages.

Mihalik dropped the weapon in disgust. 'That's twice now,' he gasped.

Covone spat out the scarf, and tried to make light of things. 'Report all seditious behaviour,' he said between gritted teeth. 'I find those people again, it's Catachan neckties for the lot of them.'

'We'll help you,' Paskow said. He tied off the field dressing with a sharp jerk that made Covone wince. 'I can't believe that our own people are buying into this 'Greater Good' nonsense.'

Mihalik stood and glanced at the other bodies. Each of them wore a knife

similar to the one that had stabbed Covone.

‘And I’m getting tired of being right all the time,’ he said. ‘You know, when these guys don’t report in to their home base, we’re going to be up to our eyeballs in blues. We have to scrub the mission.’

Paskow stood up and crossed to the blasted window without a word. He picked up his heavy bag, and walked to the door. ‘No,’ he said, not meeting their eyes, ‘this is too important. I’ll head as far away as I can and make the biggest distraction possible. It should draw most of the patrols away so that you can do what you have to.’

‘Are you sure?’ Covone asked as he staggered back onto his feet.

Paskow opened the bag. It was packed with a variety of explosives from fist-sized frag grenades to monstrous demo charges. He smiled. ‘I’m sure.’

‘Leave us one of those,’ Mihalik said. ‘Just in case.’

Paskow handed a demo charge to Covone, then turned without another word and ran down the hallway. The two remaining men gathered up their equipment. Mihalik happily wiped his knife clean, but was enraged to find that his canteen had been hit during the firefight and was now nothing more than useless, twisted metal. He left it where it lay, and headed back down the stairs with Covone.

‘We need to find a new position,’ the wounded man panted. ‘Any ideas?’

Mihalik crossed the ground floor lobby to where the main door hung partially open. Across the empty street he could see Bloedel Park, and beyond that the curving, alien buildings of the tau. With no one to keep up a constant maintenance on Cytheria’s native plant life, the park was rapidly becoming wild. Already the grass was as high as his waist in some places. Then he saw the tree – the tree with the wide trunk; the tree with the large burl of roots; the tree with the car.

‘One,’ he replied.

Seconds later, they had dashed across the street and began crawling through the park towards the shelter beneath the wreck.

Now, as he lay there staring up at the underside of the car, with one partner puking up his lungs and the other most likely dead in the streets somewhere, Mihalik began to seriously consider that this might be the end for him.

‘Close your eyes,’ Kirsopp told him. ‘You get this stuff in them, and you’ll go blind.’

Mihalik did as he was told, and felt gruff hands smear the paste all over his brow, mouth, cheeks, and nose.

‘Emperor, this stuff reeks,’ he groaned.

‘Not to the baby devils. They love it. To them, you’ll smell like corn-fed grox steak cooked just right.’ The old man stepped back to survey his work.

Mihalik looked down at himself. He was naked from the waist up, dressed only in a pair of canvas pants and a pair of jungle boots. On every inch of his exposed skin, Covone had plastered a pungent mixture of animal blood and gluey toxvine sap. It was already beginning to harden in the infernal heat of the jungle.

‘I look like a giant scab,’ he said.

His mentor gave him a withering look and said, ‘It doesn’t matter what you look like. It doesn’t matter what you have to endure. All that matters is how effective you are.’

Mihalik lowered his eyes and gave a weak ‘Yes, sir’. He was ten years old, and Kirsopp was an ancient forty-five. It was an honour and a privilege to tutor under such an accomplished veteran, but the man had absolutely no sense of humour.

‘I didn’t hear you,’ he snapped.

‘Yes, sir!’ Mihalik barked.

Kirsopp folded his arms angrily across his chest. ‘Better,’ he growled. ‘Now, let’s go over it one last time. What’s your objective?’

Mihalik waved his arm. All around, Catachan fighters were finishing their preparations. Half were stationed up in the twisting trees, armed with a variety of rifles and heavy weapons. The rest were on the ground, hacking at the foliage with their machete-sized knives, or pouring barrels of thick, black tar all around the perimeter of the cleared area. ‘To draw the target out from hiding and into this kill zone, sir,’ he said.

‘And how will you do that?’

‘Sir, when everyone is ready, the fastest runners will go down that cleared

path,' he pointed to a break in the jungle's vegetative wall, 'to the cave where the devil's nest is. They'll have buckets of this same stuff I'm covered in, and they'll start smearing the trees with it, making a trail that leads back here. When one of the baby devils gets a good whiff of it, it'll come charging up, see me, and move in for the kill. That's when all of you will light the oil, trapping it. Then the shooters can kill it.'

'What's your exit?'

'I'll climb out on a rope ladder lowered down to me by one the senior fighters, sir.'

Kirsopp nodded with satisfaction and then, with nothing more to be said, turned and walked away. Mihalik watched his teacher scramble up a tree to a safe height. One by one, the older Catachan fighters did likewise until he was alone in the centre of the circular clearing. For days, there had been men out here preparing the ground by clearing away the brush and cutting down the undergrowth. Only one path had been left, ensuring that the gunners up in the trees would know exactly where to place their shots. Despite this however, the success of this hunt all came down to him, Mihalik.

The Catachan Devil, when fully grown, was as long as a freight train, had multiple sets of legs, huge pincer-like claws, and a gigantic barbed tail that dripped lethal poison. It was an absolute monstrosity, and worse, it lived in nests. Each nest would usually contain half a dozen fully grown adults and twice as many 'devilspawn'. They had to be culled each season, lest the population become so great that they take over the planet, and old Kirsopp had, at some point in the distant past, decided that he might as well make use of this annual event. Every young Catachan had to thereafter endure this test of worthiness if they wanted to study under him.

It was suicide to simply attack the devilspawn where they sheltered. The adults would boil up from out of the ground and kill everything that moved. Therefore, the jungle fighters had evolved a means of luring the young devils away from their parents where they could be killed singularly. The foul mixture that Mihalik was covered in smelled sickening to adult devils, but when mixed with human sweat, proved intoxicating to the spawn. The creatures would follow the trail laid

out for them, but had the uncanny ability to sense a trap. Mihalik's job this day was to present himself as an irresistible target, a morsel so tasty that it would override the spawn's cautionary instincts, and run headlong to its death.

If he succeeded, his bravery would be proved, and he would be gifted with a red head scarf of his own. If he died, well, it would be just another day on Catachan.

Mihalik looked back up into the trees. The other jungle fighters had vanished in the intervening seconds, camouflaging themselves seamlessly into the background. Suddenly, the ground began to rumble. Somewhere nearby, a flock of swamp herons took flight, squawking madly with fear. Then, the devilspawn appeared in the middle of the cleared path.

It was the biggest spawn that any of them could remember seeing, and afterwards they all agreed that the creature was one year shy of becoming a full adult. It focused its enormous, coal black eyes on the defenseless, half naked child in front of it. Thick drool began to fall from its clawed and tentacled mouth. It reared up, like a venomous snake might do, and then drove the entirety of its bulk at Mihalik.

The boy leapt as far to one side as he could. The monster plowed into the earth, burying its head and sending chunks of mud flying. Mihalik knew he had to stay in the circle long enough for his elders to ignite the oil. Tough as they might be, immature devils had a fear of fire, and once the barrier was set alight, the monster wouldn't dare try to break out through the flames. He rolled up out of his dive and into a fighting crouch. A wall of fire erupted suddenly, filling the air with hellish heat and an unbearable stench. There was gunfire too, but he hardly noticed. The braided vine rope, his sole escape, dropped down from an overhanging limb. His impromptu dive however, had taken him too far away from it. The spawn was in the way, and he couldn't get around it. He looked desperately around for one of the elders, for Kirsopp, for anyone, to come to his rescue, but there was no seeing beyond the flames. He was trapped and completely alone, and his choice was a blunt one: stay here and surely die, or climb out.

The devil pulled its massive head from out of the soil, and shook it from side

to side. Clods of dirt whipped into the trees. It fixed its mad gaze on Mihalik again, and bellowed. Then it reared up just as it had before, and dove.

Mihalik dodged to his left. The abomination's head slammed down into the ground again. Then, instead of moving to distance himself from it, Mihalik bolted straight forwards. While its face was buried in the soil, the boy ran up the creature's back and launched himself into the air. He caught the vine rope half way up its length, and climbed hand-over-hand with all his might. Kirsopp appeared, a long piece of red cloth clenched in his meaty fist. He handed it to Mihalik.

Now that he was clear, the other Catachans were free to shoot the spawn with abandon. Mihalik took the headband, held it to his heaving chest, and listened. Below him, the devil rampaged in its cage of fire until it was finally felled.

'There's our boy,' Covone whispered.

Mihalik's wandering mind snapped back to the present. He inhaled sharply and shook his head. Twice now, the memory of his initiation day had been dredged up by his subconscious to be splattered across the forefront of his mind. He knew why, of course; understood of what it was that his instincts were trying to warn him. The tau would never be able to go into the fetid swamps and dark places his fellow Catachans were now falling back into. And, since they couldn't take their fight to the enemy, the blues would have to draw their enemies out to more favourable ground.

'Trapped with the devil in a circle of fire,' he muttered.

Covone's looked at him questioningly.

Mihalik rolled over onto his belly. 'Forget it,' he said as he nestled the muzzle of his rifle amidst the tree's burly roots. He settled his cheek into the stock, and peered through the scope. The sky was lightening as the sun crept up over the horizon. 'Let's have a look'.

The enemy base, which at a distance looked like a tumble of featureless white blocks and domes, leapt into clarity. Covone hadn't been exaggerating when he had called it tau central. There were nearly a dozen different buildings in various stages of construction. From the reports he'd read, he was able to identify a few of them; a low, rounded barracks, a cluster of glowing pillars that were power

generators, and an arched structure with four angled towers attached to it that could only be the command centre. Of the others, he was not so sure. Three tall towers of differing heights were still being erected; their bases hidden behind a mesh of scaffolding and their tops crowned with cranes. There was also a fourth, crescent-shaped building he assumed to be some kind of massive communications array. In the middle of all this was an open courtyard, large enough to act as a landing field for a fleet of orbital dropships. It was filling up now with tau soldiers, all of them in identical suits of ochre-coloured combat armour. They were kneeling in perfect rows and columns, preparing themselves to receive whatever inspirational wisdom their leader was about to bestow on them.

‘There sure are a lot of them,’ Mihalik said.

‘Only have to kill one,’ Covone replied.

Covone began reading off the numbers and coordinates displayed on his minicomp. Mihalik adjusted his angle to match. Finally, he settled his sights on some kind of floating platform. It was round and white, with a podium moulded into the front. Behind this was a high-backed chair with over-sized arms, and seated within was the tau priest.

‘You locked on?’ Covone asked.

‘Sitting behind his flying pulpit?’

‘That’s him.’

Mihalik flicked off the weapon’s safeties with his little finger. ‘We’ll wait until he stands up,’ he said. He swallowed in a dry throat and then asked, ‘Wind speed?’

Covone glanced down to his sensory readout. ‘I read four knots, blowing from the west.’

In his cross hairs, the priest rose up from his seat, and shuffled slowly up to the pedestal. Mihalik moved his rifle imperceptibly to the east, and adjusted a fraction upwards to compensate for the way in which his bullet would drop during its long flight. ‘I’m zeroed in,’ he murmured.

‘Then let’s see if you were right,’ Covone said.

Mihalik listened to the blood rushing in his ears, and in the fractional space

between one heartbeat and the next, where an exhale finishes but the next intake of breath has yet to begin, he pulled the trigger. Thanks to the suppressor, there was no flash, and no retort. The only sound was a soft *chuff* as the bullet leapt forward. A little more than a second later, it had flown over the tall grass and above the heads of all the assembled tau warriors, where it promptly mushroomed and bounced off the invisible forcefield that surrounded the Ethereal.

Mihalik looked over at Covone, whose face had become a pale, slack-jawed mask of disbelief. ‘I told you so,’ he said. He withdrew his gun from the tree roots and rolled out from under the smashed car. ‘Now comes the hard part. Let’s move.’

Covone rolled onto his side, stared back at him, and shook his head. He gazed down at his chest to where the bandages were stained deep red. A pool of blood had formed underneath him all the while he had been scanning and observing. ‘I’m not coming, Ezra. I won’t make it across the street, never mind the Valkyrie.’

From his leather bag, Covone pulled out the last of the demo charges. He popped the protective seal off of the detonator, and placed his thumb over button. Mihalik felt a wave of regret crash over him. He opened his mouth to say something encouraging or comforting, but Covone spoke first.

‘Don’t try to patronize me,’ he grunted. ‘You know what you have to do.’

Mihalik started back towards the street, bent low with his rifle in his hands. He constantly fought the urge to look back. Enemy soldiers would be massing on the wrecked car within seconds, and as much as he disliked Covone, the man was still a fellow Catachan. Those who wore the red scarf rarely left a brother behind.

He quickly reached the entryway to the hab block. He slipped past the still-open door, went to one of the front windows, and wiped away enough dirt with the back of his hand that he could look back out onto the park.

Cytheria’s sun had not yet crested the tops of the other buildings, and the park was a swirling mix of deep red shadows. An alarm was wailing somewhere, and scores of tau soldiers were spilling out from their base. A cloud of robot drones

swirled in the air above like a swarm of robotic bees, stirred to angry life by a solitary bullet.

The demo charge erupted moments later. A massive, glowing fireball consumed Covone, the car, the tree, and more than two dozen tau who had been moving in to capture or kill the would-be assassins. Chunks of wood and twisted, burning pieces of metal rained down everywhere. The grass in the park was set alight, and the concussion wave shattered every window that faced the street. Mihalik stood unphased as a hundred jagged shards of glass sliced into his bare chest. He could have used this diversion to make good his escape, he knew, but what would that accomplish? *No*, he thought, *it's up to me to light the fire*. He hoisted his rifle, and pressed the scope to his eye.

For a moment, there was nothing save for muffled screams and shouts in the apartments above him. The scene outside was one of destruction and shocked stillness. Then, he saw one of the blues rise up from where he had been sent reeling into the tall grass. Mihalik exhaled as he pulled the trigger, and the faceplate on the alien's helmet folded inwards with a spray of blood and bone. His right hand flew up the bolt even as he scanned for another target. The spent cartridge dropped to the floor, and he reloaded with an almost supernatural calm and speed. Another tau appeared only to go down again with a shot centre mass. Again, he reloaded. He found a fresh target and let a third round fly. A fourth. A fifth. He dropped the spent magazine to the floor and slapped in a fresh one. Search, acquire, fire, reload. Again. Again. Again. Relentless.

Within a minute, he had hit and killed a total of ten tau, and exhausted two of his ammunition clips. It was more than enough to get their attention.

He was turning to go when he caught something out of the corner of his eye. They weren't lasers per se. They were more like beams of pale blue smoke, discernable only because of the way they played over the powdered glass that covered the floor of the lobby. He had no idea what they were, but it couldn't be good. He dashed forward, diving over a couch. Behind him, a volley of small missiles detonated across the building's façade. The door turned into splinters. Bricks and mortar tore through the room. Part of the ceiling gave way with the impact, and plaster rained down on Mihalik's back. A searing pain tore through

his left arm. He remained crouched behind the sofa, his head down; and he cursed. The missiles suggested the presence of a light artillery battery, or worse yet, a vehicle. *Cheaters*, he thought. *This is supposed to be a contest between infantry.*

Mihalik knew he couldn't stay here. Sprawling on the floor, he began crawling away. His multiple cuts smeared themselves across the carpet leaving a trail of blood, but it couldn't be helped. As he rounded a corner, he took a second to see why it was exactly that his arm hurt so much. With a start, he discovered that a large piece of steel window frame had impaled itself right between his radius and his ulna. He stood up, and yanked it from his flesh. A jet of blood the same colour as his headband painted a dripping curve along the wall.

He ran down a back hallway, bashed a metal fire door open with his shoulder, and emerged into a parking lot. He had only jogged a few steps when one of the tau trackers, moving at a full run, emerged from a side alley. The tau skidded to a halt, apparently surprised to encounter Mihalik outside of the building already. For the briefest of moments, the two stared at each other. Then, the alien began to raise his carbine. Mihalik, with his longer reach, swung his rifle like a club, and bashed the tau upside the head. Then he closed the distance, dropped his gun, and yanked his fang from its sheath. He swung the blade in a horizontal, decapitating arc, but at the last second, the tau blocked the attack with a forearm. Mihalik, who had assumed that the fight would be over as soon as it had begun, was taken aback, and doubly so as he was kicked fiercely in the shin. The two of them grappled for a moment longer before Mihalik was finally able to twist his opponent's arm behind his back, and stab him through the chest. The tau started to spasm and then went limp. Mihalik withdrew the blade to find it covered in thick, cyan-coloured gore, and even though time was of the essence, he stopped to wipe it clean on the alien's pant leg. No filthy xeno's blood would be allowed to stain his fang.

He was off again, moving down the narrow, twisting streets of the colony. The remaining tau trackers were close behind him, of that he was certain. It was a race now, a true contest to see which species had greater skill and fortitude. Before long, he was outside the town and weaving his way through the

thickening jungle. He was trying to take the most convoluted path he could think of, but his head was beginning to swim. He sagged against a tree, breathless. The cuts on his chest were minor things, but the hole in his forearm was near crippling. Blood poured from the wound. His right hand looked as if it had been dipped in red paint. He used his headscarf as a makeshift bandage, and carried on.

It was nearly noon by the time Mihalik neared the extraction point. For the rest of the morning, he had managed to catch a few signs that he was still being pursued – a snapping branch here, an alien scent on wind there. However, all was quiet now. Through the trees, he could see the Valkyrie that that had ferried himself and the others in. Its rear hatch was open and looked as inviting as a mother's embrace. He was far gone, he knew that; he was exhausted, starved, dehydrated, cut, bled out, and burned. Still, it was almost over. He stumbled out into the open and towards the transport.

Mihalik was steps from the boarding ramp when the tau energy blasts hit him. They came from all directions, striking his chest, back, arm, thigh, and head. The world vanished in a succession of white flashes, and he collapsed on the jungle floor. He was dimly aware that a portion of his left leg was now missing, but it seemed somehow inconsequential. He could hear the little aliens moving through the grass towards him, coming to either confirm the kill, or finish him off. He lay there for a moment, face down in mud, thinking to himself how perfect an ambush it had been. Then, he painstakingly raised himself up, because when this happened, he was determined to be on his feet for it.

There were five of the alien trackers standing in a rough circle around him, their weapons raised. Their armour, nothing more than a protective chest plate and reinforced gloves, was red, not ochre; the better colour to blend into this planet's native palate. A few had black scorch marks across their combat vests that he guessed was a result of Covone's heroic last stand. The crests of their helmets were very tapered, with a single, red eye lens that regarded him impassively. Their rifles appeared short and stubby. Mihalik nodded with subconscious approval. Light armour for greater mobility and a carbine so as not to catch on foliage or rubble. These blues obviously weren't run of the mill

soldiers; they were specialists. He'd finally found his alien counterparts.

'Nicely done,' he croaked. 'I used every counter-tracking trick I know of, and you still trailed me. Outmanoeuvred me, too. You guys are good, no question. You must be the best in your army.'

One of the tau said something. To Mihalik's ears it sounded short and choppy, like the crackling of a log in a bonfire. He didn't speak their language and so had no idea whether he was being praised or damned. It didn't matter regardless.

'Take 'em!' he shouted.

The tau all died. Some of them were shot through the chest, others in the head. Their bodies hit the ground simultaneously, and the fittingness of that made Mihalik break out into uncontrollable laughter. Unity was important to the blues, after all.

All around him, a dozen Catachan snipers were jumping down from their treetop perches. Three of them raced over to Mihalik, eased him back to the ground, and began applying aid to his wounds with medipacks and cloth bandages.

'Did you get them all?' Mihalik managed to ask. His fit of hysterical laughter had left as suddenly as it had come on.

'Every one,' the youngest of his attendants replied. 'You led them right to us, sir. Just like you said would happen.'

Mihalik closed his eyes. The drugs were not only taking away all his pain, they were making his body a dim and distant thing. He was only half aware as his combat brethren rolled him onto a stretcher, and carried him into the Valkyrie. Then they were in the air, flying low over the canopy of the rainforest. The young attendant leaned over him to check his pulse.

'Sir, can I ask you something?'

Mihalik's voice was a raspy slur. 'What is it?'

'The blues. Will they come after us for what we did?'

'I'm sure they'll try. But they won't find us. They won't be able to get to us. We killed the best they had.'

The kid nodded, and then asked 'How'd you know? I mean, how did you know that the whole thing was a trap?'

Mihalik struggled to focus on the boy. He was not more a few years past initiation, Mihalik thought. His skin was still relatively free of scars, and his beard stubble was downy. He wore the red head scarf, but obviously still had much to learn.

‘It was in the files,’ Mihalik said. ‘Under military doctrine. Do you know what the tau call their battle companies?’

The young man shook his head.

‘Hunter Cadres. They see themselves as being descended from great hunters. When I read that, I knew that they were just setting out bait to catch the best of us.’

‘But you turned it around on them,’ the boy was grinning with newfound understanding. ‘You left us at the landing site to nail them when they came far enough away from their headquarters, and made bait of yourself.’

Mihalik was suddenly reminded of old Kirsopp’s words to him; that whatever he had to endure was irrelevant so long as his actions were, in the end, effective.

‘I’m used to it,’ he said coldly.

Mihalik closed his eyes and began to drift away. He would sleep for just a few hours, he told himself, and then it would be right back to work. He was the senior-most officer in the resistance now, and he had an insurgency to organise.