

THE KAUYON

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WARHAMMER
40,000

INCLUDES THE SHORT STORY 'THE TAU'VA'

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The fire warrior's face was frozen in the agony of dying. Strung up on a section of electro-wire, his body was a broken tangle of flesh and scorched carapace. He spasmed, twitching like a macabre puppet as the electrical current played through his limbs. The white moon motif on his ruined shoulder guard was barely visible but marked the warrior as belonging to the Seventh Hunter Cadre.

'Ta'ma,' Kal'va cursed. He gritted his teeth in impotent rage. He had never mastered the art of detached observance. Honour demanded that he deliver mercy shots to those still clinging to life. It pained him to stand idly by and watch those of his caste suffer. The sniper took a breath and steeled himself. There was nothing he could do.

He was nowhere near the massacre site.

Kal'va tapped the dial on the back of his glove. In response, the image the spotter drone was overlaying onto his helmet display changed, panning out to give him a wider view of the valley.

The tau dead stretched in every direction. Tens, dozens, hundreds of broken bodies were strewn across the bloodied earth. The ruined hulls of Hammerhead tanks and Devilfish carriers lay in smoking craters. Of the enemy, there was no sign. The Hunter Cadre had been ambushed and destroyed before they could respond.

At Kal'va's direction, the spotter drone shifted location and moved north up the valley. The drone stopped a few feet from its original position, its auto-sensors focusing on movement ahead.

He couldn't see what the drone did. A pall of smoke and dust hung in the air, conspiring with the dense rock and foliage to obscure the target. Switching to the visual feed from the secondary spotter, he caught the first glimpse of his prey.

Seven Imperial tanks were snaking their way through the canyon. Two bipedal

walkers kept pace, one on either side, protecting the flanks. Three of the tanks had squat turrets, while the other four were troop carriers with little in the way of offensive weaponry. Each was painted in hues of green and brown that masked them against the landscape.

‘Ta’ma va’ra,’ Kal’va growled as he watched one of the walkers clamber over a broken Crisis battlesuit. Looking down at his controller, a cluster of blue icons flashed quizzically as his squadron of gun drones awaited orders.

‘Patience,’ he muttered. ‘Patience.’

The drones were not advanced enough to respond to voice commands. Kal’va spoke for his own benefit. Only those of the fire caste who could temper the flame in their breasts rose to the rank of sniper, but the urge to fight first and gather intelligence later never truly left them.

Tasking the secondary spotter drone to follow the convoy, Kal’va switched to the feed being transmitted from a third drone.

Hovering just below the cloud layer, the drone was well placed to make out the inscriptions on the tanks’ hulls.

‘Cadian 101st. Emperor’s Wrath. Foe Bane.’

Kal’va mouthed the words as the drone relayed them to him, forcing his tongue around the unfamiliar sounds. Unlike the envoys and traders of the water caste, he had only the most basic grasp of the human language – just enough to track targets.

The drone ignored the middle tanks; their hulls carried numbers, instead of names.

‘Terra’s Guardian.’

Kal’va recorded the name of the rearguard vehicle and rotated the altitude dial on his drone controller.

The Imperial convoy shrank into the distance as the image on his display panned out, the tanks merging into a single geometric shape as their outlines blended together.

Tapping the dial again, Kal'va ordered the hovering spotter drone to climb into the atmosphere. The image continued to zoom out, the convoy receding until barely visible, a single blip on a display that mapped the entire region.

Kal'va already knew that the tanks were headed for the Imperial base. The ethereals believed that they sought to reinforce it before the tau could muster another attack. He didn't care about the reason, as long as they passed within range of his rifle.

Manipulating the information on his display, he plotted the convoy's most likely trajectory. Human protocol was rigid, predictable. Extrapolating their path was a simple matter. When negotiating hostile territory the humans always took the fastest route that presented the least resistance, travelling in as straight a line as possible. In this case, the convoy would cut through the Arav'la Pass and turn left over the Gal'ta Plains.

'Ma va'ra,' Kal'va swore again. He needed them to turn right.

Never chase the prey. Better to adjust its course. Kal'va instinctively touched the helmet mag-locked to his belt as he remembered Sas'la's words. He wished that his team leader had managed to follow the path he had advocated.

EARLIER

Kal'va pressed his eye to his scope, knowing that Sas'la and Or'shara did the same. Viewed through the blue lens, the human buildings appeared softer than their rough-hewn designs should have allowed. Unlike the smooth domes fashioned by the earth caste, the humans built in harsh angles.

The tau warrior listened to the wind as it blew through the long grass that concealed him. If they stood that long, the wind would erode the human structures and strike them until their corners were smooth and their hideousness was worn away. He ground his teeth in disgust. It was just like the humans to waste time standing against the inevitable.

'I have no shot,' Kal'va whispered into the audio receiver in his helmet. Slowly he rolled to his right.

Pinning down a single individual amongst the throng of labourers, soldiers and vehicles swarming the stronghold was proving no easy task. For three days he had observed the human base, waiting for a clear shot at the target.

For their part, the humans had not been idle. Under the direction of their yellow-armoured allies, they had steadily improved the compound's defences, widening trench lines, bracing redoubts and erecting firing positions.

'My honour blade for a spotter drone,' chimed Or'shara's voice in Kal'va's ear. The other sniper was secreted in the long grass eighteen spans to his left.

'Were we so blessed... No shot.'

Kal'va moved again, continuing to flank right. Had the base not been studded with sensor towers and weapon turrets, then a pair of spotter drones would have located the target and extrapolated the optimal firing position. It had been a long time since Kal'va had needed to hunt the old fashioned way.

'Visual. The target is in the upper concourse. Sas'la, you should have the angle.' Or'shara's voice preceded a raft of tactical data, pinpointing the target's location on Kal'va's helmet display.

‘He is obscured. I cannot get a shot. I am moving closer.’ Sas’la’s tone was measured but Kal’va knew that he was anxious. Their team leader had not been the same since the massacre at Yu’vra. Commander Jol’Monn had been his mentor. His death had scorched Sas’la’s spirit, robbing him of stillness. He needed to kill the enemy commander. Nothing else would settle his disquiet.

‘Stay where you are, Sas’la,’ hissed Kal’va. ‘Any further and they will detect you.’ He felt a knot of apprehension as the blip denoting Sas’la on his helmet display moved towards the enemy formation. ‘Sas’la, stop.’

The words had barely left Kal’va’s mouth when weapons fire erupted from the compound.

‘Ve’na!’ Cursing, Kal’va adjusted his scope and took aim at a group of enemy firing at Sas’la.

‘Stay hidden!’ said Sas’la. ‘On the blood of the auns, stay down!’

Kal’va’s finger hovered on the trigger of his rifle. The Imperial base was swarming with targets. He could kill dozens of them before they pinpointed his location.

‘I will fire and withdraw, distracting them from you,’ he said.

‘I am not the mission, Kal’va. Remember the mission,’ said Sas’la. ‘Kal’va!’

‘I hear.’

Kal’va eased his finger from the trigger. Even with his support, Sas’la’s chances were slight. He would not dishonour his shas’ui’s memory by ignoring his final command.

‘The earth keep you,’ he whispered.

‘May your fire always burn,’ Sas’la replied.

Kal’va tracked Sas’la as he rose from under a clump of leaves and ran directly away from him and Or’shara. Kal’va’s heart pumped faster with every step Sas’la took, as though it were he himself running for his life.

Dozens of human soldiers in green-brown fatigues spilled from the base in pursuit. Sas'la kept running, his rifle clutched tight to his chest, the gap between him and his pursuers widening as they scanned for emergent threats. If he was lucky he would make it into the forest, and felt the calming swell of hope as he began to think that perhaps—

Five yellow-armoured warriors descended on pillars of fire, landing in tight formation around Sas'la. Without pause, he swung his rifle up to fire. No sooner was it shouldered than a roaring chainsword stung out and sheared the barrel in half.

‘The fire consume us both!’ shouted Sas'la.

Kal'va's body tensed as he watched Sas'la reach for the grenade on his belt.

‘No!’ screamed Kal'va.

A single round struck Sas'la full in the face, punching through his armoured helm and driving his brains out through the back of his skull.

NOW

Kal'va unclipped Sas'la's helmet and turned it over in his hands, running his fingers over the ragged hole in the faceplate.

'Your lessons were well learned, shas'ui,' he said, touching the helmet to his temple before he respectfully replaced it on his belt.

Turning his attention back to the drone controller, Kal'va activated the squadron of shield drones he'd dispatched to the Arav'la Pass ahead of the human convoy. It was a risky strategy, but he was certain that the drones' power output was too slight to register on the human scanners.

His helm's tactical overlay flickered as it updated. Kal'va allowed himself a smile. The display showed no change. The icon denoting the convoy continued to blink as it edged towards the pass. He watched it a moment, taking joy in the deception.

Kal'va adjusted the drones' power output, pushing it up past maximum. The shield drones flashed onto his overlay, their increased energy signatures making them appear like a squadron of battle tanks. The drones would soon overload and short out, but Kal'va was confident they'd last long enough to convince the humans to alter course.

He cycled back through the visual feeds from the spotter drones overlooking the convoy. It had stopped. Activating the nearest drone's vocal sensors, Kal'va scanned the rear-most carrier for sound. There was a hiss of static before fragmentary words resolved in the human language.

'By the Emperor...'

'We've stopped.'

'We can't be there already.'

The voices sounded confused. They were without clarity or purpose. Kal'va cut the feed and directed the drone to scan the next carrier.

‘Trooper, vox ahead and find out what in the Emperor’s name is going on.’

The voice was authoritative but Kal’va detected anxiety. It was not the one.

‘Enemy formations detected ahead.’

‘How many?’

‘Hard to tell, sir. Looks like a squadron of vehicles. Could be armour.’

The third carrier was a hive of audio signals, but there was too much indecision – the target would have been firmer, more decisive. The drone shifted its scanner to the lead carrier. All that Kal’va could hear was a faint whisper of static.

‘Nothing?’ he muttered to himself as he edged the drone closer to the convoy, trusting in its stealth field to disguise its presence. Easing his fingers across the control panel, Kal’va fine-tuned the drone’s sensors.

A small spike of data chimed on his display as the drone picked up a trace of audio. Kal’va examined the signal. It was as if the sound was locked within something that sat inside the vehicle: a shell within a shell. He smiled.

‘Found you.’

Sending the drone back into the clouds, Kal’va watched as the bipedal scout vehicles split off from the convoy. Sentinels. The walkers were moving at speed towards the phantom energy signatures he’d created.

‘Predictable.’

Sending the drone gliding after them, Kal’va watched as the clumsy walkers bounded across the plain towards his overcharged shield drones. The drone fed Kal’va a stream of audio from the walkers.

‘One grid out, no enemy contact. Advancing.’

The hydraulics and pistons in the walkers’ legs fired bursts of gas that made them sound like a pair of panting kroot hounds as they sped up.

‘Approaching grid two.’

A warning glyph stained Kal'va's display as the walker's weapons cycled for firing.

'Turning into grid three.'

Kal'va let his hands dart across his control console, activating the three heavy gun drones that lay in wait for the walkers. The drones glided up from the ground like leaves in the wind. Idling at attack height, the drones performed system checks and cycled their burst cannons. The weapons were primarily designed to shred enemy infantry formations and were unlikely to critically damage the walkers, but burst cannons threw out a blistering number of shots and made a lot of noise, making them more than adequate for Kal'va's needs.

The three blue signals on Kal'va's display blinked twice: the drones were ready.

'For the Greater Good,' he said.

Using the markerlight on the hovering spotter drone, Kal'va fed targeting information to the gun drones and ordered them to attack.

The three drones sliced through the air in front of the walkers, burst cannons chattering into life as they dowsed them in a hail of energy bolts.

'Enemy!' The lead pilot thumbed the trigger on his control stick and let loose with his autocannon.

'Left!' The second walker spun in an attempt to track the drones, stitching a line of carnage across the hillside with its blazing weapon.

The drones split up, encircling the walkers, firing and displacing before the pilots could draw a bead on them.

The lead sentinel pilot voxed a hurried update to the convoy.

'We're under heavy fire. Multiple enemy units dug into the hillside. They have us surrounded.'

'Classification?'

'No confirmed visual. All we can see is the flash from their Emperor-damned

weapons!’

The two sentinels formed up back to back, turning clockwise together in a brutal dance as their weapons continued to kick out rounds.

‘Enemy armour?’ asked their commander.

‘No sign of any yet. Best guess, infantry with light munitions.’

Kal’va switched his viewer to the targeting feed from one of the gun drones. Cutting the power to the drone’s weapons, he routed all of its energy to its propulsion system, and propelled it at full speed towards the sentinels.

‘Victory through sacrifice,’ said Kav’la. Tapping on the controller, he ordered the drone to self-destruct.

It exploded before it could collide with the lead walker.

‘Correction,’ said the lead sentinel pilot. ‘Heavy rounds incoming. Possible armour.’

‘Pull back,’ ordered the commander. ‘Regroup now.’

‘Sir.’

The walkers stopped firing, turned around and loped back towards the convoy.

Rejoined by the bipedal vehicles, the convoy abandoned their previous route and headed towards the forest.

Kal’va’s spotter drones fed him a constant stream of information as they tracked the Imperial vehicles.

The terrain was rough, forcing the tanks to slow to a crawl. The ground was marred by deep craters and the remnants of the massive trees that had once covered eighty per cent of the planet’s surface. The wood from their trunks was ideal for reinforcing the assortment of earthworks popular with humans, and a great many of them had been felled over the course of the conflict.

The convoy slowed further as it advanced, hindered by the wreckage of both tau

and Imperial battle tanks.

Kal'va recognised the markings on one of the ruined Hammerheads – a black circle bisected by a crimson spear. It belonged to the Kais'shi, an elite fire warrior cadre who excelled in armoured warfare. The humans would have suffered in taking the pass.

He watched the convoy as it traversed the forest and emerged in the low-sided valley beyond. A kink in the rockline forced the tanks to slow almost to a stop, their hulls sparking as they squeezed along the narrow path.

'Lead stopping. Watch for threats,' said one of the humans inside the vehicles.

The lead battle tank signalled back down the line as it slowed to a stop. The path immediately ahead of the convoy was barred by the burned-out shell of a huge battle tank and the rotting carcasses of dozens of great knarlocs.

'Emperor's Wrath, clearing a way through.'

Kal'va listened to the vox transmission from the lead tank as it broke formation and rumbled forward, its hull-mounted weapon setting the ground ablaze. Great sheets of liquid fire washed harmlessly over the wrecked tank hull, robbing the knarloc carcasses of their flesh and turning their bones to ash.

Angling its dozer blade, the Emperor's Wrath crashed into the side of its stricken cousin, its tracks spitting mud into the air as they struggled against the dead weight of the massive vehicle. After several moments, the smaller tank edged the wreck aside enough to allow the convoy to pass.

'Obstruction cleared. Checking ahead.'

The Emperor's Wrath continued forward while the rest of the tanks waited, the walkers buzzing up and down the convoy's flanks like impatient vespids.

'Not long now,' Kal'va said to the sniper drone hovering by his head, patting its rail rifle by way of emphasis.

The Wrath stopped in front of a line of tooth-shaped barriers and voxed its report.

‘Armoured tank traps ahead,’ hissed the feed from the spotter drone.

‘Pull back seven yards,’ said a new voice across the comms, deep and resonant. The Wrath pulled back.

Kal’va smiled and tasked one of the spotter drones to survey the forward transport. The feed on his helm display distorted for a moment as the drone refocused. The hydraulics at the base of the carrier’s door fired, lowering the ramp until it met the earth with a dull thud that tossed dust into the air. There was a figure in the doorway, bent double in order that the carrier could accommodate its massive bulk. The figure straightened and strode down the ramp.

Through his drone, Kal’va looked closer. The giant was encased in sun-golden armour, his breastplate stamped with an ash-black eagle. Impossibly large pauldrons crowned his titanic shoulders, the left emblazoned with a single black fist.

Kal’va had been right before. The lead carrier contained his target.

Space Marine. Highly resistant to damage. Heavy ordnance and rail weaponry recommended. He ignored the tactical data streaming from the drone and touched his hand to Sas’la’s helmet, his fingers lingering over the hole in the faceplate. He knew exactly how dangerous they were.

The Space Marine pulled out a hand-held device and began scanning for threats. As a precaution, Kal’va shut down all of his low-level drones, leaving only the one in the sky active. He knew of more than one pathfinder team who had thought themselves hidden in ambush, only to be detected and slaughtered by Space Marines.

Kal’va felt his fists bunch in controlled rage, the barking round that had ended Sas’la still ringing in his mind.

You must be the scope, never the muzzle. Passive and observant, it is you who must show who death can take. Kal’va let Sas’la’s words calm him. The shas’ui had always known how to temper his subordinate’s fire.

‘The earth keep you with me,’ he whispered.

‘Scans are clear,’ said the Space Marine. ‘No explosive devices detected.’ The huge warrior approached a fallen knarloc that lay slumped over the tank traps, and clamped his crushing gauntlets around the beast’s face.

The spotter drone detected the faintest hint of sound as micro-servos in the Space Marine’s armour lent him the strength to drag the beast out of the way.

The giant figure knelt next to the trap and used his hands to dig away some of the earth around its base. A warning flashed across Kal’va’s display as the warrior affixed a bulky cylinder to the tank trap. Ignoring it, he watched as the Space Marine took a step back.

A moment later, the charge detonated, obliterating the tank trap and showering the area with fiery rock and bone shrapnel. Kal’va winced as he remodulated the drone’s transmitter.

‘Commander K’yna, the humans have passed the final obstacle,’ he said.

‘You have held them long enough,’ said K’yna. ‘We have exited the area. I free you from duty. Now do as you must.’

Kal’va nodded and cut the feed. There was nothing more to be said. He would have his vengeance.

EARLIER

Sas'la's body hit the ground, the blip denoting him on Kal'va's display blinking out.

'Kal'va, follow!' bellowed Or'sha as he rose from concealment, his rail rifle tucked tight against his chin.

'Or'sha, don't!'

'By the Eternal Circle!' Or'sha's first round struck Sas'la's killer in the chest, blasting a chunk from his armour and rocking him backwards. His second finished the job, cutting clean through the Space Marine's neck.

'Dar'va,' spat Kal'va as he pushed up onto his feet. He would not let Or'sha die alone. 'For the Greater Good!'

The pair of snipers advanced through the long grass at pace, firing with every step. Sas'la's murderers turned to respond, but were overwhelmed by the torrent of rail rounds that crashed against their armoured breastplates, shoulder guards and helmets. They died without firing a shot.

'Or'sha!' Kal'va motioned to their west as threat icons swam onto his display. 'Enemy.'

As one, he and Or'sha pivoted to their left, ejecting the spent power packs from their rifles and slamming in fresh ones without breaking stride.

'There!' Or'sha motioned to the press of yellow armour emerging over the ridge.

Three more Space Marines were caught off guard and gunned down, dead before they could react. The rest took cover behind some large rocks and returned fire.

'Keep them pinned,' grunted Or'sha.

Kal'va fired another round. 'We cannot stay here,' he said.

'What do you suggest?'

‘We go forward.’ Kal’va detached a photon grenade from his belt and threw it over-arm towards the Space Marines. The grenade exploded in a cacophony of sound and multi-spectrum light. The Space Marines stumbled from cover, disorientated, and fired blind.

Kal’va and Or’sha dived forward under the fusillade of rounds, rolling as they landed, rising with their weapons ready. Sighting down their rifles, they executed the remainder of the Space Marines with cold efficiency, firing single rounds through each of their skulls.

‘Forward,’ urged Or’sha. ‘We can still engage the target.’ He pivoted to his right and turned back towards the human compound.

Kal’va nodded, fed his last power pack into his rifle and kept pace behind Or’sha. He wondered how much further they would get.

A blue flash tore through the trees ahead of them, striking the ground beside Or’sha and burning away the meat of his thigh. He called out in pain as the wound forced him onto one knee.

Red warnings filled Kal’va’s display as the number of enemy approaching grew by the second.

‘Kal’va, finish thi—’ Or’sha was cut short as a bolt-round exploded through his chest.

‘No!’ Kal’va opened fire, ignorant of his dwindling ammunition as he blasted away at the trees. He ceased firing as his rifle chimed in warning. He had only one round left.

A hulking figure emerged from between the ruined trees. Its segmented armour was thicker, forged of heavier plate than that worn by the other Space Marines, and the colour of spilled blood.

A strobing identification icon blinked on Kal’va’s helm display – the target had come to him.

‘Duty and vengeance,’ he said.

Sighting between the giant Space Marine’s glowering eyes, he fired.

His round burst in the air a hand's span before the target, absorbed by a crackling energy field.

The Space Marine laughed, raising his glowing pistol and sending a bolt of blue energy towards Kal'va.

NOW

Kal'va ignored the warning, still lost to the past. He had never stopped questioning how he had managed to survive that day. That the auns had willed it should have been enough. But something within him needed to know what had drawn the Space Marines away. He needed to know that his fate was determined by his skill and his rifle.

The second chime broke him from his reverie – the convoy was approaching.

'To see and not act is to dream,' he recited. 'To act is to burn with life. In the auns' name, we light the fire.' He whispered the oath of battle and activated the remainder of the drone squadrons he had deployed around the valley.

To his left, a sniper drone whistled twice, requesting targeting information.

'Patience, Two,' he murmured, stroking the sleek curve of the drone's body. 'You will kill soon.'

He worked the dials of the drone controller, marking deployment coordinates and attack trajectories for the sniper and gun drones, and directed the trio of shield bearers to form a loose perimeter around him.

The drones chimed in acknowledgement and glided off to fulfil his commands.

Leaving the controller at the top of the ridge, Kal'va eased down onto his belly, and crawled down the embankment to his rifle.

Nestling the weapon against his cheek, he activated the scope. Looking through the scope, he saw the enemy for the first time. Despite himself, he was impressed that the convoy had held formation over such trying terrain, the troop carriers remaining sandwiched between the battle tanks and the walkers stalking their flanks.

'Steady as earth.' Kal'va began the rite of firing. 'Fluid like water.' He reached forward with his left hand and stroked the rifle's barrel. 'Whisper like air.' Making a final adjustment to the scope, he activated the gun's underslung markerlight.

‘Burn like fire.’

Kal’va closed his eyes. When he opened them again the lead battle tank was centred in his sights. He fired the markerlight, tagging the tank, then each of the others in turn.

A little over a mile away, a Sky Ray gunship whispered into life.

Its thrusters gently nudged it up off the rock bed, dislodging the layer of sand that had settled on it, and manoeuvred it into firing position.

The gunship’s turret rotated, its missile rack tracking towards Kal’va’s markers. One after another, the six seeker missiles blazed into life and shot into the air.

Kal’va stared at the convoy and waited. It would take the missiles time to reach target acquisition altitude, and more again for their onboard target locks to calculate the optimum attack trajectory.

Next the missiles’ boosters would cut out, removing any trace of their energy signature, leaving them to plummet towards the ground. At the last possible moment, the boosters would reignite, burning with the full fury of the fire caste as they sped the missiles towards their targets.

Kal’va activated the light dampener on his scope.

The first missile darted out of the clouds and hit the lead battle tank in its weaker rear armour.

The warhead detonated on impact, reducing the tank to a crumpled mess of flaming metal.

The second missile swung around the treeline and struck the right-side tracks of the rear battle tank.

The blast flipped the vehicle. It landed hard, crushing its own turret and triggering a raft of secondary detonations that blew out its exposed underside.

The rest of the convoy began reacting, fanning out in panic, while two of the transports stopped. Ten humans rushed from each, their weapons raised, and formed a cordon around the command transport.

The third missile roared down from the sky on a pillar of fire to strike the roof of the final battle tank, smashing its turret and multi-barrelled weapons.

‘Timing...’ Kal’va grinned, the heat from the flames setting off the tank’s ammo reserves.

The nine Guardsmen nearest the tank were torn apart, shredded as the high-calibre slugs tore through their bodies. The squad’s sole survivor sank to his knees, his face bathed in blood and fleshy matter.

Kal’va whispered the axiom of mindfulness.

‘It is a careless warrior who allows himself to be burned by his own flame.’

Gripped by panic, the twin walkers opened fire, their weapons churning up trees and undergrowth as they searched the valley for vengeance.

Their crazed fusillade came to an abrupt end as a missile slammed into each of them.

Their ruined legs remained upright for a moment, twitching briefly before collapsing.

The sixth and final missile struck the command transport, demolishing the fore portion of its hull and enveloping the aft in fire. The transport’s door blew open, propelling from the vehicle like an expended round.

Kal’va watched dispassionately as a huddle of humans in uniform half leapt, half fell out of the doorway. Two of them clung to the ground, rolling around to douse the flames that were licking across their clothing.

The tau warrior tracked the human officer, reading his lips as the soldier waved his weapon around and demanded an explanation. The remaining humans formed a huddle around their commander, weapons tracking in every direction.

Tagging the officer with his markerlight, he squeezed the trigger of his rifle.

The sniper drone fired before the gun’s trigger had even reset. In a flash the officer’s torso came apart, vaporised by the rail round. For a heartbeat the Guardsmen didn’t move, fixed in place by the sudden carnage. Then they opened

fire. Frantic, undisciplined volleys hammered into the hillside as the humans tried in vain to end the nightmare they had stumbled upon.

Kal'va ignored the humans and focused his attention on the single remaining transport. Its engines had slowed to idle, its turret panning for targets.

'Show yourselves,' he breathed, fighting the urge to break from cover and blast his way inside the vehicle. He had come too far to throw his life away now, but perhaps he had been hasty. Perhaps he should have taken the target out with one of the seeker missiles.

No. He would see the target with his own scope and look into its monstrous eyes when he killed it. At this, Kal'va tightened his grip on his rifle.

A few moments later, his patience was rewarded. The transport's ramp dropped to the ground and five yellow-armoured giants emerged in quick order, fanning out to cover the angles and appraising the situation down the barrels of their heavy guns.

If he had not hated them with every fibre of his being, Kal'va would have admired them. Where the humans were frightened, cowering behind whatever cover they could, the Space Marines stood in the open, untroubled by the death and destruction wrought around them.

'Cease fire,' barked one of the Space Marines. Lost to panic, the humans ignored him and continued their fight.

Kal'va watched as the Space Marine moved to the Guardsmen. Clamping his gauntlet around the barrel of one of the human's weapons, he pulled it from his hands.

'Cease fire! Do not waste your ammunition or I will expend mine on you.'

Faced with a more immediate threat, the humans eased off their triggers.

Kal'va studied the Space Marine. Judging by the elaborate insignia and raft of parchment adorning his pauldron, he was the squad leader. Yes, Kal'va nodded to himself, he would be the first to die.

'We are being manipulated. We must--'

At a command from Kal'va, his drones attacked. Crisscrossing each other in a deadly ballet, they strafed the Imperial forces with a hail of photon grenades.

The Guardsmen fell to the ground, screaming in agony as the grenades exploded amongst them with ear-splitting violence. Blood streamed from their eyes and ears as the sensory overload tore at their sanity. A few managed to clamp their hands over their ears and screwed their eyes shut; most spasmed on the ground, throttled by their own nervous system.

The drones' pulse carbines finished the job, executing the twitching Guardsmen with bursts of lancing plasma.

A pair of heavy gun drones darted out of the treeline and engaged the Space Marines, their burst cannons blazing on full auto.

The Space Marines returned fire without pause, engaging the drones with practised precision even as their armour chipped and cracked under the attentions of the tau weaponry.

One of the drones exploded, hammered from existence by a hail of bolt-rounds. Another banked sharply to avoid the same fate, sending the last of its ammunition chewing up across the squad leader's shoulder guard and into his helmet. The Space Marine slumped to the ground, his body and face a mess of bloody holes.

Kal'va shifted his attention to the carrier as its turret-mounted weapon spat super-heated laser towards the circling gun drones.

He took aim at the weapon, tagging the space between two of its spinning barrels with his markerlight.

Behind him, a sniper drone fired. The rail round punched through the gun's barrel, sending a ripple of explosions traversing back along its length to the turret base.

A second detonation within the tank sent a plume of ashen smoke sparking from the back of the vehicle.

Kal'va stared at the carrier's open hatchway, his finger hovering over his rifle's trigger. Another of the Space Marines emerged a moment later, striding down the

ramp, heedless of the flames dancing over his armour. A line of script ran across the top of Kal'va's display, confirming what he already knew – this was Or'sha's killer. The target.

'Patience will pierce even a rock.'

Kal'va let the words ready his mind and put down his rifle, unslinging Or'sha's from across his back. Activating the weapon's scope, he settled back into the firing position, adjusting slightly for the extra weight of the weapon.

Or'sha had equipped his rifle with an enlarged power pack, enabling it to fire rounds at a higher than standard velocity. Through habit, Kal'va checked the shot counter, though he knew the answer – only a single round remained unfired in Or'sha's weapon. One shot, one target.

'As the auns will it,' he whispered. He smiled at the nature of fate and sighted down Or'sha's rifle. Three of the Space Marines remained, finishing off his gun drones and forming up around the target.

'Ver're!' Kal'va cursed. A clean shot was unlikely. He activated the rifle's underslung markerlight and slaved two of the nearby sniper drones to it – they would aim at what he aimed at, and fire when he fired.

Kal'va took aim at the target's breastplate, drawing an imaginary line through the intervening Space Marine. It was the thickest point of the armour, but the easiest to hit. A calculated risk, and one that the overcharged rifle went out of its way to offset.

A blue rune flashed in the corner of Kal'va's helm display. The sniper drones were now almost equidistant from the target. Their shots would impact near simultaneously.

He made one final adjustment to the drones' positions to account for wind speed and the increased velocity of the round he would be firing.

'Vior'yr.' Vengeful kill – the ancient word left Kal'va's lips without conscious thought as he exhaled and fired.

The trio of rail rounds raced through the air. The first struck the intervening Space Marine, shattering his breastplate and passing out through his back. The

second speared through the hole in the Space Marine's torso to strike the energy field enveloping the target. There was a flash of blue lightning as the shield flared and failed.

Kal'va's round struck home last, punching into the Space Marine's chest and toppling him to the ground. The two remaining Space Marines reacted instantly, somehow able to track the final round to its point of origin.

Kal'va scooped up his own rifle and rolled right as the Space Marines' weapons chattered to life. Still rolling, he tagged them both with his markerlight and initiated the pair of sniper drones' fire and move protocols.

The drones darted from cover, one firing while the other moved, leapfrogging around the Space Marines. The humans were caught by surprise, one of them beheaded in short order as a rail round tore through his pauldron and neck.

The surviving Space Marine managed to unload a salvo into one of the drones, blowing it out of the air before the other shot him through the knee. He stumbled forward, catching himself with his free hand, and continued to fire.

In his moment's respite, Kal'va caught sight of the target.

The enemy pushed himself to his feet, its chestplate still smouldering from the heat of the rail round.

Kal'va opened fire but the target was too fast and ducked inside the ruined transport for cover. A warning flashed across his display as the other sniper drone was damaged.

Feeding another power pack into his rifle, he targeted the wounded Space Marine, blowing off his weapon arm at the elbow. The weapon clattered to the ground with the Space Marine's finger still clamped around its trigger.

The target bounded down the transport's ramp with a glowing pistol in one hand and what looked like some form of launcher held over his opposite shoulder.

Kal'va fired. The shot missed, stabbing into the earth as the target dived forwards. Rolling onto his feet, the target swung his pistol up and blasted apart the remaining sniper drone before levelling the launcher.

Kal'va felt his heart race as he scanned the area. There was nothing but light trees and small rocks, all insufficient cover to shelter himself behind. In desperation, he hit the recall button on his squadron of shield drones. They hurtled towards him at maximum acceleration as the target fired. Kal'va directed them into a curving line in front of him, their energy shields overlapping with a crackle.

Less than a heartbeat later, the missile exploded, hammering his makeshift energy barrier.

EARLIER

The Chamber of Bonding was lit by a single brazier, an echo of the flame that burned in the breast of all the fire caste. Situated in the very centre of the chamber, its glow cast spectral faces across the rock of the walls and reached as far as the low ceiling.

‘It is smaller than I had imagined,’ said Or’sha.

Kal’va nodded, but said nothing. Like Or’sha, he had not set foot on a sept world since taking up a weapon. The rough-hewn, brutal cavern was in stark contrast to the clean lines and smooth decking of the warships on which he had spent his life. Breathing deeply, he filled his lungs with the thick incense that swam in the air.

‘We stand on honoured Vior’la, on the earth that birthed the warrior caste. We walk amongst the ghosts of heroes. What we do now, we do not do lightly.’ Sas’la paused a moment to let the weight of his words settle. ‘Come.’

As was his right, Sasl’a walked ahead of Kal’va and Or’sha, leading them down through the cavern and up onto the Eternal Circle. Carved into a raised dais of rock hundreds of years before, the circle had the same dimensions as the ones Kal’va had seen etched into the ceremonial hangars of the warships he’d served aboard. It was the focal point for all bonding rituals, a reminder that a warrior’s spirit had no beginning and no end.

‘Only in fire can a weapon be forged.’

Sas’la crossed into the centre of the circle and tugged on a length of brass chain connected to the brazier. The action opened a small shutter set into the brazier’s base, allowing a single ember to fall to the ground.

The errant flame ignited the oil that pooled in the recessed outline of the Eternal Circle.

Kal’va stepped over the flames, welcoming the heat, and knelt together with Sas’la and Or’sha. As was tradition, the three sat equidistant from one another, formed as a targeting triangle set within the circle of a rifle’s scope.

‘Ancestors bear witness. Auns honour our vow.’ Sas’la gestured for them to begin, and the three bowed to one another before unsheathing their bonding knives. ‘My life is your life, and your life is my life.’

Kal’va drew his knife across his chest, cutting a deep gash across his heart. Breathing through the pain, he passed his blade to Sas’la as the shas’ui gave his to Or’sha.

‘My strength is your strength, and your strength is my strength,’ intoned Or’sha. With Or’sha’s knife, Kal’va cut into his bicep, drawing the blade down his forearm. The pain was intense but honour demanded silence.

‘My path is your path, and your path is my path,’ he said. He took Sas’la’s knife and made the final mark, a thin line across his forehead. He could feel his rising pulse beating in his neck, its thrum threatening to overwhelm him. Accepting his own blade from Or’sha, he slashed his palm, clenching his fist to squeeze three drops of blood onto the ground.

‘With blood we strengthen the circle and our bond with those who have bled before us,’ said Sas’la.

Kal’va and Or’sha responded as one: ‘As the auns will it.’

Keeping his head bowed, Kal’va struggled to his feet. The Ta’lissera Va was complete. They were as one being; bonded in mind, body and spirit. The Eternal Circle could not be broken, all would live or die.

NOW

Kal'va opened his eyes and saw nothing. The piercing flash of the shield drones overloading had shorted out his helmet's optical array.

He coughed violently, feeling the bones in his chest grind in response. Fighting through pain worse than any he had faced, Kal'va unclipped his helmet and let the blood that was filling his mouth drip onto the ground.

Struggling to lift his head, he stared up at the sky. Its blue-grey reminded him of the Chamber of Bonding. He thought of Sas'la, of Or'sha...

...of the target. The target was coming for him.

Kal'va propped himself up on his elbows, scanning for his rifle. There was no sign of the weapon.

Thick mucus dripped from his mouth as his organs began failing.

'Great auns accept me,' he breathed as he eased himself down onto his back, closed his eyes, and listened to the footsteps as they drew nearer. Slowing his breathing, he fought to hang on to what little life he had left. He did not need long.

Kal'va knew the target was standing over him. He had felt the slight change in temperature as its bulk cast a shadow over him. He opened his eyes to stare up the barrel of the Space Marine's pistol.

'Where are your filthy accomplices hiding?' the target's voice rasped through his damaged helmet. His armour was scorched and battered, its crimson hue worn and tarnished.

'I... am...' The words cost Kal'va more blood as he convulsed between syllables. '...all.' He looked down at his belt, finding Sas'la's helmet still locked to his hip.

'One?' Kal'va was unsure if it was surprise or admiration he heard in the Space Marine's voice. 'Do not lie...'

The Space Marine's helm sparked as it malfunctioned, its glowering optics flickering and dying like the final embers of an inferno. The giant removed it; beneath it, he looked even more monstrous. His jaw had been replaced by a plate of metal, wires bulged beneath his greyed skin like veins and his eyes shone red with augmentation.

'Tell me where they are and I will kill you cleanly.' The target's voice was harsh and gnarled. It reminded Kal'va of the giant compressors that the earth caste used to terra-form rock.

'Sas'la... Or'sha...' Shaking, he reached across his chest and grabbed the hilt of his bonding knife.

'I would not have credited you, xenos, with such courage. Never have I met one of your kind who doesn't hide behind his rifle. You are a weak race of cur killers.'

Tears of agony streaming down his face, Kal'va drew his knife from its scabbard. The Space Marine lowered his pistol and drew an axe from across his back.

'Perhaps you are just too stupid to know when you are dead?'

The Space Marine's weapon's hummed into life, a sparking energy field enveloping its thick blade. He raised the weapon to strike.

Kal'va looked down, turning his knife in his hand, angling the blade towards his own chest.

The Space Marine paused.

'You prove me right, xenos. No warrior would yield his life while there is still blood in his veins. Perhaps it is as well you favour this end. I have little wish to sully my blade with your craven flesh.'

Kal'va took care to wrap each of his fingers around the hilt of his blade.

'For the Greater Good.'

With the last of his strength, he tightened his grip. The hilt flashed once, marking

the Space Marine's face with a targeting light.

'No!' Rage crushed his features, and the Space Marine raised his pistol to fire as his head exploded in a hail of brain-matter and bone fragments.

Kal'va looked up, watching as the body toppled, convulsing, to the ground. Offering his thanks to the sniper drone who had taken the shot, he slumped back.

He had lied to the Space Marine. Since the day he had been born, he had never been one, had never been alone. For that was what it meant to be tau. To be a single piece of the greater whole. The Greater Good. The thought brought Kal'va warmth as he smiled and closed his eyes.

The Tau'va

Andy Smillie

'A warrior with no enemies can win no victories. Do you accept this as true, fire warrior?'

'Yes, aun,' I reply with a nod. Keeping my eyes low, I follow the trail of the ethereal's robe as he paces around me.

'A fire warrior is an instrument of the Greater Good. He has no enemies but those who would stand against it.'

'A second truth, aun.'

The ethereal stops and looks at me.

'Yet you, Kal'va, you sought enemies of your own. You acted to take the life from those who took from you.'

'With honour, I killed those who stood against the Greater Good,' I protest.

'You killed for revenge,' says the ethereal. 'You, a valued instrument of the Greater Good, were almost lost for selfish cause.'

I tense then, awaiting the cold stroke of the aun's honour blade. It is no less than I deserve.

'Still,' he says, 'there is no shame in such an act while it aligns with the needs of the whole.'

He pauses, as if considering.

'But what now, fire warrior? Your enemies are dead, and your victories are behind you.'

I make to speak, but find my voice lacking.

‘As has been the truth since the beginning, the Greater Good shall be your salvation,’ the ethereal continues. ‘It has many enemies, Kal’va. I would have you fight for it. Through its triumphs you may still find honour and victory. Even death cannot defeat you, so long as the Greater Good prevails.’

‘The Greater Good lights all fires,’ I say. ‘Only with fire can a blade be tempered, the keenest blades to win the battle.’ I press my palms together and touch them to my head in respect. ‘What enemy would you have me face, aun?’

‘Time, Kal’va. You must help us defeat time.’

I let myself fall, dropping from the Kass’Kor to victory, and to death.

Above me, the Orca drop-ship recedes from view as its thrusters punch it back up into the stratosphere. Below, ashen clouds, thick with the debris of war, rush to envelop me.

‘Check weapons for readiness.’

Shas’ei’s voice sounds in my comm-feed. There is a burning disquiet in his tone. A rawness I am certain I am the source of. I listen as Vas’la confirms his status.

‘Weapons primed for firing.’

Unlike him, I am new to the team, and I am not honour bonded to Shas’ei. I will remain bound to Or’shara and Sas’la until I join them in death. It is no less than they deserve and what true Ta’lissera Va demands.

‘My life is your life, and your life is my life,’ I say.

I let the words of bonding focus me as I flex my right arm. My suit responds to firing speed, spinning up the barrels of my burst cannon, mounted like a vengeful vambrace. A series of icons stream across my display, denoting ammunition and temperature.

The fusion blaster welded to my other arm hums to full charge as I close my fist.

It is a strange, removed sensation to pilot a Crisis battlesuit. To wield weapons that can reduce rock to sand and yet be unable to feel the cold of their alloy or the warm vibrations of their energy cells.

Another icon blinks onto my display, indicating my flamer as fuelled and functioning. I cannot feel its weight. Perched on my shoulder, the suit bears its burden. It is then that I realise what it is to be shas'ui. To have survived as I have, to have killed as I have. It is to be numb to the heat of the fire burning in your breast.

It is in that moment that I miss the weight of my rifle.

I deactivate my suit's internal stabiliser and steel myself against the rush of the descent. Closing my eyes, I bathe in a welcome flood of adrenaline. I am as a flaming meteor raining down upon the enemies of the empire.

'Kal'va, confirm readiness.'

Shas'ei's voice snaps me back to the moment. I reactivate my suit's stabiliser.

'Ready.'

Clear of the cloud's embrace, I get my first glimpse of the ground. Our research centre is a grey stain that mars the green of the landscape. Around its perimeter, a wide curtain of open land is choked with bodies and the scorched shells of vehicles.

Flashes of pulse rifle fire erupt from behind the walls of the compound.

'We should take care not to obscure the defenders' sight arcs.' A series of alternate deployment locations scroll over my display as Vas'la speaks.

'The fire warrior garrison will be dead before we impact,' says Shas'ei. 'Hold descent.'

I look again to the walls of the compound, seeing fewer weapon flashes this time. Shas'ei was right. The horde of green monstrosities swarming towards the compound is endless. The fire warriors have only moments left. My display updates as Shas'ei tags the shuttle descending in our wake.

'The earth caste need five rai'kor to evacuate the prototype,' he says. 'In the name of the auns, we will grant them that.'

Five rai'kor. It is a lifetime in combat, where each moment is earned with blood.

I look to the compound walls as the final trace of pulse fire falls dark. Lifetime. A blessing we have precious little of.

I activate my suit's jetpack and halt my fall. I fire my boosters, uttering the words of Cleansing Descent as targeting icons swarm over my tactical display.

'We are the fire. Only death shall extinguish our flame.'

As I hit the ground, I harden my jaw against the imagined force of the impact. My suit hisses and clacks in protest, the leg hydraulics bunching to absorb the shock and pincer feet cracking the stone of the courtyard beneath me.

'For the Greater Good!' I shout.

The enemy are everywhere, hulking, green monsters with sinews as thick as my arms, and blood-red eyes that strain in their sockets. The closest opens its mouth, loosing a bestial cry of rage to herald my death. It bares its yellowed incisors, levels a rusted cleaver and rushes at me.

I open fire. The ork dies, torn apart by the energy rounds spinning from my burst cannon.

The rest of the horde erupts then, shaken from their stupor to brutish vigour by the other's death. I turn my cannon on them. They come apart in irregular gobbets, their flesh churned and shredded.

The tide of green thins, but I am offered no respite. A pair of gargantuan wretches stride into the gap, towering head and shoulders over the others. Thick, metal plating covers their bodies, bolted to their musculature and welded to their skin in a haphazard approximation of armour.

I feel a flicker of frustration as their makeshift war-plate turns aside my fusillade. The orks grin with malice, breaking into a heavy-stepped run. Fulgurant energies crackle over the weapon-appendages fixed to their arms as they close on me. I hold my ground. Their confidence is misplaced.

It is my turn to grin as the pair vanish, incinerated by dual blasts from my fusion weapon. The horde pauses a moment, transfixed by the hissing trail left by my gun as it boils away the water in the air.

Amused by their kin's demise, the orks erupt in cruel laughter as they charge towards me. They are a rolling wall of sinew and blade, and I feel the reactive joints of my suit's pinioned feet adjust as the ground shudders under their tread. Still I remain free of the freezing touch of fear. Too eager for the kill and packed too tight in their frenzied clamour, it is now that the orks are at their most vulnerable.

My flamer roars as it brings them agonising death, bathing the orks in a sheet of liquid fire. It is a mercy that the enclosed environment of my suit spares me the stench of their skin; they melt to flesh-gruel as it runs from their bones.

Even in the face of such horror, the orks come still. Driven by bestial stubbornness, they bear down on me with unyielding vigour.

'Ma va'ra!' I spit the curse and pace backwards, firing with everything I have.

The orks crash into the wall of rounds, flame and heat, spraying me with their blood. Still they come. They die, and die and die. But I labour under no falsehood. I am not winning. I take another step back, and another, losing ground with every reverberating thump of my cannon. My ammo counter races to zero, speeding downwards far faster than the mission counter.

Four rai'kor. Still a lifetime.

I am alone, again. Shas'ei and Vas'la are dead, their ident-icons hanging dark on my display. Yet in place of the cold touch of sorrow or the burning desire for vengeance, I taste only the ashen cloy of frustration. Their lives were sold for almost no time at all.

Three. The number on my mission counter flickers down. I pull back to the main blast-doors, using my suit's bulk to block the orks' path into the research silo. A monstrous beast shoulders its way through the horde and bears down on me.

I open fire.

Despite the wound it suffers, the ork barrels forward, slamming into me. I topple, and it lands on top of me, a twisted snarl creasing its face. Warnings fill my display as its crude weapon carves chunks from my armour. Hoping that my thermo-shielding is still intact, I fire.

Flame washes over us both and the ork dies, dripping off me in viscous clumps.

I rise into a torrent of bullets and return fire, guiding my flamer across the press of greenskins. Three more of them fall before a heavy blade cleaves through my weapon. I twist, driving my fusion blaster into my attacker's head. He dies.

I fire again, killing another of the armoured behemoths as they lumber towards me. It was my last charge. Not that it matters. My bones rattle as another withering fusillade slams into me. My suit hisses and whines as the ork slugs break it apart, smashing its power core and dropping me to my back.

Pain lances through me, replaced in moments by a numb wetness as blood spills from my abdomen.

I struggle to stay conscious as an ork stamps down onto my chest, pinning me under his boot. He thunders a fist into his breast in triumph and reverses the grip on his knife. I glance at the mission countdown as he prepares to plunge the blade into me.

Two.

The number twists in my gut like the cruellest of taunts. I have failed. The orks will overrun the base and plunder the empire's technology. I close my eyes and wait for the pain that will mark the end of my trial.

The familiar snap-thrum of pulse fire opens my eyes. I look up to see the ork's body shudder and topple away, riddled with holes. To my left a lone fire warrior, an arm missing at the elbow, his rifle balanced across a dead ork, continues to fire. His eyes burn with the rage I thought long lost to me. I tap the eject protocol and my suit opens.

Prising myself from my harness, I crawl towards the fire warrior, fixed on the embers in his eyes. I ignore the death at my back as I move, pulling myself across the floor hand-span by agonising hand-span.

The counter on my belt chimes one, and I find the strength to quicken my advance.

The fire warrior is dead when I reach him. I prop myself up on his corpse and swing his rifle around. As the familiar feel of its stock settles against my chin I

realise that I am no longer alone.

I am Kal'va, warrior of the Greater Good, and I will kill with all the fury of those who have come before me and of those who will come after. I open fire. An ork dies, his head exploded. Another dies, and another. I change the power pack between breaths and fire again.

Moments – they are now all the earth caste need. I reach under the fire warrior's corpse for another power pack and–

I feel pain, and then I am in the air, hanging limp from an ork blade. He pulls me closer to his face, grinning. I smile back.

Over the rumble of the ork's laugh, beyond the clamour of the horde around me, I hear the thunder of shuttle engines.

Victory. In the name of the Greater Good, I know victory one final time.