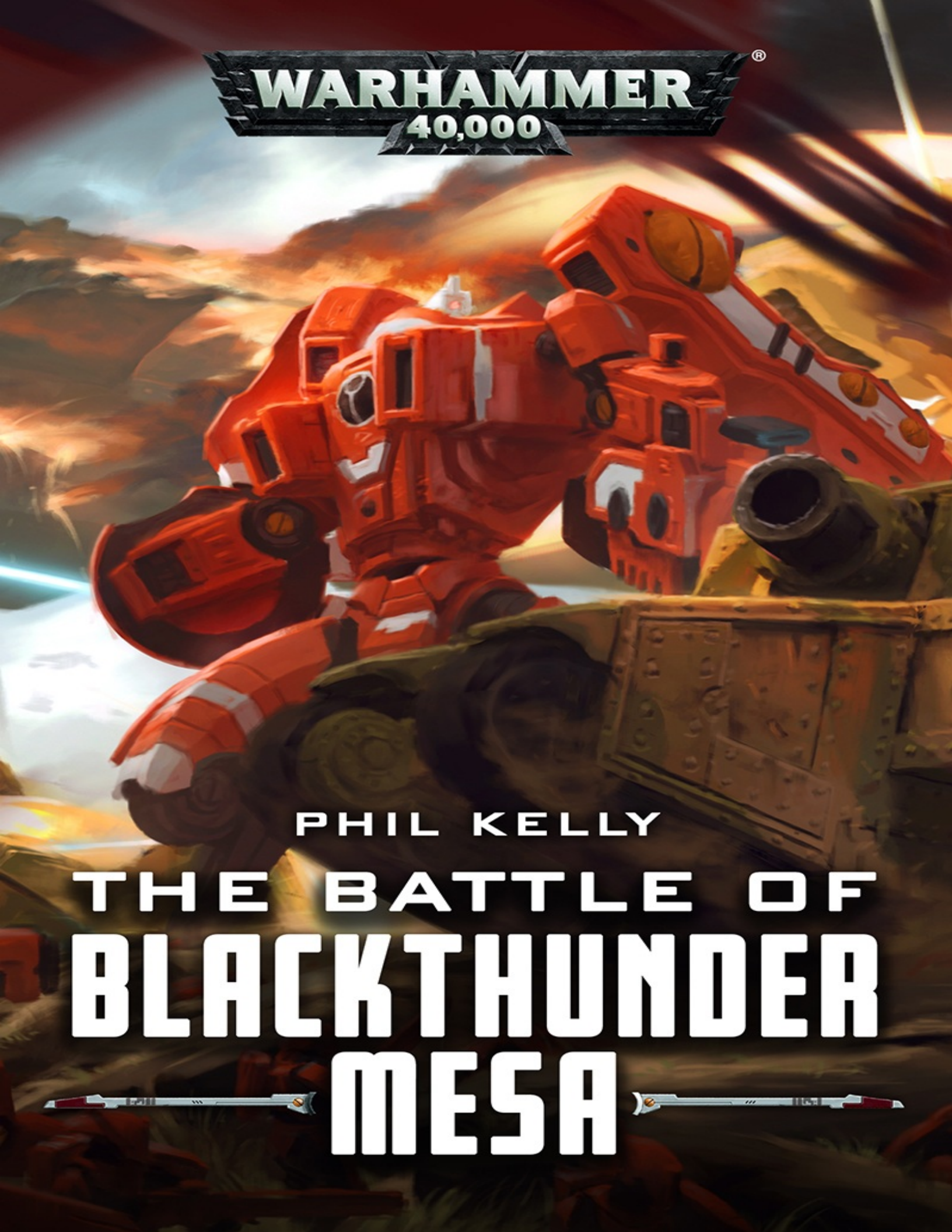




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PHIL KELLY

**THE BATTLE OF
BLACKTHUNDER
MESA**





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The Battle of Blackthunder Mesa – Phil Kelly

About the Author

An Extract from ‘Farsight: Crisis of Faith’

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THE BATTLE OF BLACKTHUNDER MESA

Phil Kelly

THE FISTS OF DAL'RYU

DAL'RYU TRANSMOTIVE TERMINUS T'AU SEPT WORLD
DAL'YTH PRIME

'Do you realise these weapons will get us all killed?'

'If that is the correct course, then so be it.' Commander Bravestorm made a cutting motion with the blade of his hand as he cast an admonishing glance at Shas'vra Furuja. Just like her to undermine what little morale they had left.

Bravestorm looked askance at the munitions pod that had finally arrived in the terminus dome, then at Commander Farsight's clearance sigil blinking red upon its hex screen. The pod was large enough to contain a Crisis battlesuit with room to spare, but if anything its cargo was even more lethal.

'It contains a sacrifice for the Greater Good,' said Udakoa, the big warrior lacing his thick fingers in the sign of the Tau'va. 'The humans have no concept of such dedication. They will not expect so bold a course.'

'The same could be said of our caste mates,' replied Furuja. 'Honoured Shadowsun withdrew her teams several decs ago. There is no shame in spending our lives elsewhere, against more realistic odds.'

The thunder of heavy munitions boomed in the distance as the Imperial artillery pounded another of Dal'ryu's domes to rubble. They had fired indiscriminately for days now. How could a species so wasteful, so inefficient in the ways of war, possibly prevail?

And yet, upon Dal'yth, the Imperium was doing just that.

Bravestorm frowned. Perhaps Furuja was right. There was something ominous about the white pod in their midst, its low hum of potential energy audible under the rumble of distant war. The thing was sleek with smooth panels and curves, a little like a transmotive carriage in miniature. A typical example of the earth caste's aesthetic, it was as if its very minimalism hinted at the lethality inside.

'No. In staying behind, we are already committed to this strike,' said Bravestorm. 'This is not a discussion.' He made the sign of the impeccable kill,

and touched the hilt of his bonding knife by way of reinforcement.

‘With respect, commander, you are not thinking clearly,’ Furuja continued. ‘Aping the Imperial mindset will end in disaster. These brutes do not fight with the mind, only the fist. You cannot expect us to do the same.’

‘Are we truly supposed to *punch* these tanks?’ asked Aae’sho, her beautiful eyes wide as she walked out from behind the weapons pod.

‘Be still, Furuja.’ Bravestorm’s tone brooked no argument, the rigid set to his shoulders sending a clear message. ‘You set a poor precedent.’

The commander knew full well how counter-intuitive the weaponry in the pod seemed. He and Farsight had sketched out the commission themselves. Prototypes, optimised for extreme close range. Bravestorm had asked after just such a development from the genius O’Vesa not twelve rotas ago, and here they were.

The devices were thuggish, almost human in their conceptual design. Now the time had come to put the things into use, Bravestorm felt excitement mingling with uncertainty and an awkward sense of shame.

Perhaps Shadowsun was right. Farsight’s obsession with close-quarters warfare, known to his students as the Way of the Short Blade, was risky in the extreme. But if it worked...

Bravestorm shook his head, and turned to face his team. ‘You will never earn honorific names with a conventional approach to warfare,’ he said, smiling ruefully as he ran a finger along the pod’s length. ‘If these things embody sacrifice, so be it. It will be *Lhas’rhen’na*, that of shattered jade, made for the Greater Good.’

‘I shall earn a new name in time,’ said Furuja, ‘it is my destiny.’

Aae’sho raised her brows in mild disdain. ‘Not soon.’

Furuja shot her a stabbing glare in return. ‘They shall call me Twinblade one day,’ she said archly. ‘And not because some *naysayer* teammate is lucky enough to call me batch-twin.’

“‘Nai-sai-er’,” said Bravestorm carefully, the syllables unfamiliar. ‘I do not know this word.’

‘It is a term for an individual who perpetrates negativity as a character trait,’ said Furuja, her tone blithe and matter-of-fact.

Bravestorm’s olfactory chasm wrinkled in distaste. What a typically *human* concept, for an individual to be known for undermining his fellows as a matter of course. No t’au could ever truly be accused of such a thing, but if the word fitted anyone, it better fit Furuja’s personality than Aae’sho’s. Still, even he

knew better than to voice that sentiment out loud.

The thunder of artillery rumbled in the distance. It was growing quieter with each passing hour as it moved away from their position. The time to move out from their improvised command centre was encroaching.

It was a peculiar trend amongst younger t'au to adopt the terms of the *gue'vesa* – those Imperials who had seen the light of the T'au Empire and worked towards the Tau'va, or 'Greater Good' as it was known in the water caste's parlance. Of late, even some warriors of the fire caste had begun to use Imperial words, ostensibly to improve their understanding of the human mindset.

The habit had the tang of fashion about it. It had always sat ill with Bravestorm, and his fellow commander, the traditionalist Sha'vastos, despised the very idea. After all, these were the same terms used by the unenlightened savages that had invaded Dal'yth Prime in a storm of brute force. The same creatures that had fashioned the walking tomb Bravestorm had faced on Gel'bryn's transmotive sidings, and the crippled, hateful *thing* inside its life-support cocoon. It had leaked blood-streaked fluids from its burst sac of milky liquid and coiled wires, spitting its fury even as it died.

Humans. Already he had learned to condemn them.

'Twinblade – isn't that what you hope to be called, Furuja?' said Udakoa, bringing Bravestorm back from his painful reverie. 'Twinfist would be just as fitting. My lower jaw still aches from Gel'bryn.'

Bulkily built to the point of risking expulsion from the fire caste, Udakoa had too soft a heart in Bravestorm's estimation. He had become ever fonder of Furuja since his *ta'lissera* bonding with Commander Bravestorm's XV8 Crisis team. The big warrior's ribald sense of humour had made several water caste diplomats cringe in the past and resulted in a Vior'lan standoff more than once.

'Two of these systems could be a formidable loadout,' said Commander Sha'rell, the veteran leaning back against the open plexus hatch of his bright blue XV8. The suit's camo circuits had been damaged at Gel'bryn, and Sha'rell had kept it that way since his promotion as a badge of honour. It had been a rallying point ever since. "*If you are to be in dagger's reach,*" he quoted from the code of fire, "*you must ensure that the first strike is enough.*"

'Do we have to use them, then?' asked Aae'sho, brushing a stray strand of her scalp lock back into place with a practised twist. 'I thought Tro'ari Shendu had declared them sub-optimal? Or are we to grace the screens in promotion of their capability?'

'Have you not graced them enough, Aae'sho?' said Tro'ari Shendu, checking

over the weapons pod with a fire caste data-wand. ‘Would your admirers think less of you for using such bulky tools?’

Bravestorm stood up to his full height, impressive even for one of the fire caste, and set his shoulders.

‘Enough. We will be using these prototype systems within the cycle. We have tried a conventional retaliation cadre approach on three occasions, and been forced to withdraw each time.’

None of the assembled fire caste met his gaze. There was no shame in retreat to a t’au, provided it conserved resources, but in truth they had very little of those left.

‘We are almost out of ammunition,’ continued Bravestorm, ‘and Commander Shadowsun has already cut off resupply as a waste of resources. This is the only method I can see left to us – to step inside their reach.’

‘Just as the wrestler Ba’tan stepped inside the reach of the swordswoman Mesme,’ said Udakoa, his fleshy cheeks crinkling as he smiled sidelong at Aae’sho, ‘and bore her to the ground.’

‘Something like that, yes,’ said Bravestorm.

‘Technically speaking, closing within conventional range parameters could be a very effective tactic,’ said Tro’ari Shendu.

Several of the t’au made the right-chopping-left sign that signified the Broken Sword.

‘The situation worsens further in Dal’ryu,’ continued Bravestorm, ‘though the water caste coverage dissembles it as ever. We remain here by choice, and we will make a difference before we yield to the withdrawal order. Faithful Oe-saya, please attend us and relay your findings before resuming your patrol.’

The flat, broad disc of a drone aide moved in from the periphery of the transmotive terminus and hovered in close, its limited holo array purring softly as it projected an airborne visual.

The bombed-out domes of the youth training complex showed the hexagonal learning nodes beneath, each hemispherical centre like a smashed eggshell with its jagged edges and cracked walls. Only a few of the ochre and beige domes, in places blended into one another to form larger buildings, were still intact. The rest were smoking black craters.

Inside the cracked domes were the barely recognisable ruins of learning chambers, communion halls and even dwelling cells ranged around the outside. Movement could be seen inside some of them. Not all of the students had made it out before the transmotive network had been disabled by artillery fire.

An infographic appeared to the side of the footage, relating the mounting death toll with stark and shocking objectivity. Bravestorm zoomed in by bringing together his index fingers and slowly widening the gap between them. The drone Oe-saya blipped an affirmative in response, and the footage focused on the scattered, burned bodies of t'au student diplomats.

The silence that stretched between the battlesuit teams was profound.

'If we do not act swiftly,' said Bravestorm, 'there will be no one left to save.'

The commander stepped over to the weapons pod and brushed his fingers over its authority sensor. It hissed open, a burst of chill air emanating from within, to expose twelve oversized gauntlets packed in shaped cellfoam.

Each clenched fist was fully as large as a fire warrior curled in a foetal ball, gold lights winking near each wrist mounting to show the prototypes were at full charge.

Bravestorm tapped the air above the revelation panel. A sheet of glowing light unfolded like a paper sculpture unmade in front of him until a stylised holo of an earth caste weapons scientist appeared. The instructional holo made the sign of the Tau'va in respect, simplified schematics flickering around it.

Onager gauntlets, O'Vesa had called them. Devices of immense power. To those who used them, thought Bravestorm, almost certainly a death sentence.

THE KILLING BLOW

BLACKTHUNDER MESA, NEAR DAL'RYU T'AU SEPT WORLD
DAL'YTH PRIME

The Manta *Guardian's Strike* slid gracefully through the purple clouds of the Dal'yth sunset. The missile destroyer was large enough to carry an entire hunter cadre to war, and despite its great size, at cruising altitude its engines were little louder than those of a Sun Shark bomber.

Better yet, its electronic signature was masked by extensive dampener suites. Three times had Commanders Bravestorm and Sha'rell used the *Strike* to attack from a vertical vector, and three times they had landed the first blow without the Imperial tank companies having the slightest chance to parry.

It was what came after that posed the problem.

A wide view of the landscape beneath the Manta, relayed from its ventral cameras to the ten Crisis battlesuits within its modified hold, showed the infamous Blackthunder Mesa. So high its rugged clifftops had a weather system unto themselves, the ridge overlooked the Dal'ryu settlement and the hexagonal system of transmotive rails that linked it to the conurbations beyond.

It had once been a popular pastime amongst Dal'ryu's youths to hike to the top of the mesa and watch the sun set over the domes. Now, its ridge was host only to spent shells and rotting corpses lousy with indigo maggots.

Since the Imperial invasion had begun, the mesa had been littered with the broken bodies of those t'au who had defended it. Many of the cadavers had since been ground beneath the tracks of the squat, badly camouflaged lumps of metal that the Imperials used as their main-line tanks.

Bravestorm felt his mouth twist in bitter disapproval as the Manta's scanners penetrated the cloud cover to relay long-range scans to his command-and-control suite. The vehicles atop the ridge were not true fighting machines, but brutish demolitions engines, inelegant even in comparison to the earth caste's building-levellers.

Each of the Imperial battle tanks was dark green and olive drab. It was a colouration appropriate enough for a verdant world, perhaps, but worse than useless against the mauves and purples of Dal'yth's plains.

'Is that supposed to be camouflage?' said Tro'ari Shendu. The tactician's tone was that of a rifleman being charged by a distant adversary wielding nothing more than a sharp stick.

'Another sign of Imperial arrogance,' said Bravestorm. 'That is one of their many flaws. Laziness of the mind, and a habit of underestimating their enemy.' He paused, deep in thought. 'It will lead to their downfall.'

'Some might say there is good reason for their pride,' said Furuja. Bravestorm blipped across the crossed-forearms sign of censure and opened a single communion link. 'Keep those thoughts to a closed link, if you must express them,' he said. 'The ethereal caste has a way of hearing such sentiments.'

He signed off before she could respond, but a small voice in Bravestorm's mind admitted she had a point. There were literally hundreds of armoured targets down there on the ridge.

He cued up the Manta's analysis, spooling through direct to his link. Eight hundred and eleven war vehicles in total had fought their way to the top of the outcrop, despite the battlesuit teams Bravestorm had led to stop them in the early stages of the invasion.

Far too many for them to engage effectively, even if the Imperials had no infantry support to speak of.

Bravestorm blink-clicked a hostiles filter and scanned anxiously for signs of the squat, bipedal Dreadnoughts the Imperials used as heavy battlesuit analogues. He breathed a slow sigh when he found nothing that matched his recorded readings.

The walking war engines were formidable indeed; he had learned that the hard way at Gel'bryn. Even if he overcame another such an adversary, he was not sure if he could stomach the spectacle of the thing laid open in defeat, the shrunken and limbless near-corpse inside staring up at him with a mixture of impotent loathing and undiluted hatred.

That sight still swam into his thoughts at least once per dark-time dec, its cursing words stuck fast in his mind.

Die in pain, foreign worm-thing.

Bravestorm put the memory from his mind and forced himself to focus on the enemy disposition below. The vast majority of the vehicles were the thick, cannon-turreted battle tanks the water caste's gue'vesa informants called Leman

Russ – given the unusual terminology, Bravestorm assumed the model was named after the machine’s inventor in a typical display of *gue’la* vainglory. The things were grouped in squadrons of nine, each with a command tank marked out by ostentatious heraldry and command-link aerals.

Those on the outside of each echelon had far longer barrels than the others, the tanks known as Vanquishers. Those at the fore were Demolishers, their stubby barrels so wide a human could have slept inside one.

The artillery pieces ranged on the far side of the fissure that split the mesa were little more than canted, long-barrelled guns on tracks. It was these Basilisk squadrons that were hurling solid shot munitions into the farthest training domes. Though formidable at long range, their efficacy at close fire was so poor Bravestorm had effectively discounted them from his calculations. He had already assigned the Manta the duty of neutralising them as the Crisis suits took on the Leman Russ battle tanks.

‘This time we will forsake the purely vertical strike for the Shadowsun mask,’ said Bravestorm. ‘I have patched across the relevant data suite.’

‘Commander?’ said Aae’sho. ‘I have not studied this. What is the core concept?’

‘Each *gue’la* tank has a predictable and limited arc of effect. Much like a plains tortoise, the Imperial vehicle is hampered by its own focus on defence. By extrapolating and overlapping their fields of fire, we can ascertain the zones where it is safest to land, and work from there. Look for the gold wedges on your top-down display, and position yourself inside at all times. I shall take point, and make myself an obvious target.’

His team sent symbols of assent, each initiating their command suites accordingly.

As the *Strike* moved in, its hex-linked informationals showed that the blackened wrecks at the rear of the vehicle echelon – those that Bravestorm and Sha’rell had taken down with their previous assaults – had not been salvaged, nor even cleared out of the theatre of war, but simply left there to rust. A small flame of pride burned in Bravestorm’s heart at the sight. His team had taken a heavy toll in destroying them, and withdrawn only because their suits were running low on ammunition and energy charge.

This time, in theory at least, that concern would not be a problem.

The low, threatening hum of the onager gauntlets filled the *Strike*’s passenger bay. Many of Bravestorm’s fellow warriors flexed the broad digits of the unfamiliar weapons systems, the motions of dextrous fingers inside their control

cocoons aped by the XV8s' giant electrified fists.

Some amongst them were eager to test the new systems in a live-fire environment – Bravestorm included. His gamble would determine whether ten of the Dal'ythan fire caste's brightest and best would live or die, and he was anxious to tip the balance in his favour. More than that, their strike would seal the fate of those from the youth academies yet to evacuate, and likely make a difference to morale across the entire war effort.

It had to work. It had to.

'Location arrival in twenty microdecs,' said their air caste pilot, a coolly competent battlefield specialist who had earned the name Trueflight. 'Preparing debarkation sequence.'

'My thanks, Trueflight,' said Bravestorm. 'Team, make your final preparations.'

'Not long until our fates are met, commander,' blipped Furuja to Bravestorm on a personal communion link. 'With next to no training in this weapon system, I do not feel confident.'

'Just channel all that doubt and anger into violence,' said Bravestorm. 'We've seen you do it before.'

This time it was Furuja who shut off the communion link.

The rear portal of the Manta destroyer chimed loudly, and a sliver of violet sunlight lanced through its primary door as it slid open. One by one the Crisis teams of Bravestorm and Sha'rell, racked on the dual internal rails of the customised Manta's lower passenger deck, ejected from the craft's rear.

Bravestorm's iridium-skinned XV8-02 prototype was first out, as ever. His onager gauntlet's hex informational flared brightly next to those of his shield generator, plasma rifle and flamer. Magnetic impulsors pushed his battlesuit clear of the gunship's engines in a single smooth shunt.

His team ejected behind him in quick succession, and Sha'rell followed close behind with Loa'thon, On'st, Bel'uatta and Adha'varnatel forming up in skyfall pattern around their commander's sky-blue battlesuit. Their distribution was textbook, each XV8 dropping down through the clouds and firing its jets to ensure maximum group cohesion.

Visible far below through the thin veils of water vapour was Blackthunder Mesa, a jagged cliff with an edge that wound like a serpent towards the indigo plains below. Its foremost edge was clustered with enemy tanks, from this distance looking like a swarm of beetle-backed insects all gathered to stare at the training academies of Dal'ryu beyond.

Bravestorm was about to send the gold icon of a successful aerial deployment when a hail of large-calibre flak rounds detonated close by. Illuminated by the halo of his own undampened shield generator, Bravestorm had likely been the target, but it was Shas'vre Loa'thon who took the brunt. The impacts tore at his battlesuit in an explosion so powerful it was startling even with Bravestorm's audio dampeners on combat mode. The shock wave sent Sha'rell spinning away in a gout of black smoke.

More flak came up an instant later. Bravestorm's shield generator flared as it took a glancing impact, and Loa'thon himself was hit by a stray wedge of shrapnel. Blood trailed from his plexus hatch like a crimson ribbon. The stricken battlesuit tumbled into a patch of cloud.

'Disperse!' shouted Bravestorm, zooming in on the quadruple muzzle flare of what looked like anti-aircraft guns far below. He eye-flicked new vectors of attack onto the central hex-screen, each aimed in one of the gold triangles where the Imperial flak tanks could not find them.

Bravestorm tucked his XV8-02's limbs in close, streamlining his suit so that its feet formed the tip of an arrowhead. He eye-flicked trajectories for Furuja and Udakoa to match his descent, sending Aae'sho and Tro'ari Shendu on a parallel vector of attack.

Now more of the Imperials were taking the bait. An insistent warning chime of incoming fire rang out in his control cocoon. He dived forwards sharply, his XV8-02 pivoting forwards and bringing its shield round even as high-velocity rounds exploded against its force field. Fire blossomed around him, a flaming disc of energy revealed by the tremendous impacts.

Bravestorm could feel each shell's aftershock rattle him in his cocoon. His shield generator readout flickered from gold to bronze in a matter of seconds, already a third depleted. Still, the hammering shells were held at bay – and Furuja and Udakoa behind him had been kept safe.

Bravestorm plummeted through the last thin veil of cloud to see the flak tanks below, their quad-barrelled cannons raised high. He sent a volley of plasma bolts diagonally down at the rear of the closest tank as it tracked its guns around. The burning blue parcels of energy cut into the legs of one gunner and the hip of another. They tumbled away into the dirt.

A sharp boost from his thrust/vector suite, and Bravestorm shot towards the next flak tank. His flamer system chimed as its rangefinder ticked into gold, and he sent a lance of superheated fire to wash across the open gunnery platform at the vehicle's rear. The humans manning the tank flailed, limbs blackening in the

conflagration.

The commander was already past. He hit the third tank like a hurled spear, swinging a wild haymaker punch with the onager gauntlet at full energy discharge.

The prototype weapon hit the quad-barrelled weapons turret so hard the entire structure, despite being twice the size of an XV8, was ripped away with a scream of tortured metal.

Bravestorm grinned widely as a trio of bolts spat from his plasma rifle. A microdec later a whirling storm of fire and shrapnel engulfed the tank and the t'au commander alike as its ammunition feed cooked off.

He staggered heavily backwards from the detonation, alerts bleeping and caution indicators flaring on the holographic doppelganger of his damage control suite. Bravestorm felt a spike of hot aggression mingle with relief. His iridium Crisis suit had ridden out the explosion with little more than a layer of synth paint stripped from its exterior.

All around Bravestorm the brutish human crews of the anti-air tanks were shouting, waving their arms and barking in their guttural tongue. Weapons turrets swivelled towards him, desperate to draw a bead. He crouched low. A storm of solid shot ammunition whipped overhead, enough to rip a Razorshark fighter to chunks of scrap metal. But the tank's guns had not been designed for close engagements, and not a single round struck his battlesuit's armour.

To the right, a quad-barrelled mortar tank was accelerating towards him. Its engines roared.

His soul alight with the fire of battle, Bravestorm roared back.

Leaning in his XV8-02, the commander charged straight forwards to meet the tank headlong. It loomed closer, a slab of dull green. At the last moment he leapt and brought his onager gauntlet down hard, smashing into the tank's glacis. With the vehicle's momentum meeting the blow, the fist struck hard enough to lift the tank's rear several feet into the air.

Bravestorm aimed his next punch right at the vision slit. There was a moment of hard resistance from the gauntlet's neural relay as his fist ploughed straight through the tank's hull, its thick metal shell giving in sharp triangular segments that caved inwards. Bravestorm extended his fingers sharply, reaching for the crew member inside, and was rewarded with a piercing scream as the driver was impaled on his gauntlet's thumb.

There was a loud clank of metal, and a shouting gue'la trooper emerged from the vehicle's top hatch, seizing the pintle weapon system and sending a volley of

low-calibre bullets pinging from Bravestorm's iridium battlesuit. The gue'la's face was twisted and animalistic, his mouth a red-black hole surrounded by discoloured teeth and coarse hair.

The commander ripped his gauntlet free in a spray of blood, his shoulder-mounted weapon system spearing the gunner through the chest with a bolt from his plasma rifle.

Good riddance, thought Bravestorm. The galaxy is a cleaner place for his death.

Ducking down behind the glacis of the flak tank, Bravestorm took stock of the situation. Already Sha'rell had taken down another of the graceless vehicles, his dual flamers sending out a blast so fierce it turned the gunners at the rear to flailing effigies of blackened flesh.

One of the burning humans launched himself at Sha'rell's battlesuit, clinging to the shoulder as the commander landed and took cover. Sha'rell shrugged him free, pivoting round to stamp him into the dust.

Udakoia landed nearby with an earth-shaking crunch. He had been eager to adopt the new weapons system; so eager that with Sha'rell's permission he had taken two gauntlets in order to replace both his primary systems. He stormed forwards, placed both of his fists under the nearest flak tank, and braced for a moment.

'Udakoia,' said Bravestorm, 'you're not—'

His words were cut off as Udakoia lifted the Imperial tank high enough to put his shoulder under it, the metal buckling where the onager gauntlets' thick fingers bit into the hull. Udakoia straightened suddenly with a thrust from his jet pack, flipping the tank onto its side and spilling the crew into the dirt beyond.

One of the crew got his leg trapped beneath the tank's superstructure, and started screaming like a wounded kroot ape. The other rolled with the momentum, scrabbling a pistol from his hip holster and squeezing off a bolt of ruby energy. Udakoia walked into the shot, the blast scorching his plexus hatch but doing no real damage. He backhanded the fallen human so hard the top half of his body was mangled into a featureless ruin.

Udakoia chuckled over the cadrenet. 'My compliments to O'Vesa when you see him next.'

'Just stay in the densest areas,' called Bravestorm. 'It is the only way we will survive this.'

Udakoia blipped a golden sign of assent before striding towards another Imperial tank. Its quadruple cannons tracked around to draw a bead on him. That one was dangerously close to overconfidence, thought Bravestorm, and here it

would likely get him killed.

The commander sent a volley of plasma shots winging over that burned a hand's breadth from one of the quad-cannons' ammo cases – just like the idiotic Imperials to mount their ammunition on a vehicle's exterior. He shifted his aim, and was rewarded by a series of sharp explosions as the shells of two of the cannons cooked off. The other two pointed straight at Udakoa as the shas've burst into a run.

He was still nowhere near close enough.

'Furuja!' shouted Bravestorm.

'Engaging.'

Dropping down from above she came, slicing through one of the flak tank's barrels with a beam from her fusion blaster even as Aae'sho grabbed the other with her onager gauntlet. The young warrior squeezed it so hard the metal cylinder twisted at a strange angle, then came clean away in her fist.

Furuja spun fast on the spot in her XV8 – something Bravestorm had only ever seen his comrade Commander Brightsword pull off – and slashed her fusion blaster beam across the gunners at the rear, bisecting them both with one sweep of superheated energy. Aae'sho hurled the barrel of the gun sidelong, the improvised projectile taking out two more crew on a nearby flak tank.

Only then did Udakoa hit the tank like a charging rhinoceros, fists pounding the front to mangled scrap metal.

'This is most cathartic,' he shouted over the cadrenet.

'It's already dead, lackwit,' said Furuja, already boosting away to land on a nearby tank that was slowly reversing to get a better bead on them. Udakoa clambered atop his target and grabbed hold of its frontal shield, tearing it free and hurling it in what seemed to be her direction. Furuja leaned to one side, and the torn slab of metal sent a knot of tank crew that had been advancing upon her scattering for cover.

'Watch your aim!' shouted Furuja over the cadrenet.

'She is right,' said Bravestorm. 'That was too close.'

'I would offer contrition,' said Udakoa, 'but it worked.'

Bravestorm's command-and-control suite bipped loudly, and he flicked an eye towards the distribution array. There was a tank squadron converging on their position, unaware that Sha'rell and his team were sprinting around behind them to initiate a swift *mont'ka* strike.

The first of the tanks spat twin tongues of fire from its barrel as it took a shot. Bravestorm was forced to kneel behind his shield generator as the crashing

impact was obliterated in a storm of energy. It had depleted the weapon system's reserve once more; now its metallospectrum was the colour of cold steel. A few more of those and it would be the charcoal black of death.

There was a thunderous roar from Bravestorm's left flank. He glanced at his suite to see Shas'vere On'st blasted backwards, ripped limb from limb with his plasma rifle spinning into the middle distance.

A massive, blunt-muzzled super-heavy war engine was crunching its way across the mesa's ridge, three times the size of the Lemman Russ tanks around them. Bravestorm called up his directional audio, narrowed its scope to a thin beam and pointed it at the tank's turret. As he suspected, he heard the whine of capacitors as the giant laser cannon atop it reached full charge.

'It readies to fire again!'

Sha'rell leapt, his jet pack giving him enough lift to send him soaring in a long parabola, and landed atop the tank. He stuck the nozzle of his right-hand flamer right in the vision slit and squeezed off a long burst.

Flames burst from vents and barrels as a raging inferno filled the interior. The screams of two crewmen filtered over the XV8-02's sensors, rendered reedy and thin by their incarceration in that white-hot furnace. Bravestorm grimaced. That was a bad way to die, even for a gue'la.

Somehow, the super-heavy still ground on, tracking around to take a bead on Bravestorm's team. Its cannon roared once more. This time Bel'uatta took the brunt, the thick laser beam blasting her Crisis suit to molten slurry and killing her in an instant.

'Break left!' he shouted. 'Get behind it!'

Sha'rell had already leaped to the rear of the tank, Aae'sho with him. From his new vantage point Bravestorm watched Aae'sho grab hold of the rear hatch of the tank and brace herself before ripping it wide open, mangling a massive slab of its hull with a screech of protesting metal.

'Get clear!' shouted Sha'rell, pushing her battlesuit roughly away. Aae'sho stumbled back, stunned, before jetting away to join Furuja as she engaged a Demolisher squadron at point-blank range.

Bravestorm watched in disbelief as Sha'rell grabbed the mangled rear of the tank and forced it open even wider, half climbing inside with his flammers billowing out an inferno all around him.

'No,' he said, 'Sha'rell, you must—'

A titanic explosion stole his words, blasting the giant tank to a tangle of smoking black metal in a detonation so massive the nearest three Lemman Russ

were consumed in the firestorm. Of Sha'rell, there was no sign.

Lhas'rhen'na. The sacrifice of shattered jade.

A distant boom from the west. Then another, a few microdecs afterwards.

Bravestorm's command-and-control suite pinged an alert at the third. These were not detonations, not gunfire, but seismic events, each like a miniature earthquake.

They were coming from the north-east, to the east of Dal'ryu. A fourth boom, then a fifth, close behind. Like the drumbeat of some ancient god's funerary procession.

Fighting the urge to climb a wrecked tank and take the high ground, Bravestorm darted right, backhanding his onager gauntlet into a trundling tank as it drove in close to sideswipe him. The vehicle's track came away, and it veered with the impact, overcompensating only to slam into another that was attempting to cut him off. Ahead of the stricken tanks was a channel, a gap down the endless ranks of lumpen vehicles. Along it, Bravestorm could see the edge of the mesa and the field of violet grassland beyond.

Two massively built behemoths loomed down there, bipedal war machines so big they made the Leman Russ tanks look like cleaner-drones hovering at the heels of a Broadside.

Imperial Warlord Titans.

The monstrous Warlord Titans were already legend upon Dal'yth. They were known as god-machines to the *gue'vesa* who had spoken of them, and Bravestorm could see why. Bipedal, the approaching war engines were vast mockeries of the Hero's Mantle. They had been built by a race that respected only raw power, with none of the earth caste's thought for grace, manoeuvrability, speed – or practicality, for that matter. These war engines were crippled by their own immensity. They could not fight effectively in a city, a forest, nor any built up area at all.

But on the open plain, engaging an elevated target, they would be in their element. The nearest, ahead of its companion by some four hundred metres, had honorific banners fluttering from the long-barrelled cannon that formed its right arm.

'Do you see those things, commander?' asked Furuja.

'Of course,' he replied. 'They disturb me too. But only elite warriors could pilot those things, and Farsight himself has said the *gue'ron'sha* have their own barbaric code of honour. Such souls would not fire on valued troops.'

‘Are you sure?’

‘Even the critically wounded Imperials are forced to fight on. Here, amongst the ranks of its allies, we will be protected from its fury.’

‘Then thank the Tau’va we followed your course and stuck close, commander,’ said Udakoa.

The ground-shaking booms of the nearest Titan’s footfalls were growing louder as it changed heading to approach the ridge directly, its inexorable approach leading it closer with every earth-shaking footfall. Flocks of Dal’ythan ground-gulls were startled from their burrows, white specks flitting against the giant cliff of metal advancing upon the mesa’s edge.

There was menace in its hunched posture, its gait and the dull glow of the eyes set into its massive, blunt head. It was stamping forwards like a Fio’taun executioner weighed down by his own honour blade.

Upon its shoulders it bore massive missile launcher housings, each the size of a small building. A payload devised to level cities, and likely with a single volley. The giant’s entire right arm was a cannon in form, long and tapering at the end in the manner of some vast laser weapon. The left was a gauntlet of colossal size, its ironwork talons articulated and crackling with ropes of electrical discharge.

Bravestorm saw the Titan’s guns turn until they were pointing right at his team. The tip of its primary gun barrel grew to such brightness that his blacksun filter overlaid a polarised cut-out.

‘We should run,’ said Udakoa, tension straining his words.

‘Have faith,’ replied Furuja. ‘Even these gue’la would not fire on their own kind.’

‘I am not so sure,’ said Udakoa.

‘Do not give into fear,’ said Bravestorm. ‘They are not that stupid. I give you the word of my honour. We are safe here. Remain in close formation.’

The barrel of the titanic machine’s laser arm glowed even brighter. At the same time a payload of missiles launched from its shoulders, arcing down towards them like a flock of killer raptors plunging in for the kill.

‘Into cover!’ shouted Aae’sho.

The world erupted into searing light.

Bravestorm was hurled back, his battlesuit flipping end over end as it was suddenly blown like a leaf on a gale. He slammed into the broad flank of an Imperial battle tank, and the impact knocked out a handful of teeth. Choking on his own vital fluid, he spat blood. Pain wracked every nerve. His head felt like it

had split open, as if struck by an axe in each temple. The stench of cooked meat filled the control cocoon; the scent of his own flesh, charred to dark ruin.

Realisation sent fresh waves of pain, his stunned and reeling mind fighting against an animal sense of panic. Death was near. A cold shroud of fear and guilt wrapped around Bravestorm's spine. The Titan had fired indiscriminately.

The gamble had failed, and they were as good as dead.

He had to concentrate. The others relied on him.

Agony consumed him as Bravestorm forced himself to focus, manually punching the stimulant injector. Needles pricked the nape of his neck, but he barely felt them. It was a system intended to provide a boost in times of extreme duress, not to revive a warrior who had been charred from scalp to heel. Nonetheless the salving fluids flowing through his system brought a measure of cool relief against the white-hot pain.

As the commander's vision cleared he could see a streak of light at his flank. There was a ragged wound torn in the side of the suit. Hot air seared in, spiking the pain in his right flank still further. An old hairline split in the battlesuit's iridium plating, a caulk-sealed wound from a bolt-round at Gel'bryn's transmotive sidings, had been ripped into a gaping fissure. Now the XV8-02's systems were flickering, glitching manically as they attempted to cope with the vast trauma they had sustained.

The entire control suite suddenly cut out, and darkness swallowed him. Slowly his vision adjusted to the bio-luminescent glow that formed his XV8-02's emergency lighting.

Bravestorm felt the acid of his stomachs scarring the inside of his throat. Nothing remained of the cadrenet link to his team; every hex was dark. Only a few lights winked on the interior panels. The commander frowned and shut the system down manually before initiating it once more.

A thunderous footfall came from half-a-mile distant, terrifyingly close. Panic threatened to consume him like a primal tide. He had to escape.

The iridium Crisis suit restarted a microdec later, its display hexes unfolding one after another until his command suite was fully functional once more. The sub-screens that reflected his comrades were all the flat black colouration of the void.

Aae'sho. Furuja. Adha'varnatel. Tro'ari Shendu. Udakoa. All dead.

All obliterated in a single, blinding moment.

The team's hexes folded back in on themselves, leaving only the symbol of the Greater Good.

There was a ground-shaking, seismic boom. This time it was louder, so close Bravestorm could feel it through his torn and blackened battlesuit.

Then another, and then a third.

Patient. Unstoppable. Terrifying.

The despair and pain consuming the commander's mind were pushed down by a fierce desire for revenge. It was a sudden, intense pressure that crushed his intent into a single point, like a thousand burning coals compressed all at once into a diamond blade.

He alone had survived. The experimental iridium alloy of his modified XV8-02 was the only thing that had come between him and brutal annihilation. His guilt would drive that blade into the enemy, or burn him up completely.

Bravestorm slid his targeting lock aperture to maximum as his command suite reinstated. The ground was the sky, and the sky the ground; it came to him that his battlesuit was upside down; that he was at the edge of a massive crater. Ranged around him were the wrecks of dozens of Imperial tanks, scattered around the edge of a wide, steaming circle strewn with the disembodied remains of Crisis battlesuits and mangled Imperial vehicles. His sensor vanes panned around to full panoramic; behind him were the wrecks of a dozen more. An inferno roared still, bubbling paint on the flanks of those vehicles at the edge of the crater hastening to move from the Titan's crosshairs.

The pain and doubt came back for a moment, unwilling to be sidelined so easily. Against such horrific force, such merciless disregard for the life of ally as well as enemy, how could any sane mind prevail?

Then the diamond blade in Bravestorm's mind cut through the fug of confusion and guilt, parting the clouds to reveal the cold and stark answer.

With rage.

The commander felt an unnatural tingle, intensifying to send crashing waves of pain across his nervous system before the stimulant injector numbed them to a dull ache. The Imperial engine's power field, invisible but potent nonetheless, had washed over him.

The beast was within a stone's throw, and it was readying for the kill.

Bravestorm felt white blossoms of raw pain blind him for a moment as he twisted in his control cocoon, but his scrabbling black claw found the indent of the defence override nonetheless. He channelled the last of the battlesuit's energy from recovery protocols into attack parameters, pressing his fingers in the deep-set nodes until every iota of available energy was channelled into the XV8-02's thrust/vector suite.

His command-and-control suite was on backup, still hazed and glitching with its retinal scanner controls out, but it was operative at least on manual. His ranged weapon systems were out completely. The guns themselves had melted into drooping, molten fingers of metal, rendered useless by the Titan's devastating assault.

Bravestorm leaned hard and sent a burst of thrust from his repulsor jet pack's left vent, rocking his fallen machine until it toppled over to one side with a crash. He moved one arm experimentally, the blackened flesh splitting open to show a delta of red cracks, and the XV8-02 followed suit.

Above him, the Titan loomed. He could see its vastness blot out the Dal'ythan sun through the gaping wound in his flank.

Slowly, agonisingly, Bravestorm pushed himself onto his front, then onto all fours. Fires still crackled across his battlesuit's back, and he manually silenced the alarms with stabs of a finger that was more blackened bone than flesh.

Another crushing, heart-stopping impact. There it was, raising a massive foot over the smoking ruins of his team as if it were about to stamp them from history altogether.

'No!' he shouted, his throat on fire. 'You will fight me alone.'

The commander boosted upwards, his onager gauntlet leaving trails of crackling electricity behind it as his jet pack array flared on maximum. The Titan filled his vision, a giant of metal and hatred, cold and inviolable next to the embers of the t'au attack.

The repulsor jet pack's twin columns of energy carried him higher, past the heraldic armour plates of the war machine's armoured legs, then the swivelling gimbals of its hips and the turntable of its waist. Faster he flew, angling his flight. He aimed straight for the jutting, gargoyle-like head unit that held the war machine's crew, and rerouted all power to his gauntlet.

This close, within its reach, the giant could not bring its mighty guns to bear. Its hubris, its haste to snuff out all resistance from its fallen prey, would be its doom.

The onager gauntlet arced towards the Titan in a haymaker sweep, striking not at the armoured head but at the underside of its throat. In a long, tearing gouge Bravestorm ripped away thick ropes of armoured cabling. Oily fluids drizzled from the giant machine's neck in a crackling storm of electricity and red-hot sparks.

The commander felt his blow slam into a giant pipeline, standing proud like a tendon. He grabbed hold, rerouting power to the jet pack's thrust, and closed his

grip. Turning upside down, he placed his battlesuit's feet on the underside of the Titan's head and pulled as hard as he could.

With an agonised scream of tortured metal the pipeline gave way, milk-white fluids gouting across the XV8-02 and splashing into the control cocoon through the gaping wound in its front.

Bravestorm shouted in triumph as the Crisis battlesuit fell away, its energies spent. A moment later he saw the Titan's own gauntlet, massive enough to crush the XV8-02, swing in towards him.

The giant's fist swatted him like a bloodwasp.

The commander felt gravity release its grip for a moment before he crashed heavily into a missile crater, his iridium battlesuit as mangled as the XV8s of his dead comrades around him.

With a last effort, Bravestorm craned his neck and squinted through the fissure in the suit's front, intent on one last glimpse. The Titan was turning away, fluids still drizzling from its neck. In the skies behind it he saw the distinctive triangular shape of a Manta missile destroyer, two more cresting the horizon beyond.

Then the ground around him trembled once more, and not only at the pace of the vast war effigy. The armoured company that had claimed Blackthunder Mesa was on the move, redeploying from their exposed position at some unseen command.

As consciousness began to slip away, Bravestorm felt a dull throb of relief. The Way of the Short Blade had proved successful, in a way. By forcing the Imperials to redeploy, they at least achieved Lhas'rhen'na.

Farsight would be proud.

'That one looks largely recoverable,' said Fio'vre Dala'dao, pointing to the fallen XV8-02. Around him, his earth caste teammates picked through the blackened wreckage of Blackthunder Mesa. 'Incredible fortune,' said Dala'dao. 'Mark it as a priority for rescue, please, Oe-shirudo. We do not have long.'

The worker drone at the recovery team leader's shoulder slid forwards, casting a markerlight across the fallen iridium suit's torn flank. Its beam illuminated a withered, blackened form inside, clawing at nothing and wheezing feebly as it clung to life.

A light lanced Bravestorm's consciousness like a spear. He was adrift upon a dreamlike sea of red and black, the ocean of pain threatening to rise up over his head. Somehow he was clinging to a disc of white, the sign of his salvation,

keeping him afloat. But it was shrinking, diminishing with every moment. Some distant part of his brain equated it with his emergency bio-support.

Always the last system to go, it was nonetheless running out.

Swimming towards him through the agony were hairy, gangle-limbed creatures with pig-like eyes and gnashing, bloodstained teeth.

Gue'la, revealed to him in their true form.

The beasts were swarming. Their competitive nature, their selfish lust for violent gratification, saw them tearing at one another in their haste to be the first to sink their teeth into his flesh. But none of them could quite scabble its way atop the edges of the white disc.

The paradoxes of mankind's nature hit him like a hailstorm as the creatures fought one another for the kill. How could a species so advanced in the art of conquest be so self-defeating? Why would those so individually strong make their communality so weak? How could they ever defeat those who had given body and soul to the Tau'va? These creatures had no conception of the Greater Good. They would wastefully kill their own kind in order to promote their individual interests. How then could they be so successful?

One of the gue'la monsters surged forwards, pushing down on its nearby kin. It seemed to Bravestorm that one of its pack-mates had started to drown beneath its claws, but the callous act gave the beast support enough to clamber onto the disc holding the commander afloat. Slowly the floating white circle began to break apart.

Then, staring into that creature's porcine, red eyes, Bravestorm saw the answer.

Humanity had its own twisted conception of the Greater Good, though its individual components did not realise it. A concept that involved killing every threat against its race, no matter the cost.

Like a hive of insects, Humanity cared little if a hundred warriors died, so long as the multitude overall survived. The gue'la would go to any lengths, fire upon one another gladly to ensure their species' propagation. It was as callous as it was effective.

More and more gue'la creatures clambered over the disc of white towards him. The waters of painful revelation reached up to cover Bravestorm's mouth, filling his lungs and bearing him down into the blackness.

A voice floated through the vision of pain.

'Remarkable,' it said in a perfect Dal'ythan T'au dialect. 'He is alive. Gather the lifter drones. We will recover the whole suit, Fio'vre, and convey it to the laboratories to save what we can.'

Bravestorm struggled to comprehend the words, but the gue'la terrors closing in on him robbed them of meaning.

'I will replenish the battlesuit's injector array in the meantime, and petition O'Vesa to prepare a life support suite for the fallen hero's arrival.'

'He bought time enough to save the training facilities, came a second voice. 'The water caste would never forgive us if he died.'

A needle of cold fear pierced Bravestorm's heart.

'Knowing honoured O'Vesa's love of a challenge,' replied the first voice, 'he could well fight on for many kai'rotaa to come. Though with burns these deep, he will never leave his battlesuit again.'

Bravestorm frowned for a moment before understanding filled his mind, and a cold terror mingled with white-hot rage.

This was not over.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

An extract from *Farsight: Crisis of Faith*.



The tau have the right of it.

Many of our fellow inquisitors would hang me by the neck as a heretic if they heard me say that, for all the good it would do them. But this little xenoculture on the fringes of Imperial space has a way of interacting with the universe that is fascinating to me. I feel they are somehow more likely to see the truths of existence afresh, perhaps by being so far removed from the shattered fragments of knowledge that the older races so habitually cling to. They have open eyes, and comparatively open minds. A very dangerous combination, unfortunately, and one that cannot be left unmonitored.

These tau know nothing of nameless doubt, of existential fear, or the hideous reflections that even the meekest human souls can cast into the hell-dimension of the warp. They are not a psychically active race – or if they are, they are so weak that even I find it difficult to read their Empyrric presence. What blessed ignorance that must be, to live unthreatened by one's own rapacious shadow. I can only imagine.

Given the grand scale of humanity's realm, a xenos empire of perhaps a dozen scattered systems is no great cause for concern. The little wretches haven't even mastered faster than light travel. Ambitious they may be, and technologically advanced in a way, yet their race is isolated and hopelessly outmatched. Conceivably, if they discovered the art of warp travel, they could one day pose an epsilon-level threat.

Frankly I doubt it will ever come to that. If not for their temerity in crossing the Damocles Gulf, I doubt the Imperium would have really bothered with them at all.

Far direr threats cast their pall across mankind's realm than the tau. The bio-ships first engaged at Tyran, for instance, may soon have the whole Ultramar empire fighting for survival. Still, whilst the greater mass of the Adeptus Terra concerns itself with ghastly fiends, void-borne terrors and brutish savages, I am

content to keep an eye on this pocket empire of optimists. Why? Not through lack of courage; you know me well enough to realise that. In short, it is because of that which lies beneath.

Today marks the third year of my assignment to observe this xenos race first hand, from within their society and without. It is fairly common knowledge on the Eastern Fringe that the tau seek to ‘enlighten’ those they encounter with the truth of their precious communality. This is known in common tau parlance as the Greater Good. It might seem a laudable idea, to a naïf. Trust me, dear Xyndrea, it is not nearly as benevolent as it sounds.

In my late-night conversations with my initial contact, the garrulous water caste emissary that calls himself Tidebringer, I have learned much about tau philosophy. Far more than he wished to impart, I’ll wager, but then the water caste do rather like the sound of their own voices. The blessed Tarot I see in the mirror has hinted at the parts of his mindscape he thought artfully concealed, those that concern his caste’s hopes and dreams. The Blind Wanderer was much in evidence, as was the Fountain of False Tears. Filling in the gaps has been very gratifying, much like deciphering a puzzle that is challenging, but still within one’s capabilities.

Once, the tau were very proud of their diplomatic conquests across the near side of the Damocles Gulf, and rightfully so. Not only had they finally managed to navigate across that vast expanse – no mean feat, given the warp currents that swirl and hunt within its nebulous reaches – but they had also talked their way into making uncontested planetfall upon Imperial territory.

Slowly, patiently, these silver-tongued newcomers managed to inveigle their culture – and even their technology – into a clutch of our fringe worlds. Perhaps that was easier than Segmentum Command would like to think, or even our fellows in the Ordo Xenos. All credit to them, the cunning bastards did a masterful job of subtly taking over four principal systems – and a string of orbital planetoids – without so much as a single shot fired. Tidebringer’s fellows, these smug water caste types, refer to their interplanetary negotiations as the Silken Conquests. Though it shames me to admit it, I can see why.

The worlds in the Timbra sub-sector are so far removed from Terra’s rule that dissatisfaction grows like weeds through every stratum of society. It is much the same story on every frontier, of course, but when the aliens inevitably come knocking, humanity’s inherent xenophobia usually sees the natives gather their guns under the Imperial eagle soon enough. That is sadly not the case in the star systems of Timbra. Not all invaders are ravaging beasts hungry for destruction.

Slowly at first, with a merchant here and a trader there, tau agents with a near-perfect command of Low Gothic sold their excellent technologies to the indigenes of the fringe worlds. They did so at such a low price that many of the human populace considered the tau little more than idiot savants, gifted simpletons who would be easily exploited. The truth, of course, was closer to the other way around.

The sight of descending tau ships was soon welcomed everywhere from Vespertine to Matinsong. It was a precursor to easy deals, and weapons tech that gave a real edge in the black market – and on the field of conflict, should the deals turn nasty. The tau were relaxed and passive, more than happy to tell the Imperial citizens of their culture. For a while, even those faithful to Holy Terra's ideals thought they were doing the right thing in dealing with them. Know thy enemy: it's a maxim that even a backwater oaf can understand.

When asked about their home worlds, the tau merchants painted such a compelling picture of their sunlit utopia that the long-neglected fringers began to think perhaps they would like a piece of that lifestyle too. More tau tech made its way to the worlds of the Timbra sub-sector, more merchants and traders negotiated deals that seemed too good to be true. They had a hidden cost that none truly appreciated until it was too late – complicity. Minor tau settlements were established across the sector, all in the name of trade, of course. The dullards let them build.

Then came the medicine. The earth caste arrived, short in stature and humble in manner. They were introduced by the suave ambassador caste with such smooth grace that no one really objected to them toiling away in the background – especially when the earth caste's med-packs proved so effective. Within a month, rustjaw, leprosy, screenblind and pneumonia became distant memories.

After the first batch of successful treatments upon Vespertine, a third caste arrived – the pilots of the tau navy. They had to breach orbit in order to ferry the apothecarion packs around. Well enough, thought the fringers; the air caste kept themselves to themselves, and were rarely if ever seen in the flesh. Before long the sight of graceful ochre aircraft was no longer worthy of comment. None realised they had missiles concealed in their wings, nor that the drones on their wingtips were not just fitted for data retrieval, but for the generation of powerful force fields.

With every child saved from death by disease, with every smooth transaction in the marketplace, the arguments against the tau's presence on the fringe worlds became less strident. Here was something the citizens of the Imperium could

sorely use – an easy victory, waiting to be taken from the benevolent lackwits next door. For the common people there was no question, these tau made valuable neighbours. And who knows, perhaps they were right.

Eventually, even the planetary governors were worn down by the endless words of Tidebringer and his kin. The tithes to the wider Imperium dried out to a trickle, and then stopped altogether as all wealth was invested in the future of the fringe worlds instead. Perhaps the governors were trying to impress the tau with their forward thinking. Perhaps they genuinely wanted to help their citizens, and the generations to come. We shall likely never know the truth.

But it was an insult the high Lords of Terra could not ignore.

The Timbra sub-sector became the subject of a redemptive war plan, telepathically transmitted to the Adeptus Astartes by a veteran team of astropaths. It took years, almost a decade, for the vengeance of the Imperium to manifest – Holy Terra has bigger fiends to slay, after all. But manifest it did. The wheels of the Emperor's justice turn slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.

The Damocles Crusade would have put the fear of death into a tyrant from the Maelstrom, let alone a race of xenos upstarts with barely a single thread to their name in the greater tapestry of fate. Led by a coalition of Space Marine Chapters, this counter-invasion force slid through the unquiet currents of the warp towards the Matinsong system. They translated into realspace so close to the system's Mandeville point they most likely bypassed every cordon and alert network the tau had. The xenos navy, such as it is, never really had a chance against the armada of Imperial ships that appeared from nowhere and barged through to the planets beyond.

On each of the fringe planets, the xenos mustered as much of their military caste as they could scramble. Perhaps through hubris, perhaps due to the ease of their conquests in what they refer to as the enclave worlds, they had left those worlds lightly defended. The Space Marines destroyed the tau garrisons like a sledgehammer smashing a china doll.

The Ultramarines, Hammers of Dorn and Scar Lords led the aggression in grand style. I don't think the tau had any idea that we could bring such a tremendous concentration of force to bear at a single point and time. Each planetfall reduced a tau garrison cadre to a scattering of corpses and ruined tanks before its fellows could respond. With the Imperial beachheads established, the Astra Militarum battalions brought the fringe worlds back into compliance with slow but ruthless dedication.

The Ecclesiarchy in particular had a fine time 're-educating' those who had

strayed from the Emperor's light. The Astra Militarum and a few elements of the Adeptus Astartes still have a presence there to this day, enforcing the Imperial way with bolter, blade and flame, but it is the Adeptus Mechanicus that has the largest demographic upon the capital worlds. I must tell you of Vior'los' magma lakes in my next missive. I don't think I have the spirit for it now.

The counter-invasion didn't stop there. The Chapters that had launched the invasion had been given orders to teach the tau a lesson, to leave a scar on their collective psyche so deep they would fear straying into humanity's realm for centuries to come. Making translation to the warp once more, the Space Marine fleet crossed the Damocles Gulf with relative ease and burst back into realspace in the heart of sovereign tau territory. This time the tau navy put up a fight, but against the capital ships of a crusade fleet, they were still found wanting.

The Space Marine armada bulldozed its way past the outlying worlds of Hydass, Sy'l'kell and Viss'el to strike directly at Dal'yth Prime. A sept world, as they call their prime territory, Dal'yth Prime was one of the jewels in the tau empire's crown. I was part of that invasion force, posing at the time as a primaris psyker of the 122nd Baleghast Castellans. At one point I had the pleasure of fighting alongside the Eighth Company of the Ultramarines; it was a proud moment even for an inquisitor.

Dal'yth Prime is a very different story to the outlying fringe worlds. It is a world of indigo plains and vast hexagonal transit structures that link huge biodomes. Its infrastructure is so advanced the defending military brought thousands of soldiers to each crucible of battle in a matter of minutes.

This time it was the Imperium that was over-confident. The tau struck back hard, and for a long while, they were crushingly, horribly dominant. The Eighth took heavy casualties, as did every other Space Marine strike force that made planetfall. Captain Atheus himself was struck down by Farsight's protégé, a young officer whose name translates as 'Bright Sword'. Those battlesuits engaged the Ultramarines wherever they landed, and transmotes packed full of fire warriors were never far behind. For a while, we were losing badly.

The now-Captain of the Eighth, Numitor, came up with a hypothesis that the tau had no real experience of fighting psykers. It turned out he was right. The xenos have worked with psykers before, and were eager to learn more about them – I think that is the main reason why they accepted me as an advisor – but they still see us as a curious alien phenomenon. At Numitor's behest my little gang was brought in to give the xenos a nasty fright. It turned out the tau commanders were relying heavily on the teachings of a venerable war leader

who had never encountered psychic warfare, and the sheer chaos and confusion engendered by my circus of freaks derailed their strategies over and over again. I miss them keenly, Darrapor's wide-eyed wonder and Cobliaze's pyrotechnics most of all. That old crone Malagrea promised she would take good care of them. I hope she stays true to that oath.

In truth, I think it was the assault squads of the Eighth that did more damage than my fellow psykers, but we wrong-footed the tau cadres, and victory is victory. The Imperial strategos ordered the tactic repeated, throwing the tau war machine out of kilter in a dozen zones. Captain Numitor's leap of faith was the breakthrough that turned a massacre into a grinding war of attrition – the kind of war the Imperium likes best.

Fighting alongside the Ultramarines was an experience I shall not soon forget. I think, towards the end, the sons of Macragge had almost begun to respect the tau fire caste. Some shared notion of honour, perhaps. All well and good for these warrior types, but not a luxury that an inquisitor can afford to entertain. There is too much at stake.

When it came to giving the tau a much-needed revelation concerning the true size and power of the Imperium, 'Operation Pluto' was a resounding success. We were not able to finish the job, however. News of the Tyran bio-fleet heading towards Ultramar forced us to withdraw. We left before Dal'yth's military heads, Commanders Farsight and Shadowsun, could be slain.

That was months ago, now, and those two war leaders remain at large. The water caste are claiming that the tau repelled us through skill, rather than a stalemate enforced by an exterior force. Still, the damage has been done. So shocking was the suddenness and violence of our attack that the tau will think twice before crossing the Damocles Gulf ever again.

Ostensibly, my posting here is to remind these xenos that they do not have the full measure of humanity, and to ensure that an incursion upon Imperial space does not happen again. It is my assigned task to learn about the inner hierarchies of tau civilisation so that if necessary, they can be swiftly and effectively beheaded. All well and good, on the surface of things.

In truth, however, there is another, deeper reason I am watching these new players in the great drama unfolding across the cosmos.

It is often the most innocent souls that turn to darkness.

Inquisitor Vykola Herat
Ordo Xenos

Post-script: For posterity and context, I have transcribed some of the tau material distributed across Vespertine. It has been taken from the data-slate analogues the tau call 'informatives.' I have appended the actual footage in addition, though be warned – should its integrity hold in transit, it will make for unpleasant viewing.

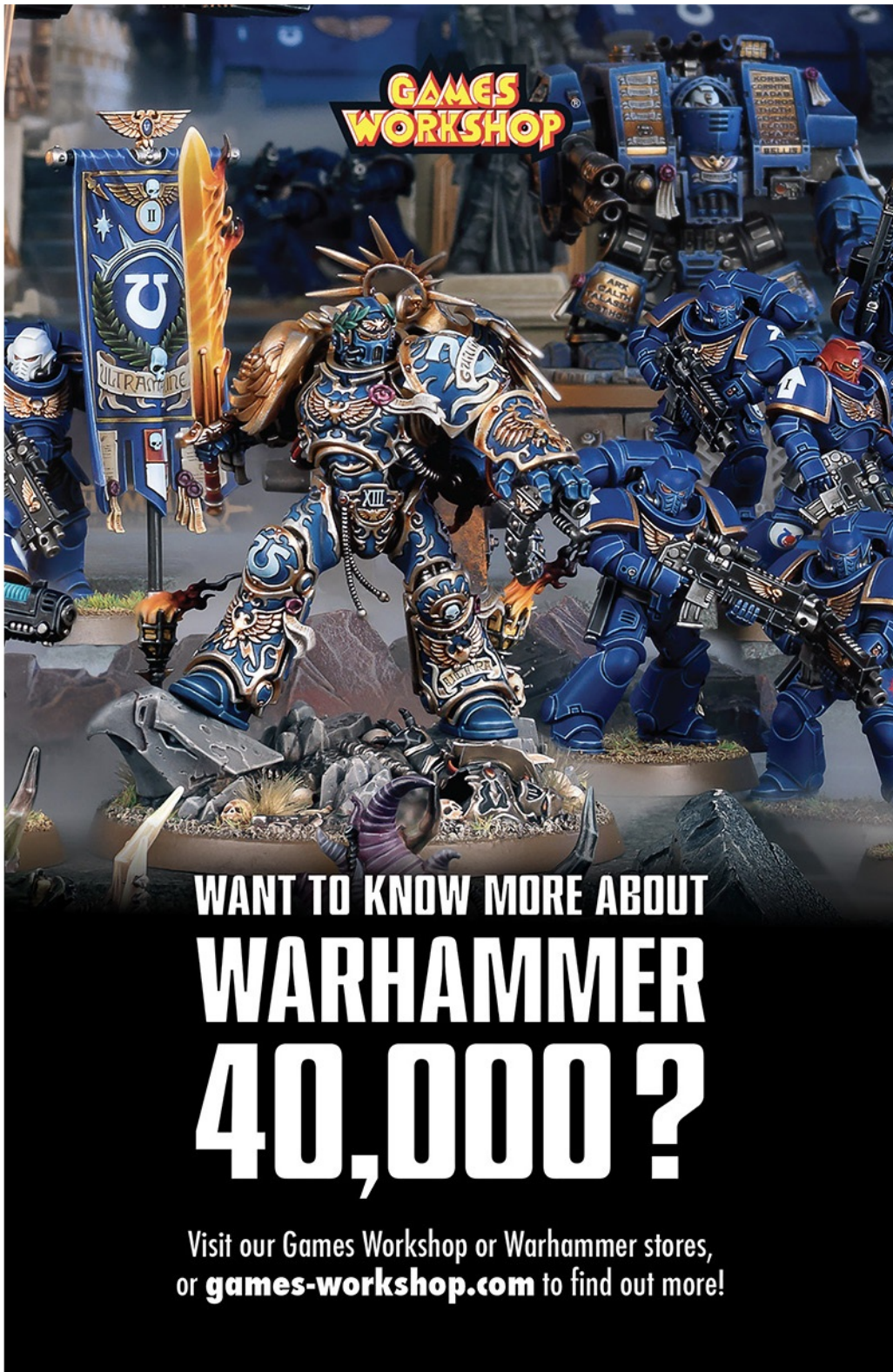
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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in the *Black Library Events Anthology 2017/2018* in Great Britain in 2017.

This eBook edition published in 2018 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Ji-Hun Lee.

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ISBN: 978-1-78030-746-6

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