



WARHAMMER

MONT'KA

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MONT'KA

Drifting in the depths of space was a highly sophisticated piece of Tau technology. It was a sentry relay station designated number 7221:499. The device spun slowly, holding its position with periodic bursts from its stabilizer-jets. At precise intervals, hidden doors opened and automated sensory arrays protruded out. Once the scans were completed, the devices retracted, lens-panels once again iris-ing shut.

Mu'gulath Bay was so distant that it was but another speck of light, but this station was one of hundreds that encircled the newest Tau sept world, the seventh line of defence that ringed the region. For this was territory only recently seized, the frontier of the Tau Empire. Anything that moved – be it spacecraft, asteroid or deep space creature – was scanned and analysed. That information was passed at near light speed, as ringstations relayed it to the Mu'gulath command nexus. Neither space hulk nor drifting cloud of gas moved without Earth caste scientists studying and tracking it.

Then the blackness of space split open. Out came leviathan cathedral-topped warships – an entire Imperial armada in all its might and grandeur. Probe-station 7221:499 whirred, all its instruments working at maximum function. The probe scanned the fleet – a colossal feat, for the flagship-pattern craft alone offered a

wealth of data and it was but one ship of hundreds, and not even the largest. The scanner-probes identified massive battleships, smaller escort craft and truly vast transport vessels filling the empty void that had been empty just moments before. Sensor arrays collected speed calculations and armament projections, while internal scans identified the exact number of teeming life forms aboard, even distinguishing war engines, hulking Knight suits and other weapons of warfare. 7221:499 picked up and recorded the frenzy of vox-hails that emanated from the colossal flagship. The readouts were already encrypted and sent towards Mu'gulath Bay when space split once again.

The enemy armada passed into another shimmering rift, disappearing as the hole closed behind them amidst a flash of light and roiling, incomprehensible energies. Like some huge, predatory fish, the Imperial fleet had surfaced briefly, checked its target, then slid once more into the depths, an incomprehensibly large menace that left nothing but a gentle swell in its wake.

Travelling through the Warp, an armada carrying enough Imperial troops to conquer Mu'gulath Bay five times over stood every chance of arriving at the newest Tau sept long before the relayed message ever would.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE



TAU EMPIRE

- Commander Farsight
Renegade Commander
- Longstrike
Master gunship pilot
- Darkstrider
Sub-commander
- Starshroud
Pathfinder shas'ui



ASTRA MILITARUM

- Lord General Troskzer
Supreme Commander
- Colonel Starkzahn
Commander of the Western Spearhead
- Knight Commander Pask
Tank Commander



ADEPTUS MECHANICUS

- Arcotholitis
Tech-Priest Dominus





WAR ZONE DAMOCLES

When the Tau Empire's Third Sphere Expansion crossed the Damocles Gulf, they entered the sovereign territory of the largest single domain within the galaxy – the Imperium of Mankind. There could eventually only be a single outcome from such a collision: War!

Here was a clash not just between armies but also between ideologies. The Tau were forward thinking and logical, they

believed in integration and technological advancement. The Imperium was stagnant, resistant to the future as they clung to a past that had long ago slipped from knowledge into superstition. The battles that followed were waged in the depths of space, upon barren moons, and over densely populated planets. Over the years, hundreds of conflicts raged across the Damocles Gulf region, with each side hailing triumphs and tasting bitter defeat.



The Tau Empire pitted their high-tech marvels and tactical prowess against the massed might and grinding determination of the Astra Militarum. For shock attacks, the Tau Empire employed the pinnacle of their war engineering, a range of highly armoured battlesuits. Yet to their amazement, the Tau found the firepower and mobility of their battlesuit cadres was at least equalled by the rapid-strike assaults of Mankind's own elite warriors, the much vaunted Imperial Space Marines.

The Tau did not hold ground, while the Imperium did not willingly relinquish it. When they lost the initiative, the Tau retreated, returning to battle only when the situation favoured such manoeuvre. Imperial armies, however, were expected to achieve victory or die in the attempt. The hit-and-run attacks of the Tau were met with grim resolve by the

Imperium, whose grinding assaults often found their quarry had fled. Move was met by countermove, and the latest Tau Empire aggression had drawn forth the largest Imperial response to date. On the battlefield, bolter was pitted against pulse rifle, as the Greater Good clashed headlong against the Emperor's Will. Entire planets were devastated by war as the savage clash of empires engulfed the Eastern Fringe.

Retaliation. Escalation. A crescendo of violence grew. This was not just a battle for a few star systems, it was something more fundamental, holding the future of the whole region in the balance.

Both sides were certain of their inevitable victory, but the fate of the Eastern Fringe would only be decided through the fires of bloody conflict.

WAR ALONG THE DAMOCLES FRONT

The Damocles Gulf had long served as a border between the Imperium of Mankind and the Tau Empire. When the Tau breached that barrier, the two forces came into inevitable conflict, beginning a series of pivotal wars. As the two sides became more aware of each other, those battles escalated in scale and ferocity, each side striving for domination.

The Damocles Gulf is a roiling and anarchic zone in the galactic east. For the Tau, it had long been an unnavigable space phenomenon that blocked their progress. The strange interstellar clouds wreaked havoc upon navigation apparatus and had long thwarted the Tau Empire's expansionist plans, yet they had found that perseverance, technology and determination could overcome anything.

During their Second Sphere Expansion, the Tau finally crossed the Damocles Gulf, finding hidden labyrinthine space lanes cutting through it. This breakthrough cost many lives, but once beyond the barrier, the Tau discovered everything they desired – mineral rich worlds and inhabitable planets that could be subsumed into their Empire. They also found war awaiting them.

By crossing the Damocles Gulf, the Tau Empire began to encroach upon the star systems under the domain of the Imperium of Mankind. In the beginning, the Tau easily subsumed these worlds, for they were lost or dissident human colonies, cut off from the established rule of their race. What Tau diplomacy could not win over, the armies of the Fire caste eliminated. Eventually, however, the Tau

began to conquer worlds within the Imperium's fold. Unwittingly, the Tau had roused the ire of this galactic colossus, and the bitter and destructive wars that followed were unlike anything they had previously experienced.

Where the Tau Empire brought civilisation and enlightenment, the Imperium wallowed in ritual and dark superstitions. Where the Tau embraced technology and the promise of the future, the Imperium feared both, clinging instead to repressive brutality and the relics of a glorious past. The collision between the ambitious new Empire and the entrenched rulers of the galaxy was inevitable.

In retaliation for the Tau expanding into their territory, the xenophobic Imperium launched the Damocles Crusade. It was a broad attack to reclaim the planets colonised by the Tau and the Imperium drove the xenos back across the Damocles Gulf all the way to their sept world of Dal'yth. Mankind's onslaught was only brought to an end when the Imperium's forces were called back to deal with other galactic threats. Yet even that first taste of defeat did not quell the Tau's ambition; they rebuilt and soon began the preparations for an even greater attempt.



The Third Sphere Expansion was the largest Tau military effort to date. Under the dynamic leadership of Supreme Commander Shadowsun, the Tau Empire once more crossed the Damocles Gulf, recapturing much territory. In their most audacious attack yet, the Tau conquered the Imperial hive world of Agrellan, renaming it Mu'gulath Bay. Transforming the ruinous human planet into their newest sept world, the Tau intended Mu'gulath Bay to be the lynchpin of their new expansions, the launching pad from which new star systems would be subsumed into the Empire. It was an ideal gateway planet, for its orbit safeguarded the Dovar System beyond it – a cluster of mineral rich planets of vital strategic import.

Imperial presence was still strong in surrounding sectors, as the Tau discovered to their chagrin. A mission to the planet Voltoris was intended to finish off those who had escaped Agrellan, but the Tau met heavy resistance. It is not the Tau way of war to batter such obstacles headlong. Instead, they would flow like water around well defended planets, conquering all else until those few worlds were lone islands, cut off and worn down by blockades. This was the command given by Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va, the spiritual leader of the Tau Empire. Tau expansionists took battle to the planets of Doth, Belfurnace, Delinquency and 9-Jodran, establishing new colonies and making inroads into former Imperial territory.

The next major clash between the Tau Empire and the Imperium occurred on Prefectia, a fortress world that had been largely abandoned by Mankind. The Tau overcame what remained of the Imperium's defences, and had just begun to set up their own installations when the Imperium struck again. Elements of several Space Marine Chapters, foremost amongst them the Raven Guard and White Scars, executed a series of simultaneous planetstrikes, initiating a seek and destroy mission to swiftly eliminate the Tau Empire's leadership. Kor'sarro Khan, Captain of the White Scars 3rd Company, personally vowed to decapitate Commander Shadowsun, for she had first outmatched him on Agrellan and then escaped his blade again on Voltoris.

Using herself as bait, Commander Shadowsun took advantage of the Imperium's fixation on slaying her in order to spring a masterful trap. Many casualties were inflicted upon the Space Marines, including the Raven Guard Chapter Master, Corvin Severax, who was slain by Shadowsun herself. Not even a large contingent of Imperial Knights from Voltoris could turn aside the devastating Tau counter-attacks. Only through heroic actions were any Imperial forces able to retreat off-planet. Their foe defeated, the Tau believed their expansion in the Dovar System and beyond could now continue unopposed while the Imperium nursed their wounds. In this prediction, the Tau proved to be profoundly mistaken...



THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Following the great victory upon Prefectia, Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va gave an impassioned speech. It was an awe-inspiring sight, the Ethereal hovering over the crater-ridden battlefield, the burnt-out frame of a fallen Imperial Knight as his backdrop. It was a broadcast viewed by every member of the Tau race, even those too young to walk.

In his victory speech, Aun'Va announced another Tau triumph. He praised the leadership of Commander Shadowsun, and acknowledged the mastery of the Fire caste. The Ethereal Supreme spoke of how the Tau race stood now on the precipice of greatness. Before them lay endless possibilities – they had but to seize them. Once, the Damocles Gulf had thwarted their expansion, as had the rule of the Imperium of Mankind. The Tau had now overcome these obstacles to stand once again victorious.

Aun'Va announced that the Third Sphere Expansion was only just beginning, and called upon each sept world by name to give more of themselves to the Greater Good. Just as the frontline soldiers of the Fire caste were asked to give everything in defence of the Tau'va, so too must each citizen of the Tau Empire; production must double, new technology must be developed and every part of society must be made more efficient.

'WE ARE FIVE CASTES, ONE PEOPLE. WE STAND UNITED, DEDICATED WHOLLY TO THE GREATER GOOD. AS WE PROGRESS, WE WILL ENCOUNTER FURTHER BARRIERS. WE WILL OVERCOME THEM. OUR FUTURE IS NOW, BELIEVE IN OUR DESTINY.'

Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va

It was a staggering statement, for the Tau Empire was already on a war footing – production was running at maximum capacity simply to supply the enormous amounts of materiel needed to fund the Third Sphere Expansion. Yet Aun'Va was asking for more. To this request, the Tau responded with earnest devotion. If the great leader of their people asked, it would be done. There would be no questions and no qualms about the cost, only ardent efforts to increase production by any means necessary.

With the foe gone from Prefectia, Aun'Va began to plan the next phase of the expansion. Half of the Fire caste forces on Prefectia were sent to aid in the exploitation of the Dovar System – suppressing or eradicating native populations, protecting Earth caste installations and safeguarding Water caste diplomatic actions. The remaining forces were to return to Mu'gulath Bay. There, they could briefly refit and train while the war council laid plans for the next wave of planetary invasions. It was generally accepted that the Imperial hold upon the region had been broken, and it would be a long time before their forces returned in great numbers. The Imperium had suffered a series of losses that would have set the Tau Empire back generations, including the latest blow – losing the King of the Space Marines. It would take them some time to recover from such shattering setbacks.





In their understanding of the Imperium and its ways, the Tau could not have been more wrong.

Even before Agrellan was attacked, the aggressive infiltration of the Tau Water caste had been marked. Astropathic choirs broadcast warnings and armies were already mobilised before the Tau's lightning fast invasion was complete. The Tau success only increased the magnitude of the Imperial response. That many of the region's lesser holdings had previously given into Tau bribes and manipulations had only increased the Imperium's desire for retribution. Perhaps the only thing the Imperium was less tolerant of than xenos invasion was betrayal or corruption. The seditious, those who would lure Mankind to their doom, were loathed above all.

Forces were mustered, congregating in numbers beyond the scope of what the Tau believed possible. The vast armadas and armies of the Imperium were slow to gather momentum and had to span distances the Tau could not fathom, but once Task Force Retribution was finally launched into the Warp, there was no stopping its single-minded mission to reclaim the territory once ruled in the Emperor's name. The warriors of the Astra Militarum would not halt until they had raised the glorious banner of the Imperial Aquila where it rightfully belonged. And so, when the task force emerged from the Warp with klaxons blaring, it was as close to Agrellan's orbit as they dared, to maximise the advantage of surprise.

Soon all wrongs would be revenged a hundredfold.

Awaiting the summons to war council, O'Shaserra, better known as Commander Shadowsun, looked out from the tower-dome's viewshield. The skies above were clear and blue, but dark, toxic clouds lurked on the distant horizon. Mu'gulath Bay was the site of her greatest triumph, but O'Shaserra could not find anything she liked about the planet. To her, it was still a battlefield – not a sept world like her beloved T'au. Outside of the few zones cleared by the Earth caste, the world was nothing but a ruined wasteland covered by the desolation of war, the very air caustic.

'You do like our newest sept world?' asked Aun'Va as he moved up to stand beside his chosen Supreme Commander, the highest Fire caste rank in the Empire.

'It will take... time for the enviro-engines to work,' she said, her eyes drawn to the raging rad-storm to the north.

Aun'Va's laugh was dry. 'O'Shaserra, you will never be mistaken for one of the Water caste. Your true thoughts are too easily discerned. But that is as it should be. A warrior is for fighting, not negotiating.' Aun'Va was about to say something else when the warning sirens sounded – the staccato din of their alert declaring a Level 1 planetary threat. Multiple alarms pinged for attention, and O'Shaserra had already activated her comms, a dozen different reports flooding in.

The skies above burned impossibly bright as cataclysmic events unfolded in space. The Imperium had returned...



CHAPTER 1

RETRIBUTION UNBOUND



THE HAMMER OF IMPERIAL JUSTICE FALLS

There was but a single purpose behind the launching of Task Force Retribution – the cleansing of Agrellan of any and all xenos life forms. The forces mustered were excessive in size and power for a mission to sweep clear a single planet, no matter its size. Such was the intent, for it was time for the upstart Tau to be taught a lesson.

The naval portion of Task Force Retribution was led by 478th Battlefleet Ultima, commanded by the highly efficient Lord Admiral Hawke. In the admiral's experience, the initial period of an invasion was the most critical. Every moment saved reaching the target was worth millions of lives. Thus the fleet entered real space at top speed, the vast armada of ships ripping into reality and barrelling towards the newly declared sept world.

The *kor'vattra*, the Tau navy, found themselves in a difficult position. Most of the Tau's starfaring ships were scattered across the Dovar System, meaning the naval garrison that protected Mu'gulath Bay was hopelessly outnumbered. The Imperial fleet possessed more lance batteries than the Tau had ships. Lacking Warp travel, it would take some time for the *kor'vattra* to gather in sufficient strength to offer any real challenge to the invading armada. In the meantime, the *kor'vattra* made an attempt to blunt the Imperial onset, although it was more bluff than last stand, a manoeuvre intended only to buy time for the planetary defence. Even so, just stalling the foe cost the Tau a dozen starships. Forced to choose between retreat or total annihilation, the *kor'vattra* fled before the oncoming wall

of Imperial battleships. They used Mu'gulath Bay's gravity to slingshot themselves away, withdrawing into deep space. In doing so, the Tau hoped to lure their foes into pursuing them, drawing off some of the weight of the impending hammer blow. This is exactly what happened, as much of the Imperial fleet either gave chase or took up defensive positions, forming an encircling blockade of starships.

Even without a screen of Tau battleships, Mu'gulath Bay was still well protected. Orbital stations – called *kir'norsla* by the Tau – bore dozens of powerful shield generators along with massed gun batteries. Each *kir'norsla* was the hub of a networked system of defensive satellites. Those orbital constructs enshrouded the planet beneath a lattice grid of firepower patterns, a deadly gauntlet that would destroy any enemy craft that dared to enter high orbit. Until these defences were offline, Lord Admiral Hawke would not risk ferrying troops to the ground. It was time to call upon the Space Marines, the vaunted elite of Mankind's armies.

Thunderhawk Gunships and boarding torpedoes delivered strike teams to the orbital stations. In the low gravity battles that followed, the Space Marines were forced to contend



with gun turrets, protective Drones and garrisons of Fire caste warriors in void suits. Speed was necessary, for the longer it took to disable the defensive stations, the longer the defences upon Mu'gulath Bay's surface had to prepare.

The Adeptus Astartes deployed jump pack-equipped Assault Squads. These warriors launched themselves from strafing Thunderhawk Gunships and, using controlled blasts from their jump packs, guided themselves onto the Tau superstructures, clamping on with activated magboots. Then, leapfrogging from gun turret to gun turret, they used melta bombs to disable them. Eventually, the Space Marines blasted their way inside the complex, fighting through the defending Fire caste soldiery. With their heavy shields and large ion cannons, the kir'norsla would have proven costly obstacles for the vast Imperial battleships to engage. The Space Marines, however, showed the extent of what a small group of the Emperor's Finest could do.

Of all the Adeptus Astartes, none fought with more determination than the Raven Guard. They fumed over the loss of their Chapter Master to Shadowsun on Prefectia. Each time their bolters blasted down a foe, the sons of Corvus Corax felt vindication. It was Kayvaan Shrike, their new Chapter Master, who led the assault on the largest orbital station. He clawed his way through the hull, carving through bulkheads and defenders alike, to place timed plasma charges at its core. Upon detonation, they set off a chain reaction that tore the station apart. For days afterwards, it was as if the planet had a second sun.

Kor'sarro Khan swung Moonfang, the ancient power sword glowing with a nimbus of sparking energy. So savage was the blow that it cut two Fire Warriors in half, the blade burying itself deep into the arched bulkhead behind. Snarling in rage, the White Scars Captain attempted to wrest the deeply embedded blade free. The Tau took advantage of the brief respite. Pulse carbine shots streaked, several finding their mark, but all failing to penetrate Kor'sarro's ceramite power armour. The Khan spun away from his sword and charged headlong, shouting his battle cry. His gauntleted fist cracked through a helmet, breaking the skull within, while his other hand drew forth his bolt pistol, blasting rounds into his nearest foes. When the remaining Tau fled down the corridor, it was the Khan's natural instinct to follow, yet he could not leave his sword behind. Turning to retrieve the blade, the Khan felt something akin to panic – for it was not where he had left it. Then he espied it, leaning against the wall further down the corridor. Kor'sarro scowled. None could be allowed to touch such a hallowed relic of his Chapter. But then the warrior emitted a short barking laugh. 'Come out old friend, I know you must be there.'

From behind a large support bulkhead stepped Kayvaan Shrike. 'Well met again, Kor'sarro. The charges are set. Let us gather our squads; it is time to leave. This is the last of the orbital stations.' Seeing the bloodthirsty look in his comrade's eyes, Shrike added, 'There will be plenty more planetside.'

'Aye,' nodded the Khan as he reclaimed his blade, 'And I still have a head to claim.'



WAR ON ALL FRONTS

The Imperial landings upon Agrellan were marked by a storm of violence as the Tau attempted to exact a high toll upon their invaders. It was a price the Imperium, with their overwhelming superiority in numbers, were willing to pay. They knew that once clear landing zones were established, they could bring the full weight of their armies down for vengeance.

The Tau had not been unprepared. Mu'gulath Bay was far from the heart of the Tau Empire, but the colony was as fully prepared and well equipped to repel invaders as any sept world. Yet despite the constant state of alert and a wide ring of sensors that Commander Shadowsun had personally approved, massive Imperial forces had appeared upon Mu'gulath Bay's doorstep with almost no warning. The Tau were simply stunned by the magnitude and closing speed of the impending Imperial assault. The sheer size of the invasion was beyond anything the Tau had trained for, or that they could even have imagined.

As the Space Marines took the orbital stations offline, ending their ability to engage spacecraft, the next stage of the planetary invasion had already begun. Ancient, cathedral-topped battlecruisers entered high orbit over Mu'gulath Bay in a line formation, opening fire with their innumerable lance batteries. Their first objective was to finish off the crippled space stations. Shorn of their protective shields by the Space Marines, it was not long before each orbital weapons platform was flaring as bright as a supernova. Only then did the Imperial battleships begin their long-ranged duel with the Tau surface batteries.

Under the orders of Commander Shadowsun, many of the Tau surface guns opened fire. Some, however, remained silent so as to stay hidden, their high tech stealth suites ensuring that no Imperial scanners could detect them. Those that did return fire proved to the Imperium once again why it was so dangerous to engage a Tau sept world.

Several of the Imperial ships sustained massive damage, with the Lunar-class cruiser *Herald of Terra* being forced to leave orbit after suffering repeated ion cannon blasts. This was nothing compared to the fate of the Dauntless-class ship *Will of Iron*. Taking a hyper railcannon shot through its reactor, the cruiser suffered catastrophic damage as a series of internal explosions left the hulking craft listing lifelessly to port and nearly split in half. It began an inevitable death spiral, slowly being drawn down by the planet's gravity. There was nothing Lord Admiral Hawke and 478th Battlefleet Ultima could do to save the *Will of Iron*, yet watching her slow, inevitable death only served to drive the rest of the fleet onwards with renewed vigour. The planet shook with the reverberation of the bombardment that followed, with many of the newly emplaced Tau installations razed to the ground.





After days of pounding strikes, the majority of the Tau guns were silenced. A few were so well protected by shield generators that they would require a more direct approach. Under the command of Kayvaan Shrike, the Space Marines used Drop Pod assaults to destroy the last few batteries that dared to engage the Imperial fleet. Only then did the first wave of atmospheric fighters and bombers enter Mu'gulath Bay's atmosphere, hitting preselected targets. Space Marine Scouts were the first forces of the Imperium to hit the ground. Upon their signals, the vast transports and landing craft began the long process of ferrying billions of soldiers along with supporting materiel.

With the same perfect timing that marked all of her operations, Commander Shadowsun unleashed her counter measures. Formations of Air caste fighters, previously screened from Imperial detection, suddenly appeared, seeking to intercept the incoming transports. Gun batteries hidden behind stealth fields now opened fire, turning several transports into balls of flame. From deep space, several strike forces of Tau battleships seized the opportunity to run the Imperial blockade, launching their own attack runs on the heavily troop-laden transports. The Imperium, however, had been forewarned. On Prefectia, Kayvaan Shrike had seen enough of Commander Shadowsun to know she would strike when her enemy was most vulnerable. Like clusters of angry insects, Imperial atmospheric fighters swarmed out to engage their enemy. Further Space Marine Drop Pods streaked downwards, targeting the recently revealed Tau gun batteries. The skies filled with Task Force Retribution's transports and lander craft as the planetary invasion began in earnest.

In the glowing lights of the command nexus dome, Shadowsun pored over holographic maps, her gaze drawn to the surrounding fleet of enemy vessels. 'Star-admiral O'Kor'sha'nos, can you estimate when the kor'vattra can be gathered in strength enough to drive off the invaders?' asked Shadowsun, running her own calculations.

For a moment, the willowy Air caste commander waved his slender fingers over icons, opening and closing sub-maps with a deftness that belied his many years. 'No sooner than 77 cycles, O'Shaserra,' he replied, pausing to complete more calculations. 'And no later than 103 cycles,' he added at last.

'If I am to delay superior forces for 80 cycles,' said Shadowsun, no longer addressing O'Kor'sha'nos, 'I dare not fully contest the landings, as I will need to conserve troop strength. If we cannot get the Ethereal Supreme off-planet safely, my first priority must be to safeguard him.'

There was a sigh from the darkness behind and, for the first time, Commander Shadowsun heard Aun'Va sound weary. 'We are trapped. The fate of myself and perhaps the future of the Tau Empire now depends upon you,' said Aun'Va. Commander Shadowsun turned, not sure how to address her next point, but the Ethereal Supreme did it for her. 'And now you wish to tell me to stay hidden, but you do not wish to anger me,' said Aun'Va. 'I chose my Supreme Commander well; I would be foolish not to heed her advice even when it rankles. I shall retire to the hidden bunker and use only my broadcasts to inspire our warriors,' said Aun'Va.

IMPERIAL LANDINGS UPON MU'GULATH BAY

At the time of the Imperial assault, the sept world of Mu'gulath Bay was in transition. Much terraforming was required to turn the planet into a proper staging world for the burgeoning Tau Empire.

Before the Tau conquest, Mu'gulath Bay was deeply polluted by the crude industries of its previous rulers. The Tau's scans revealed high levels of toxins saturating the entire surface. The planet's scarred wastelands were subjected to flesh-stripping rad-storms and the few remaining native creatures suffered unnatural mutation. Towering over all were the abandoned hive-cities of the Imperium. The Earth caste had been busy, however, and in the darkness of that smog-filled world were the bright

lights of prefabricated hab-domes, research stations and massive enviro-engines that would soon cleanse the atmosphere. Hundreds of newly developed sites dotted the enormous planet's surface, the largest of which was Lo'vasht'au, a name that promised future greatness. Situated beneath the rusted ruins of the former capital hive, Agrellan Prime, the Tau intended this to be the centre of the new sept world, which might one day rival mighty T'au in size and power.

MOUNTAINS
OF ABSALOM

ACACIAN BASIN

DEAD PLAINS

THE BLACK RUINS

RUINS OF
PREDOMINUS HIVE

Imperial Western
Spearhead

IRONBACK
MOUNTAINS



TEMPESTUS
PEAK

RUINS OF
STORMSPIRE HIVE

RUINS OF
AGRELLAN PRIME

Imperial Eastern
Spearhead

Imperial Central
Spearhead



Wave after wave of Imperial troops were brought down to Agrellan. The majority of the ground forces were under the command of Lord General Troskzer of Cadia. Beneath the Lord General were eighteen infantry regiments of the Astra Militarum, six armoured regiments, and two artillery regiments. Additional assets included eight platoons of Tempestus Scions, several dozen companies of abhuman auxiliaries and three companies of Rough Riders.

Within hours of leaving the Warp, Lord General Troskzer was visited aboard his flagship *Indomitable* by Chapter Master Kayvaan Shrike. Listening to Troskzer's battle plans, the grim Raven Guard leader gave advice and warnings, for he had fought Commander Shadowsun enough to have earned a healthy respect for the Tau's fighting prowess and canny tactics. The overwhelming numbers and war of attrition proposed by Troskzer would free Shrike to lead pinpoint assaults against vital Tau targets. The elements of several Space Marine Chapters were fighting as part of Task Force Retribution, including the vengeance-seeking Raven Guard and the war-hungry White Scars. As the ranking Space Marine officer, it fell to Shrike to direct his fellow Adeptus Astartes, who were not great in number, but could turn the tide of any battle nonetheless. Shrike already had a meticulous plan for seeking out hidden Tau gun emplacements while aiding the main ground offensive.

Further swelling the already vast numerical advantage held by the forces of the Imperium were many Imperial Knights, including a large contingent from House Terryn,

along with an eclectic mix of Freeblades. Most mysterious of all was the small fleet of Adeptus Mechanicus starcraft carrying many Tech-Priests and several cohorts of Skitarii. Their leader was Magos Arcotholitis, although he never attended war councils, preferring instead to stay aboard his own flagship the *Archaetrove*.

Although Lord General Troskzer had requested further regiments from the Departamento Munitorum, in particular a Titan Legion, other wars precluded that possibility. It was made known to Troskzer, however, that additional assets would be made available should his ground attack stall, but the delivery of that statement made the Lord General's hackles rise; he knew it would be better if he never had need to call upon those ominous additional resources.

In Troskzer's attack plan, there were a dozen drop sites scattered across the planet, but three main ones. These were situated upon Agrellan's super-continent. Each of these assault fronts – the eastern, central and western spearheads – was to grind their way forward, seeking out and destroying any and all Tau they encountered. Ultimately, the three spearheads would converge upon the largest Tau installation, located in the shadow of the old hive-capital, Agrellan Prime. There, Troskzer reasoned, they would combine forces to eradicate the xenos forces.

In truth, Lord General Troskzer was well beyond the days when he would lead the fighting personally. He was a veteran of so many wars he had forgotten more battles than





he remembered, and during that time, he had learned well to mark outstanding officers, allowing him to put his trust in the decisions made by his regimental leaders. Troskzer himself would remain aboard the *Indomitable*; the commander on the ground would be the dynamic leader of the Cadian 625th, Colonel Starkzahn.

In his long military career, Supreme Commander Troskzer had known many of his fellow Cadians that were as fierce, determined and aggressive as Colonel Starkzahn. None of the others, however, had lived long enough to rise past the rank of captain. Sooner or later, the self-sacrifices and 'lead from the front' mentality took their toll on an officer – it was simply the way it was. Yet with every relentless drive to victory, Colonel Starkzahn had evaded that fate. He was the saviour of Darristen, the leader who crushed the Hellicom Rebellion, who had led his men deep behind enemy lines during the campaign that broke the hundred-year deadlock on Boxian. Colonel Starkzahn's officers would take a las-shot for him, and the soldiers of the 625th would put down their weapons and charge traitor Space Marines or hulking Orks if their colonel told them to do so.

Colonel Starkzahn was in the first transport wave planetside, as was his style, and he was the first to descend the exit ramp of his lander. Upon his orders, the heavily battle-scarred Sergeant Lokski planted the regimental standard into the thick, sandy grit that covered the wastelands. It was this sight – their leader beneath their colours – that the 625th Regiment saw as they debarked and formed up. All knew battle waited, and the men of the Astra Militarum were ready for it.

'Sir,' said vox-operator Konev, 'Captain Czensk reports only light Tau presence in the landing zone, and they appear to be falling back.'

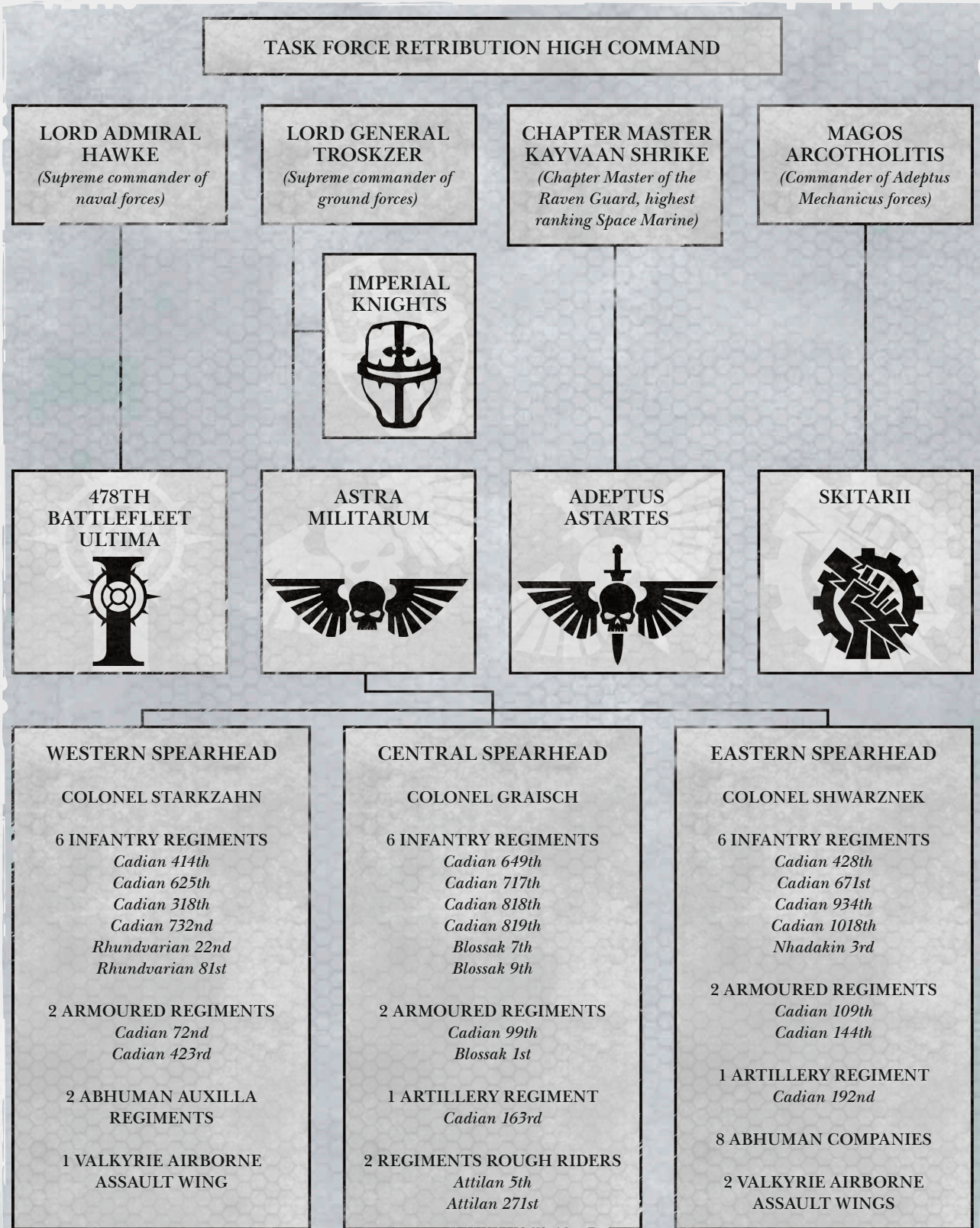
Colonel Starkzahn nodded. Despite his concentration, the grim-faced colonel sensed what was going on behind him. He quickly turned to Sergeant Lokski, glaring at the smile upon his regimental standard bearer's scarred face. He knew his men too well. 'Out with it, Sergeant,' the Colonel snapped.

The smile disappeared instantly, yet Sergeant Lokski's eyes still beamed. 'We knew that those xenos scum were cowards, sir. We knew they'd run.'

Colonel Starkzahn shook his head. He hated long Warp travel. No matter how many drills he ran his men through, they still found time for rumour-mongering. 'No,' the colonel said in a stern, measured tone. 'No, the Tau will run, but they are not cowards. We will see them soon enough, but they will not fight on our terms. Do not underestimate them. Save your smiles until we raise the Aquila over Agrellan Prime.' Turning swiftly, the colonel rattled off a series of orders to various aides and officers before calling for his Chimera. 'Captain Malinovsky can finish troop dispersion, it is time we got to the front,' he said. Starkzahn was worried, however. All his officers had been briefed to expect Tau ambushes, but it was difficult to overcome ingrained beliefs. On Cadia, the mantra had long been 'not one step back' and retreating was seen as an admission of defeat. The Tau ambushes, Starkzahn thought, were going to quickly debase those old notions.

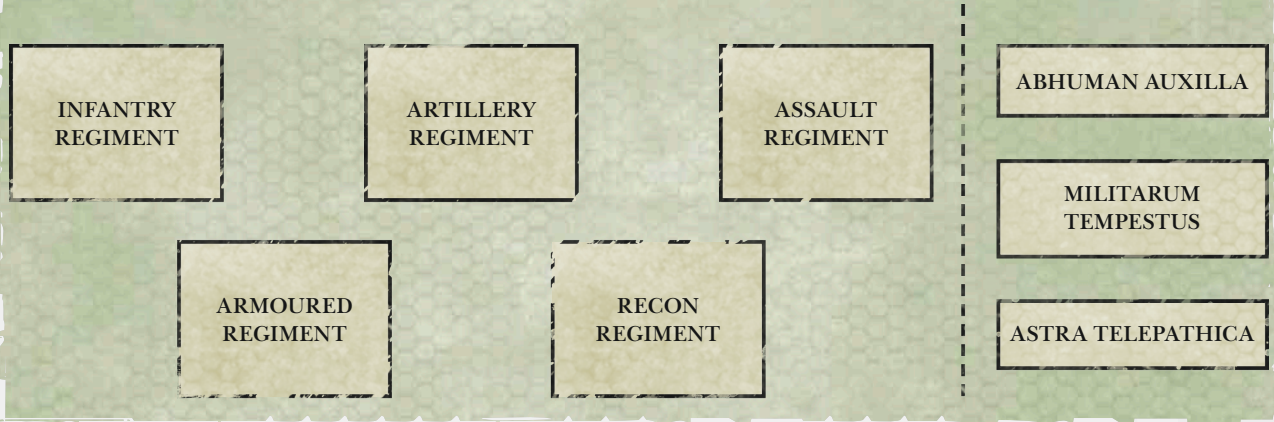
TASK FORCE RETRIBUTION ORGANISATION

Compiler's Note: Due to the scope of the disparate Astra Militarum regiments and war fleets that were assembled as part of Task Force Retribution, the following diagram is not a comprehensive list of forces, but rather the leadership structure to which those Imperial troops answered.



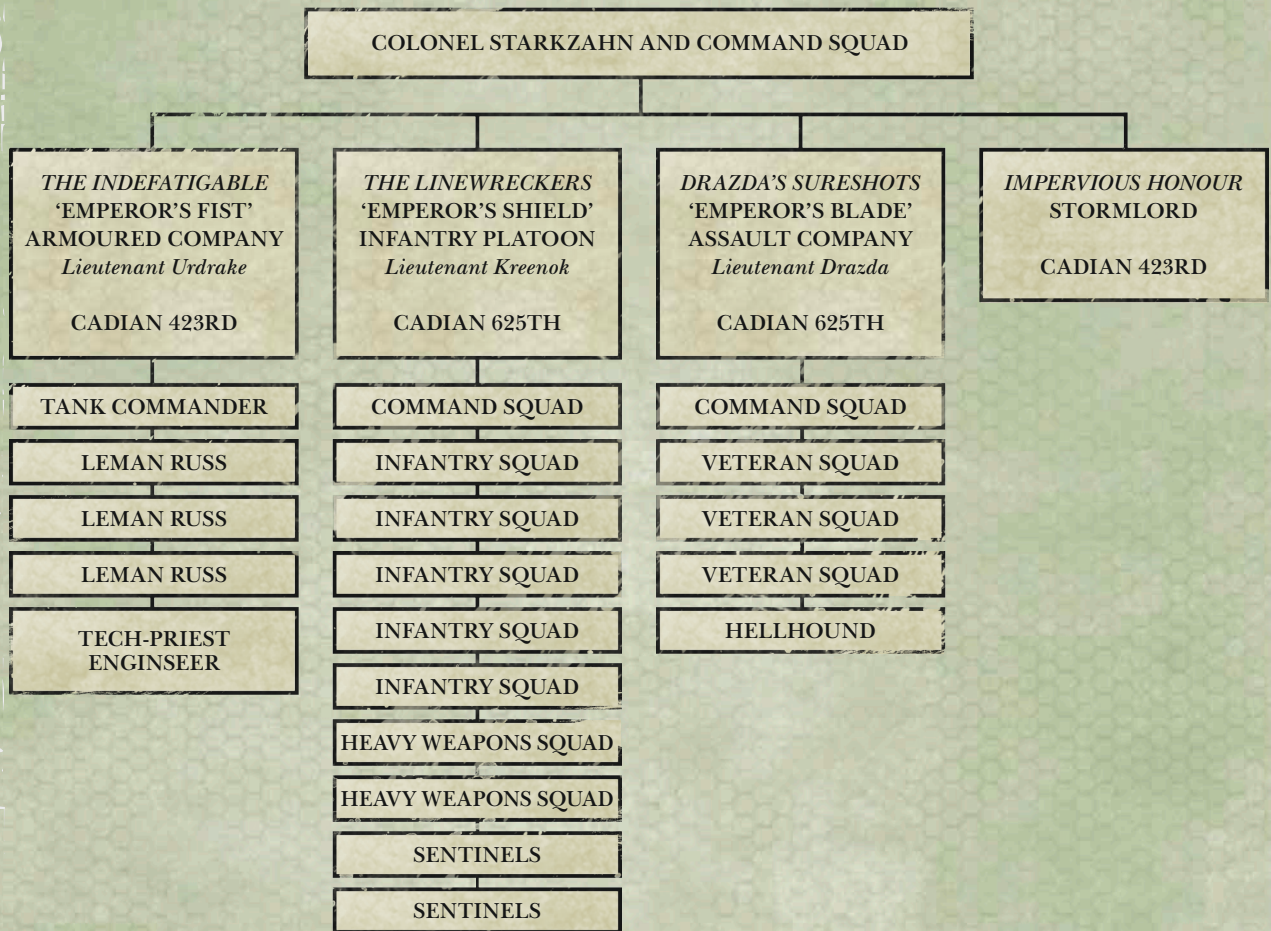
CADIAN BATTLE GROUPS

The monolithic regiments of the Astra Militarum seldom fight apart. Instead, companies will be detached from each of the regiments on campaign – typically under the command of a senior officer. These assets may be further bolstered by one or more platoons of specialists, such as abhumans or Militarum Tempestus Scions. Those Battle Groups led by the pride of Cadia's officer schools are known for their peerless discipline and courage under fire.



BATTLE GROUP THUNDER

Battle Group Thunder, personally commanded by Colonel Starkzahn as part of the Western Spearhead to reclaim Agrellan, was drawn from elements of the Cadian 625th Infantry Regiment and 423rd Armoured Regiment.



COLONEL STARKZAHN

It was none other than Colonel Starkzahn himself that led the western spearhead. In addition to the Cadian 625th, the spearhead boasted some of the best support Task Force Retribution could deploy. It was Starkzahn's plan to reach the muster point first, for he wished to prove Lord General Troskzer correct in appointing him commander.

Led by Colonel Starkzahn and the Cadian 625th, the western spearhead was the quickest to assemble and move out from their landing zone. While the commanders of the other drop sites were still amassing their regiments or digging in to establish a defensive perimeter that they could fall back to, Colonel Starkzahn was pressing ahead. Despite the enormous size of the troop landers, and the fact that they filled the sky in their non-stop ferrying, it would be a great many days, or even weeks, before the full might of the invasion force was assembled. That was time he could use to begin pushing towards his objective. To this end, Starkzahn barked orders all along the front, urging each newly assembled battle group to advance.

While none of the landings were fully contested, each was intermittently tested by Tau attacks. Sleek Air caste fighters would break through the air cordon around a landing site, strafing the rallying points or shooting down packed transports. Expertly hidden Pathfinder squads would use their marker lights to call down missile strikes, escaping retaliation due to the sudden appearance of XV25 Stealth suits that would rake fire upon the Guardsmen as a diversion before themselves disappearing.

All knew that Agrellan was a grim place, but upon reaching their landing zones, many of the Imperial Guard had their worst fears confirmed. Starkzahn's men had landed in the Dead Plains – a lifeless, toxic desert. In all directions, the Cadian 625th found their horizon limited, as the planetary bombardment had kicked up vast quantities of sulphurous ash, adding to the prodigious sandstorms that regularly swept across Agrellan. The men were issued with rebreathers, which would allow them to endure the worst of the storms, but a long term campaign would surely spell doom for each man too long exposed to Agrellan's toxins. For Starkzahn, this was just another reason to finish the offensive as quickly as possible.

Some commanders might be content to lead forces from the rear, but Colonel Starkzahn was not one of them. Aggressive as always, he was quick to form his own battle group and push out from the landing zone, soon disappearing into the towering clouds of irradiated dust. Starkzahn knew Tau ambushes would be waiting, and such thoughts gave him no pause. In fact, he was eager to pit his tactical prowess and the might of the Astra Militarum against these xenos.



NEVER DEFEATED

Noted for his aggressive attack style and his unbroken string of victories, Colonel Starkzahn was the commander of the Cadian 625th Regiment.

HONOURED LEADER

For his personal bravery during the Hellicom Rebellion, Colonel Starkzahn was awarded the Honorifica Imperialis by Lord Castellan Ursarkar Creed himself.

GLORY IMPERIALIS

Upon leading the 625th to unexpected victory upon the planet of Darristen, Colonel Starkzahn was presented with the power sword Glory Imperialis – an heirloom that had long served Cadia.

AUTO-RELIQUARY

As befits any great officer, Colonel Starkzahn was appointed an auto-reliquary of a former Cadian officer of excellent repute. This device bore the memory engrams of Lord General Krastervox.



BATTLE GROUP THUNDER



Assembled from the first wave of landings and led by Colonel Starkzahn himself, this formation was swiftly named Battle Group Thunder due to the ground-rumbling advance of the super-heavy Stormlord *Impervious Honour*.

Part of the 423rd Armoured Regiment, *Impervious Honour* was earmarked to join the armoured spearheads. It had last fought upon Cyphus IV, where its Vulcan mega-bolter had single-handedly torn apart an Ork offensive. Wave after wave of greenskins had swarmed towards the Imperial lines, but the multi-barrelled weapon spewed out a solid wall of shot, ripping apart the front ranks more quickly than the Orks could charge. It was the first super-heavy tank to arrive at the landing zone, and the moment Colonel Starkzahn saw *Impervious Honour* churn down the landing platform, he commandeered the vehicle, assigning it to his own battle group. Starkzahn valued not only the tank's thick armour plating and matchless anti-infantry weaponry, but also its capacity to transport infantry.

Advancing alongside the super-heavy tank came the core of Starkzahn's assembly, the Emperor's Shield Infantry Platoon under the leadership of Lieutenant Kreenok. As bold in battle as the Colonel himself, Kreenok was a highly regarded young officer, known for his zeal in combat and

his unflinching resolve. Since their heroics during the Hellicom Rebellion, Kreenok's platoon had been known to the rest of the 625th as the Linewreckers. It was they that had led the street-by-street fighting that at last captured the final hab-block, the infamous 'Butcher Block'. Many platoons had met bloody failure attempting to secure that area, each wiped out in turn by the block's defenders. Eager for his own chance at glory, Kreenok drew his chainsword and led from the front. Those few soldiers that survived the gore-filled assault became Sergeants, and were given command of the new troops that were drawn up to replace the lost men. It was these platoons that boarded the ships of Task Force Retribution. Alongside Kreenok's command squad, the Linewreckers were composed of five infantry squads, two squads of Sentinels, and two Heavy Weapons Squads. The Sentinels were typically used upon the flanks to provide speedy reconnaissance, although they also excelled as a quick mobile reserve to add firepower where the infantry most needed it. The Heavy Weapons Teams were used to supply covering fire while the main infantry squads advanced. The heavy bolter teams were known to their comrades as 'The Chuggers', a name derived from the distinctive sound of their weapons, while the lascannon teams were known as the 'Tank-Killers' for it was their lot in battle to engage and destroy enemy armour.



Filling out the battle group's infantry was an Emperor's Blade Assault Company, led by battle-scarred Lieutenant Drazda. The three veteran squads were known as Drazda's Sureshots, for they claimed to be the top marksmen in the whole of the 625th. They had served beneath Starkzahn since his promotion, and the Colonel valued Drazda's aggressive tactics as well as the deadly accuracy and grizzled presence of his elite squads. On Darristen the Sureshots had raced into position aboard their Chimeras, dismounting to form a gun line just in time to repel the surging Cultists. Yet the foe was not composed solely of robed fanatics, for at the enemies' heart came armoured fiends, the hated Chaos Space Marines. That the Sureshots lived to tell the tale against such formidable opposition was a testament to not just their aim, but also their iron-hard ability to hold the line. During that battle, the Sureshots' support Hellhound earned its own nickname. Dubbed the *Fury of Cadia*, its fiery blast swept the streets clear, leaving behind only bubbling stains where once enemies stood.

The final squad Colonel Starkzahn assigned to the battle group was an Emperor's Fist Armoured Company. Drawn from the 423rd, the company known as the Indefatigable were under the leadership of Tank Commander Udrake. They would provide armoured support for Battle Group

Thunder, a role they had also assumed in their most recent battle during the defence of Cyphus IV. The task had not proven too large for them, and each roar of their battle cannons blasted ramshackle Ork tanks into rolling fireballs. So fierce was that firefight that the Indefatigable's Tech-Priest, Vincitius, had spent the entire journey since joining Task Force Retribution repairing the multiple blast marks that scored each of the tanks of the company. It had ultimately been the lascannons of *Impervious Honour* that had ended that tank battle, as the Stormlord tore off the superstructure of an Ork megatank before continuing to mow swathes through the supporting Ork infantry.

The last warrior to join Battle Group Thunder was Commissar Fremantle, a stern officer who did his black-clad office proud. Ever eager to increase his prospects for promotion, Fremantle had sought out Colonel Starkzahn's command group, for he knew that they were sure to go straight into the heart of battle. It was there that the Commissar's bountiful willpower might do the most to further the Imperium's cause. He would not be disappointed, for Colonel Starkzahn's plan was to push Battle Group Thunder forward as quickly as possible, spearheading the long drive towards Agrellan Prime.



Following Colonel Starkzahn's plan, the western spearhead was a flood of battle groups working towards a common goal. In addition to Starkzahn's own Cadian 625th, troops came from the Cadian 168th, and the Rhundvarian 22nd, along with elements from the Cadian 423rd and 72nd Armoured regiments. Where possible, Colonel Starkzahn attempted to keep regiments cohesive, but this was a difficult task thanks to the inevitable landing zone mayhem and the pressure to get underway as quickly as possible. In general, the battle groups were constructed with a mix of armour and infantry. The only notable element that was missing was artillery. The artillery brigades were scheduled as the last to land, so the infantry regiments had only their own few supporting pieces, but Starkzahn did not imagine this would come back to haunt him. He anticipated a mobile front where air power would prove more useful than slow-moving artillery trains.

The cracked wastelands over which the western spearhead travelled were bleak, and the region was prone to sudden rad-storms that covered the horizon in thick dust. The Dead Plains were flat land, occasionally broken by rocky outcroppings. The only signs of life were the ruined industrial zones that dotted the desert. Every terrain feature seemed to be an ideal location to hide one of the hit-and-run counter-attacks or feints for which the Tau

were infamous. At irregular intervals along that relentless march, firefights would break out, or missiles would streak from beyond sight to crash into the Imperial ranks. The men of the Astra Militarum bore hardships such as the raging hot sun, or the cloying grit that swept through, with typical stoicism. The xenos attacks, however, were a stinging irritation, a constant harassment. There was not a soldier – be it lasgun-toting infantry grunt or ranking officer – who did not long for a proper battle. Colonel Starkzahn had expected, as their multiple attack fronts advanced, that sooner or later the Tau forces would stand and fight, allowing his battle groups to amass towards the battle.

Reports flooded through the vox as each battle group pushing across the desert updated their status. Each told a slight variant of the same tale – assaults that rose out of nowhere but faded away before the Imperial Guard could mount anything like a proper response. Such attacks came suddenly, with no warning. They swiftly learned to hate the whooshing sound of the strafing aircraft that sped overhead or the whistle of missiles soaring past from beyond the horizon. There was one thing, however, that the Guardsmen learned to fear above all others: the dreaded railguns mounted atop the Tau's Hammerhead Gunships. These hover vehicles would skim forward into range, or boost up above dunes, then unleash a volley or



two and retire. The whip-crack sound meant death as the magnetically-driven, hyper-sonic railgun rounds sliced through Imperial armour. Sometimes the Hammerheads were supported by infantry, their long-ranged pulse rifles stabbing out pulse bursts to claim lives. During such times, it seemed there was nowhere to hide, especially for the tanks, as the barren desert was devoid of useful cover. Should the Guardsmen, through perseverance or flanking manoeuvre, close the distance to their foes, the Tau infantry would board their Devilfish transports and withdraw rapidly into the noxious, choking air.

With the great majority of the Imperial Navy's Thunderbolts, and the Astra Militarum's own Valkyries and Vultures, tasked with protecting the vulnerable regions surrounding the drop zones, the Imperial ground forces found it impossible to pin down or destroy the quick-to-retreat Tau. In a few localised cases, Chapter Master Shrike organised lightning Adeptus Astartes retaliations, with fast moving Thunderhawks bringing down superior firepower. There were, however, only a handful of such operations set against what was thousands of small-scale ambush attacks. The aftermath of the Space Marine assaults – burnt out Tau vehicles smoking in the desert – did much to increase morale as the long lines of Astra Militarum infantry and tanks passed by.

Pearing out from the craggy overlook, Shas'ui Tra'erro scanned the shimmering horizon. Columns of raised dust gave away the location of the oncoming gue'la – only heavy, tracked vehicles kicked up so much debris. Besides his own, three other Pathfinder teams were spread across this sector. The Shas'ui punched coordinates into his wrist-mounted comm-suite, his sensor vane relaying the information to the other teams. They had triangulated well, and marked out and prioritised each enemy unit, from the marching infantry to the lumbering steel-clad tanks that rumbled behind them. Far behind the Pathfinders was a series of dunes. Hidden amongst those raised hillocks were the Armoured Interdiction Cadres. Each gunship commander received the information from the Pathfinders, their holo-maps tracking the approaching foes. The Pathfinders watched and waited, the columns of dust turning into dark shapes and finally individuals as they neared. Shas'ui Tra'erro knew his team; there was no need to tell them to wait, for their discipline was unquestionable. Closer, and closer still, Tra'erro let the foes close. He could make out the heavily stubbled and dust-lined faces of the gue'la now, their eyes sweeping right over his well-camouflaged position. On his keyed in signal, the team aimed their markerlights – painting their targets with invisible beams. Far away, flares lit the dunes as the Sky Ray Gunships unleashed their deadly salvos...

AMBUSH AT THE BLACK RUINS

The Tau were stunned by the size of the Imperial armada and the suddenness with which it was upon them. Commander Shadowsun knew she could not confront such numbers at the enemy landing sites, for her forces would wilt beneath orbital bombardments and massed firepower. The tenets of Kauyon stated that it was the patient hunter that got the kill.

Captain Shaposhnik raised his magnoculars to scan the horizon, although doing so proved useless. The poisoned air was so thick with floating dust that he could see little outside of heavy bolter range. In that distance, nothing moved beneath the shadowy ruins that loomed out of the dust. None of the glasses' varied functions seemed to be working either, even after he banged the device hard against his palm in the hopes of stirring its machine spirit. It did nothing to improve the situation. The toxic dust also played havoc with vox-hails, periodically distorting them or rendering the comm-net completely silent for a time. Still, the Captain did not like the fact that the forward Sentinel squadron and the infantry recon platoon had disappeared, both failing to report. It could be that a heavy squall was silencing their vox-hails, but every officer had been warned of possible ambushes. Colonel Starkzahn insisted that ambushes by the Tau were certain – a matter of when, not if, they would strike.

Faced with the choice of heading straight into an enemy ambush or holding back, deciding his next course of action was not difficult for Shaposhnik. He did not wish to feel his colonel's wrath for taking too cautious a pace, and so he

ordered his vox-operator to signal the troops into a trio of battle lines. When this manoeuvre was complete, he then gave the order for the first line to advance with care. It was his reasoning that an unknown xenos threat could be nowhere near as ferocious as his own colonel.

As the Imperial Guard battle lines advanced, they were watched intently, followed via superior blacksun optics as well as half a dozen different tracking devices. Heat sensors monitored the pollution-spewing engines of the tanks, but could adjust their focus to see an individual's heartbeat. Density scans pinpointed weak points in armour, while advanced sonic equipment recorded communications and even breathing patterns. Data was shared from each of the surveillance points and nodes, while a small amount of information was even garnered from what remained of the geosynchronous orbital satellites.

Cadre Fireblade Shas'nel Rhu'var tapped a few icons on his wrist-comm, relaying the coded battle plan. Thus, without a word having been spoken, the message was spread across the ruins, each hidden squad in the cadre understanding the mission and its timings perfectly.





The ambush at the Black Ruins was sprung quickly.

Pathfinder teams, well secreted within the rubble, used their markerlights to target each vehicle in the leading Leman Russ squadron. Striking faster than the eye could follow, volleys of seeker missiles locked on, striking the vehicles in the rear where their armour was thinnest. The Imperial tanks buckled and exploded, sending deadly shrapnel whirling into the packed infantry that advanced in their wake. Before the Guardsmen could react – either to drop down into cover or to return fire – the longshot pulse rifles of Sniper Drones began picking off their preselected targets. At once, sergeants, lieutenants, Commissars, and especially soldiers that carried heavy weaponry, all twisted or jerked violently as well-aimed plasma pulses tore through each of their bodies.

Captain Shaposhnik and the remaining Imperial Guard officers attempted to quell the panic beginning to take hold of their soldiers while Tau Hunter Cadres joined the attack. From behind the ruins, Devilfish transports raced, their rapid acceleration kicking up clouds of blackened dust. At preselected positions, the vehicles came to a sudden halt, disgorging a stream of Fire Warriors who quickly assembled into optimised firing formations. The xenos line rippled with blue muzzle blasts as volleys of glowing plasma filled the air, quickly followed by the screams of the wounded. As he turned to his vox-operator to order the second battle line forward in support, Captain Shaposhnik was startled to find his comms-man headless. He watched helpless as the corpse crumpled, spurting red arcs as the lifeless body twitched out its last.

Lesser regiments would have broken and run from the sudden and bloody efficiency of the ambush, but these were Cadian Shock Troopers, warriors of the 625th. They came to fight. Already, the survivors were hunkering down, forming their own gun lines and returning fire. The bright energy beams lanced out, piercing through the gloom. Some of the Cadians scrambled to recover the heavy weapons dropped by their fallen comrades, but one by one, plasma pulses from the distant Drones punched through armour and flesh alike, slaying all who dared venture out of cover.

Shouting commands, Captain Shaposhnik ordered a defensive formation, pulling his remaining squads closer together. They formed around the remaining mortar teams, whose crew were hurriedly working to lob shells outward towards the last known position of their attackers. With the situation stabilised, Captain Shaposhnik called for a vox-operator, and directed the second battle line to shore up his position. Soon, another squadron of Leman Russ tanks was there, their battle cannons thundering to provide covering fire, even though they could see little more than flashes of light shrouded in the murky distance. More infantry rushed up, strengthening the line. Next, Shaposhnik transmitted his coordinates, first seeking whatever air support he might be able to request, and secondly, calling for aid from nearby battle groups.

It was only after that broadcast had been sent that Shas'nel Rhu'var ordered his cadre's portable signal jammer to be switched on, shutting down all further communications. The bait had been set; the true ambush was still to come.

LONGSTRIKE'S ARMoured INTERDICTION CADRE



Armoured Interdiction Cadres were designed to be mobile and hard-hitting, yet none had ever proven as deadly accurate as the one led by master gunship pilot Shas'la T'au Sha'ng, better known as Longstrike.

When the Tau first conquered Mu'gulath Bay, seizing it from Imperial hands in a single day, there were no heroes that emerged out of that battle more famous than Longstrike. Armoured Interdiction Cadres are taught to fight not as individual gunships, but as a single entity. In the beginning of that lightning campaign, his formation was deployed as the tip of the spear – the armoured wedge that was to engage Imperial tanks and destroy their heavily fortified positions. That day, Longstrike wielded his formation with unerring perfection.

Pushing their gravitic engines, Longstrike's gunships entered the combat zone at speed. They faced an onrushing company of Leman Russ battle tanks as well as heavy weapons fire coming from a staggered line of well-fortified bunkers. First, the Sky Ray Gunship used its networked markerlights, pinpointing and prioritising targets for the cadre. Its own turret-mounted seeker missiles were held in reserve for long-ranged shots or especially difficult enemies.

Aided by the markerlights, the Hammerhead Gunships engaged. Two of their number bore the flat-barrelled and highly feared railgun. As Longstrike's cadre was outnumbered, every shot counted, and they did not miss. Despite the thick armour plating of their opposition, each railgun shot penetrated its mark – the internal explosions that followed sent billowing clouds of oily black smoke upwards to the sky. The third Hammerhead Gunship bore a turret mounted ion cannon. When overcharged with energies, the blazing blue blast that it emitted blossomed wide, vaporising the Imperial Guardsmen inside their ferroconcrete bunkers.

Longstrike never let his formation stop, but kept them moving all the time. Weaving through the wreckage of their kills, the cadre advanced. With a sudden whoosh, the Sky Ray unleashed its seeker missiles, blasting apart enemy vehicles that sought to outflank the Tau gunships to target their more vulnerable side armour. Enemy tanks were not the Armoured Interdiction Cadre's only worry, however. Infantry armed with heavy weapons lurked amongst trench lines and took shelter amidst the blackened hulls of destroyed tanks. Even as they trained their sights upon the sleek Tau vehicles, the cadre's secondary weapons came into play. Burst cannons opened up to shred the foe,



and missile pods sent forth screeching salvos. When the infantry ducked to take cover, or pulled back to hide, smart missiles followed, their AI guidance sending them looping around objects or streaking down trench lines.

By day's end, Longstrike had personally destroyed so many enemy targets – from tanks to an enormous walker – that he had firmly established himself as the Third Sphere Expansion's most heralded tank ace. Yet the master pilot insisted it was the teamwork of his cadre working together that made the formation so deadly. For felling so many Imperial foes, his entire Armoured Interdiction Cadre earned special praise from Commander Shadowsun herself – an honour second only to receiving commendations from Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va.

Whether in attack or defence, Longstrike has reinforced the same basic doctrines since returning to Mu'gulath Bay: stay mobile, work together, prioritise targets. Commander Shadowsun's orders for engaging the Imperial forces seeking to reclaim the planet were simple – erode the enemy's strength through hit-and-run attacks. Such tactics were well known to all Armoured Interdiction Cadres, and Longstrike and his comrades intended to do their duty, striking fast and hitting hard before pulling back.

LONGSTRIKE

Due to his unerring aim, master gunship pilot Longstrike was chosen to trial the XV02 pilot battlesuit. With its upgraded interface, Longstrike became not only better integrated with his gunship, but also with his entire cadre. The suit perfectly interacts with the AI functions of the pilot's Hammerhead, enabling him to better lock onto targets, fire at speed and support his comrades. Despite the unparalleled views and holomaps provided by the XV02, Longstrike still prefers to rise to the cupola position to view each battle directly. To those who question his actions, Longstrike repeats an ancient saying on T'au – 'Vrass al'shon kun'sha', which translates roughly as 'some traditions refuse to die'. This is typical of Longstrike, for he is a traditionalist, repeating over and over the maxims taught by the pilot training academies. He believes firmly in drills and repeats manoeuvres with his cadre over and over until each of them know his battle tactics and preferred targeting matrixes as well as he knows theirs. When Longstrike's new cadre proposed to undertake the ta'lissera bonding ritual with the exacting veteran, however, they were refused. After his first bondmates were slain by the armies of Mankind upon T'ros, Longstrike vowed to never again perform that ritual. Cold and detached, Longstrike is bonded to duty and battle alone.

SQUADRON BATALICA



Squadron Batalica was confident that there was no foe they could not blast apart and then grind over with the tracks of their Leman Russ battle tanks.

Squadron Batalica was the first squadron of the 3rd Company of the 423rd Armoured Regiment from Cadia. The squadron had been hand chosen by the company's commander, each tank crewed with the most skilled or experienced drivers and gunners. The company commander had a shrewd eye for picking the most talented from among his fellow tankers, for he was Knight Commander Pask, the best known of all Imperial tank aces.

In battle, Leman Russ tanks had ever been the hammer of the Imperial Guard, the hard-striking wall of armour sent to breakthrough enemy lines or add steel to a defensive battle line. None could claim to perform such tasks better than Knight Commander Pask. He had more confirmed kills than any living tank commander in Cadian records, and those men in his company, and especially those assigned to his personal squadron, simply tried to keep pace with their illustrious leader.

In the relentless tide of war assailing the Imperium, the 423rd Armoured Regiment had been sent across the

galaxy, joining task force after task force. Always, no matter where they deployed, Squadron Batalica won the most commendations. On Haytor's Hole, Pask led them to halt the advancing waves of Eldar grav-tanks, leaving only wreckage in their wake. During the Seven Moons campaign, Squadron Batalica duelled rebel armour, defeating not only other Leman Russ tanks, but also spike-ridden Chaos Space Marine vehicles.

Knight Commander Pask's secret was straightforward – he was unmatched in skill as a tank destroyer. His strategy was simple – shoot first and don't miss – and it was advice he never failed to give to the constant stream of new tankers that joined his company. For most engagements, Pask preferred to situate his tank amidst his personal squadron, using his long-barrelled vanquisher cannon to destroy whichever foe he deemed to be the most dangerous opposition to his tank. His squadron was ordered to do the same, their battle cannons thundering while they protected their leader's flanks during the advance.

Imperial Guard tank training was as brutal and straightforward as the steel-clad Leman Russ battle tanks themselves. Tankers were taught to trust in the thick armour to their fore and to keep their guns blazing.



The best defence was to destroy the enemy before they could fire back. This thinking was very much how Knight Commander Pask employed his squadron on Agrellan, sending them forward relentlessly, even callously. If the enemy proved to be particularly well equipped with anti-tank weaponry, Pask himself might hold back, sending in other squadrons to draw fire while he blasted apart each threat as quickly as his loader could re-arm his vanquisher cannon. If his other squadrons were destroyed, Squadron Batalica was next in line.

Regardless of such cavalier treatment, all the men of the 423rd were devoted to the living legend who was their commander. While waiting for orders to reveal which Tau position they were to attack next, the men occupied themselves by recounting their commander's heroic deeds – listing in vivid detail the many examples of Pask's deadeye shooting or the tales of how his nerves were so steady that he didn't know how to flinch. Yet their favourite tales revolved around how, by many a battle's end, Knight Commander Pask always lost his vehicle.

It was true. Pask rarely finished a campaign in command of the same armoured vehicle as he had started. Once, an Ork Battle Fortress crushed his Leman Russ; on another

occasion an Eldar Fire Prism sliced Pask's tank in half. On Trogos IV, Pask's vanquisher cannon took down a rampaging Chaos Titan, but the toppling machine fell directly on top of the victorious tank. At first, it seemed like Pask might escape that calamity, for the savvy commander had reversed out quickly enough to avoid the smashing collision, but he was not fast enough to clear the wide radius of the ensuing explosion as the fallen traitor Titan triggered some terrific meltdown of its power core.

In the end, it was of no matter. Whether emerging from flame-blackened wreckage, or squeezing through some savage shell-hole torn into the steel hide of his tank, Pask crawled free from the ruins each time. His uniform might be burnt, his flesh scarred and his blood flowing, but he lived. When issued with a new tank, Pask always chose the same name – *Hand of Steel*. His veterans would recite those stories over and over again, repeating them until even replacement troops could tell tales of engagements that took place years before they joined the regiment.

Thus far on Agrellan, the xenos had mostly fled before the oncoming might of his Leman Russ battle tanks. Knight Commander Pask had the feeling that a large-scale attack was coming soon, and his instincts were never wrong.

CLASH OF ARMOUR

As columns of Imperial armour rushed to counter the Tau ambushes, they were being stalked in turn. Commander Shadowsun had unleashed her Armoured Interdiction Cadres en masse, hoping to inflict a crippling blow before pulling back. Thus began an epic clash of tank versus tank...

Knight Commander Pask could tell something was wrong. His comms rig picked up multiple calls for help, each situation seeming eerily similar. Strong Tau ambushes had crippled the advance, and the lead elements had just enough time to signal for reinforcements before their vox-casts were cut off. Pask's own vox-caster soon went dead, as if a zone of silence was spreading outwards. Only a buzzing hiss could be raised across the spectrum of channels. The last message Pask heard was a report stating that many battle groups were angling towards the stricken front. Each had been warned about the Tau penchant to use ambush teams to attack reinforcements and had signalled they were advancing cautiously. Pask, however, had a different idea.

Instead of racing towards the latest coordinates, Knight Commander Pask chose a longer route that looped around the last known location. Popping out of his hatch, Pask used hand signals to direct Squadron Batalica, and the other two squadrons that made up his company, to follow his lead. It would take longer, but Pask feared an ambush on a far larger scale. Ahead, he noticed that the low-hanging, unnatural skies were worsening. They were heading straight into a growing storm.

Hunkered down behind a shattered Chimera hull, Captain Shaposhnik had come to realise that his company was nothing more than bait in a far larger engagement. The same grim truth was dawning on many dozens of other Imperial officers across a front that stretched two hundred miles. Beneath the lowering skies, men and tanks had poured onto the ruin-filled wastelands seeking to aid their comrades. They found the Tau guns awaiting them.

The men of the Imperial Guard had learned to fear the long, sinister weapon atop the Tau Hammerhead, hating that whip-crack sound. First to arrive were the speedy Emperor's Talon Sentinel companies, but the bipedal walkers were torn apart – seeker missiles, ion cannons and railguns making quick work of their light armour. Next, the Emperor's Fist Armoured Companies began to roll in, each composed of a dozen armoured tanks. So began an escalating clash of armour, as more and more elements of the Cadian 423rd and 72nd Armoured Regiments joined the tank support vehicles from the infantry regiments. Little did they suspect that they were charging headlong into the targeting grids of Shadowsun's massed Hunter and Armoured Interdiction Cadres.





The Tau had chosen their battlefield well. The vast cinderplains were wide open, save for clusters of ruins poking out of the dusty grit. It was flat land, broken occasionally by hillocks covered in wind-swept detritus so they appeared like sand dunes in a forsaken desert. The hovering Tau gunships took maximum advantage of such cover, lowering themselves so only their turrets could be seen. With lightning storms arcing through the thick clouds above, there was little chance of air support for either side.

Within hours, the plains were littered with smoking wrecks. Advancing by squadron, the Imperial tanks found themselves overmatched – they were outranged and trying to traverse open ground. In the midst of the duelling armour, a different kind of war began to play out amongst the graveyards of shattered hulls. The broken remnants of previous Imperial Guard companies tried to work forward. Heavy weapons teams scurried from wreck to wreck, the still-burning hulks giving off the only light in the gathering gloom. Lone Sentinels stalked closer, seeking to pick off the death-dealing Hammerheads and Sky Rays. They were met, in turn, by Strike Teams and Pathfinders, all fighting a deadly war within the larger battle.

For Longstrike, the battle was little more than target practice. He was so quick and accurate with his railgun fire that he dispatched whole squadrons of tanks, the first of the trio still rolling forward, crippled by internal explosions, even as the last tank's hull was penetrated, its fiery detonation sending its crude steel turret winging through the air. Each of Longstrike's auto-impulse triggers

sent forth a deadly shot, and while his mind pored over the moving digital display, thanks to his XV02 pilot battlesuit, he still found time to recommend shot angles and manoeuvre patterns to the pair of Hammerheads and the Sky Ray under his command. Longstrike did not count the enemy kills, although later study of vid-capture from that stage of the battle tallied over forty armoured vehicles destroyed by his cadre alone. However, not everything about the battle was going to Longstrike's satisfaction.

The holo-map had shown Longstrike several disturbing things. First, the electrical storm that raged overhead was supposed to keep flyers away from the battle zone, yet the tank ace had marked several large craft skirting through the northern reaches. They did not register as any known enemy atmospheric fighter, and that troubled him, as the unknown was never an ally. Secondly, the sheer amount of Imperial armour was staggering. They were massing in greater numbers than anticipated. If they all moved forward at once, the Tau cadres would quite quickly be overwhelmed. Thirdly, a new spearhead appeared on the westernmost edge of Longstrike's display – a group of enemy tanks that were threatening to outflank Tau forces.

Feeling they had already stayed longer than was prudent, Longstrike sent out the order to fall back. One by one, the hovering Tau gunships began reversing, pulling back even as they continued to rain death upon their Imperial foes. Longstrike watched his shoal of gunships skimming low and fast over the ruined landscape; they had struck hard, but now needed to move out quickly, lest they themselves be caught in the vice-grip of the closing enemy formations.

THE PRIDE OF CADIA



Company IV of the 78th Cadian Armoured Regiment was a three-strong 'Emperor's Fury' Super-heavy Company, its deployment reserved only for the most fiercely contested battle zones in the galaxy. Known as the 'Pride of Cadia', the company was comprised of a Baneblade, *Foebreaker*, along with a city-wrecking Banesword, *Blessing of Obliteration*, and a Hellhammer, *Emperor's Decree*. All three of the super-heavy battle tanks came from the forge world prime, Mars itself, and had served Cadia with great distinction for thousands of years. Each of the tanks was a colossal mobile fortress, a moving wall of the thickest armour bedecked with cannons of prodigious size.

The leader of Company IV was battle-scarred tank veteran Commander Vroskni. From the cupola of his command tank, *Foebreaker*, he had led the Pride of Cadia to many battlefield successes. Although the company boasted enough firepower to level opposing armies, Vroskni had learned that the secret to victory after victory was to get the most out of each of the super-heavy tanks under his command. Most recently, the company was called to join the assault groups fighting on Thraxdon. For ten years, Imperial forces had besieged the rebellious fortress world, but they had been unable to break through the traitors' formidable defence lines.

Within a day of arriving on the planet, Vroskni was leading his super-heavy company at the centre of the latest assault. The Pride of Cadia lumbered forward, shrugging off incoming fire while unleashing their own thunderous salvos. In the centre, *Foebreaker* used its main gun to abolish distant enemy gun turrets, while the hull-mounted demolisher cannon smashed apart bunkers and reduced ferrocrete walls to rubble so the tracked vehicles could grind over them.

On Vroskni's right was the Banesword, *Blessing of Obliteration*; its quake cannon pounding shot after shot against the gun-laden central citadel. Each hit gouged a blast mark deep into the gun-laden central citadel, the massive reverberations sending cracks and fissures running throughout the previously impregnable structure. At last, unable to absorb any more punishment, the great tower collapsed, sending cheers down the Imperial lines.

The heretics, however, were far from defeated. The trench lines swarmed with heavy-weapon armed cultists, eager to exact revenge upon those who dared penetrate the first five layers of their hitherto invincible fortress. The secondary gun turrets of the Baneblade and Banesword barely made a dent into such a blood-maddened throng, and not even



the thick armour plates of the super-heavy tanks could long withstand so much massed lascannon fire. Yet Commander Vroskni had anticipated such dangers, calling forward the last tank of his company, *Emperor's Decree*. The Hellhammer truly came into its own in such close quarters fighting. Side sponsons jetted out flame arcs to sweep clear the tank's immediate vicinity, while the high calibre ordnance fired from its Hellhammer cannon destroyed not just the foes that clustered behind the barricades, but the defences themselves. Walls and trench lines that had sheltered countless enemies were quickly reduced to blackened craters, nothing moving amongst the smoking ruin.

At that point, Commander Vroskni ordered the Hellhammer forward, with his own Baneblade and the Banesword holding ground in order to provide a wall of covering fire. *Emperor's Decree* churned a path more deeply into the inner levels of the fortress defences, its way paved by demolisher and quake cannon blasts. The heretics could not halt such an inexorable onslaught.

Within the hour, Imperial troops had broken through all defences, a victory made possible by the prodigious might of Company IV, the Pride of Cadia. There was little time to rest, however, for as soon as the Engineer teams re-blessed

the venerable machines, the super-heavy company was loaded onto transports to be taken aboard another fleet; war zones across the Imperium were clamouring for reinforcements. Such precious assets as a super-heavy company, however, were carefully regulated. In this way, Company IV only helped stem the most calamitous of Ork invasions, only broke the most vital of deadlocks and crushed only the most egregious rebellions beneath their massive treads. Over many triumphal campaigns, Commander Vroskni had learned that, as long as all three tanks in the Pride of Cadia supported each other, then nothing short of an enemy super-heavy asset could withstand their firepower for long.

Although Company IV had never encountered Tau before being assigned to Task Force Retribution, Commander Vroskni had been fully briefed on the xenos and their advanced technology. As he and his company were attached to Colonel Starkzahn's spearhead, Vroskni was also told of the colonel's bold plan. Instead of deploying the super-heavy company into the relatively secure landing zone, Starkzahn proposed to air-lift the Pride of Cadia straight into battle, most likely dropping them on the very edge of enemy territory. It was a risky manoeuvre, but would provide considerable shock to the Imperial assault.

THE FURY OF THE EMPEROR

The plan for the Armoured Interdiction Cadres was to pull back before becoming locked in a major battle, yet that plan quickly deteriorated amid rapidly changing battlefield conditions. With the unexpected arrival of a super-heavy tank company, the Tau were soon trapped in a fighting retreat, with both sides hurling reinforcements into the escalating fray.

The retreating Armoured Interdiction Cadres found their route unexpectedly blocked by the most massive of Imperial tanks. As they attempted to skirt around them, Knight Commander Pask and his three squadrons arrived, battle cannons thundering. The tank battle that erupted was a savage affair, with hellish carnage inflicted upon both sides. Everywhere, the blackened hulls of exploded armoured vehicles burnt like torches. While tanks wove in and out of the mechanical detritus, lascannon beams and the distinctive contrails left by railguns crisscrossed the battlefield. The massive artillery shells of the Baneblade, *Foebreaker*, crashed down, the detonations blasting the ground so that it soon looked like a barren moonscape.

When the Hammerhead Gunships held their foe at range, the main battle tank of the Tau held several advantages – the hover tank was more manoeuvrable, and its railgun better able to penetrate enemy armour than its Imperial counterparts. In the close-ranged maelstrom of the ensuing battle, however, the outnumbered Tau struggled to maintain any edge. The best Tau pilots kept calm, using their craft's speed and tight turning radius to keep obstacles between themselves and the Leman Russ

squadrons, snapping off shots as they moved. Those pilots who halted, or took too long to aim, were soon met by the hull-crumpling fire of massed battle cannons. Most devastating of all was the quake cannon of the Banesword, *Blessing of Obliteration*; even when its massive ordnance missed its mark, the heavy shells sent up such a torrent of concussive force that they could flip over nearby hover tanks. After a shoal of Sky Rays went up in a blossoming fireblast, the Tau quickly adopted spread formations.

In such a target-rich environment, Knight Commander Pask was truly in his element. Oblivious to all else, his mind was bent on his next killing shot. Again and again he ordered his gunner to fire, and each time, a muzzle-blast of flame scorched from the vanquisher cannon, sending grav-tanks crashing and spinning into the thick dust with every shot. Black smoke made the skies darker still while the battle raged all around. With an immense number of armoured vehicles travelling in all directions, there was little time to think or reform – it was only hunt or be hunted. Always, the Tau vehicles sought to disengage, to fire on the move while trying to escape the Imperial cordon that was closing in all around them.



For Longstrike, the controlled retreat had turned into a nightmare. The enemy were around him, behind him, closing in from every quarter. He called out threats and targets constantly, shifting directions and banking hard with his Hammerhead.

Despite his best efforts, Sha'ng had lost members of his cadre. One by one, his comrades' gunships had been destroyed, until only Longstrike and a single other Hammerhead remained. Yet there was no time to dwell on his failure, for shellbursts blossomed all around his tank and his holo-map showed more enemy tanks moving up from the south-east. Even as Longstrike flicked off the alarms that were alerting him to minor hull damage and that his decoy launchers had exhausted their supply, he noted that the thruster array of Shul'mur's Hammerhead was malfunctioning. To stall for long was to die, and a quick glance at the map showed multiple icons closing fast.

'Shas'la Shul'mur,' Longstrike said, 'Shut down all power to your left thruster

array. Let it recycle before reboosting. But don't stop now. It will be easier for you to steer left. There are dunes ahead you can keep between you and the incoming gue'la.'

The vid-feed image of the young pilot showed a warrior on the edge of panic, and monitors indicated that his heart rate was unusually high. Even as Longstrike spoke, he adjusted his railgun and sent three shots streaking towards the closest enemy tanks. It was only seconds before two were billowing black smoke, flames leaping out as the crew attempted to open hatches and escape. The third tank had veered enough so that the projectile glanced harmlessly off the turret, its own long-barrelled battle cannon blazing away in answer.

Longstrike had generally learned from experience to disregard the return shots of a Leman Russ when the enemy was firing on the move at maximum range. Such shots were typically wildly inaccurate, yet this one was different. Blaring signals gave Longstrike an instant of warning,

and his last tilt ensured the sloping armour of his Hammerhead did not take a direct blast. Still, the resounding clang of impact shook everything. Even the suppressor field from his XV02 pilot battlesuit did not shield him entirely, and Longstrike's head felt cloudy and thick, his eyesight momentarily blurred. Instinctively, Longstrike jiggled his craft, moving it rapidly sideways while swivelling his railgun. He needed to keep the enemy's eyes upon himself, buying more time for Shas'la Shul'mur to reach the safe cover of the dunes. Yet despite his efforts, it was not to be.

In one of the luckiest or most impressive displays of gue'la accuracy that Longstrike had ever encountered, the long-barrelled tank had again opened fire, its shell ripping apart Shul'mur's Hammerhead in an exploding fireball that sent wreckage high into the air.

Calmly, Longstrike changed course, accelerating away with all possible speed. The holo-map showed he still had quite a gauntlet to navigate ahead.





CHAPTER 2

IMPERIAL SPEARHEAD



MOVE AND COUNTER MOVE

The allied commanders of the Imperium agreed that once they began putting pressure upon their xenos foe, they must not relent. All recognised the Tau way of war. At all costs, the Imperium must prevent the Tau from disengaging to plan another series of ambushes on their terms. Without delay, they took the fight directly to the Tau strongholds.

After the long running battle with enemy armour – including a company of monstrous super-heavy tanks – those Tau that returned to the relative safety of the cleared zones breathed deep sighs of relief. Once within the perimeter of the Earth caste's enviro-engines, the skies cleared to a radiant blue, as opposed to the overcast toxic smog that permeated the majority of Mu'gulath Bay. With the exception of the towering hive city of Agrellan Prime dominating the background like a looming mountain range, the rest of the landscape had been cleared of the remnants of the planet's decrepit Imperial past.

The Imperial forces were not far behind, however, and as the leading elements of the broken Armoured Interdiction Cadres approached the first of the Tau's defensive perimeters, Commander Shadowsun began to mobilise their reinforcements. She sent her well-guarded reserves – a mix of Hunter Cadres and Rapid Insertion Forces, along with entire shoals of Sun Shark Bombers – in to cover the retreat. The plan was for them to deliver a hard counter-strike and then, while the enemy regrouped, the incoming Tau forces could get within the defensive lines. In a thousand battles upon a hundred planets, such tactics had served the Tau well, and none employed them with greater mastery than did Commander Shadowsun. And, at first, it worked.

Incoming Lemman Russ tanks were quickly dispatched as they entered the cleared zone and were met by a crossfire of railguns. As the Imperial forces began to muster in force, Crisis Teams struck from the skies, their jet packs allowing them to combat drop out of fast-moving Orca transports high above. Even before they landed, they fired masses of missiles, carpeting foes with a layer of explosions. At close range, their fusion blasters made short work of the Imperial armour, turning steel into molten piles of slag in seconds. Firing up their jump jets again, the Crisis Teams bounded away before their targets could retaliate.

The Imperial Guard were disjointed, their momentum blunted. The Tau had gained the reprieve they so desperately sought, and they would soon retire behind their first line of defence. But then, with the sound of thunder, the skies were ripped asunder.

Moving too rapidly to be intercepted by fighters, the Drop Pods of the Adeptus Astartes plummeted downwards at impossible velocities. The sky was streaked with contrails and filled with the screams of retro-thrusters. The Imperium had countered Commander Shadowsun's rapid strike assaults with one of their own. Within seconds, the Tau retreat was once again blocked as the Drop Pods opened and Space Marines exited, their boltguns blazing.

Kor'sarro Khan exalted in the fresh air, letting it fill his lungs as he charged ahead. This was more like it, he thought, swinging a two-handed blow with Moonfang to sever a battlesuit's leg. In the following spinning motion, the Captain of the 3rd Company of the White Scars reversed his grip on the blade and drove it down through the toppled battlesuit's chest. With a quick twist, he ensured that the Tau inside the suit was halved before jerking his blade free, a spray of blood confirming the kill. Mantras and rituals only helped so much in the confined space of a Drop Pod – the only true way to clear away the memory of that helpless interment was this – the heady rush of battle and the sweet taste of his enemies' defeat.

Although the Khan had grown to respect the battle prowess of the Tau and the tactical acumen of their leader, Commander Shadowsun, he found their ambushes and fighting at maximum distance dishonourable. That they too were masters of the hit-and-run attack only made the Khan hate the xenos more.

In fact, everything about the Tau made the Khan's blood sing. It was a familiar feeling – for only when he was on the hunt did the Khan feel fully alive. It was a good feeling to be on the same world as his declared prey. He had hunted Commander Shadowsun for some time – this was the fourth campaign in which he had sought her. Indeed, it was on this planet that the Khan first made his vow to claim the Tau Commander's head.

Now, Kor'sarro Khan had tracked his foe to her lair. He doubted she would appear on the battlefield just yet – she did not always lead her troops from the front as he did. She was trapped on this world though – a satisfying thought, for he relished this quest. After this mission, the Khan and his 3rd Company had free license to return to the defence of Chogoris, and that drove him on. She must not escape his blade this time.

With a leap, the Khan was over the barrier wall and amongst the Fire Warriors. He was a lion amongst the sheep, a hive-eagle amongst rat-doves.

Over and over, he honoured the blessed blade of his Chapter, bathing it in xenos blood. None could stay his rampage, and severed limbs and arcs of gore sprayed upwards in the wake of his onslaught. Behind him, the Khan could hear his brothers' roaring bolt pistols and whirring chainswords as they fought to keep up with their Khan. Let them try. Kor'sarro knew there were none yet to challenge his command, but he respected the very thought of it, for anything that made the Sons of Jaghatai stronger was to be embraced.

The killing was soon over, for it was little more than a one-sided slaughter. A lone vid-Drone rose from the massacre and darted off. Beside Kor'sarro Khan, Brother Subetei raised his bolter to shoot it down, but the Khan slapped the weapon wide, the shells thumping into the dusty ground with muffled 'whumps'.

'Let it go,' the Khan commanded, snarling up at the Drone. 'I want them to see us. I want her to see me and know that I am coming.'



THE SOLDIERS OF THE MACHINE GOD

With the aid of the Adeptus Astartes, the Imperial thrust into Tau territory was fully underway. It was at this time that a new army arrived to join the ever-growing battle outside of Agrellan Prime. At the command of the Tech-Priests, the ordered ranks of a Skitarii War Cohort stood ready to begin their assault upon the Tau constructs.

In the mountainous shadow of the former capital hive of Agrellan, the Tau had built their largest installations – hab-domes, a Fire caste training complex, and all the foundations for a new sept world, perhaps the largest of them all. Now this vista was the site of a battle that the Tau had never seen coming.

At the defensive walls guarding the sprawling Tau complex, Commander Shadowsun had planned to make the gue'la pay dearly, before retiring behind the defences. A Space Marine Drop Pod assault had foiled both aspects of that plan. More and more of her carefully husbanded reserves were sent to extract armies that were pinned down, drawing more and more Tau forces into the raging combat.

While the Space Marines stormed the first line of defences, Colonel Starkzahn arrived at the front. The commander of this spearhead assault found a new army assembled upon the desert-like plains, forming up alongside his companies from the Cadian 625th and 423rd Armoured Regiment. How or when the Skitarii War Cohort had left *Archaetrove*, their orbiting Macroclasm class Tech-Cruiser, was unknown. Judging by the thick dust coating their red robes

and covering their strange engines of war, it appeared as if they had already marched some distance. Yet there they stood, forming into battle lines in time to join the larger assault, while ahead, explosions blossomed as the Space Marines breached the first of the Tau fortifications.

This was not the first time Colonel Starkzahn had fought alongside the Skitarii Legions, and he knew from experience that it was not his place to question these allies or their doings. The heavily cowled Magos Arcotholitis had mysteriously turned up for the hasty war council claiming that his War Cohort would advance alongside the Imperial Guard, safeguarding the right flank. That was good enough for Colonel Starkzahn, as to his mind, allies willing to fight as aggressively as the Skitarii did were the only ones worth having. He gave the order to advance to his troops. Simultaneously, from high in orbit above Agrellan, the Tech-Priest masters sent down their signals, the Skitarii giving the slightest of twitches as the doctrina imperatives activated their mechanised bodies in preparation for war. So, side by side, the Astra Militarum and Skitarii began their march across the wide eastern plain in the shadow of Agrellan Prime.





The first segment of the Tau defensive line was already in shambles – the Space Marines had seen to that. The second and third lines, however, were now all firing at full power. The air cracked as the hyper-velocity railgun rounds from the distant Tau gun emplacements began to hit the advancing armour. Several Leman Russ tanks exploded, great geysers of smoke and fire blossoming across the wide, flat area. The strange, crab-like walkers of the Skitarii, however, continued apace. Flashes glared and energy fields flickered, but still the Onager Duncrawlers scuttled onwards, their guns remaining silent and, as yet, offering no response.

Forward the forces of the Imperium marched. The Imperial Guard line became staggered as they advanced, for explosions tore holes in their ranks, pulse rounds dropped soldiers, entire squads grouped behind the relative protection of the hulking tanks, and platoons dropped into firing positions to begin pouring fire into the line of Tau fortifications ahead. This was not the case upon the right flank.

Relentlessly, the Skitarii plodded on, neither increasing nor decreasing speed. Some warriors were punched off their feet by incoming pulse rounds, but a number of those merely got up again, assuming a new place in the formation as it continued onwards. Once in range, they began to fire – the thump and crackle of their galvanic weaponry contrasting with the roar of battle cannons and clatter of heavy bolters. Glowing rad-beams stretched out to blast the Fire Warriors lining the barricades, and the eradication beamers of the crab-legged Duncrawlers began atomising

all before them in wide swathes. With an inhuman burst of speed, the metal-limbed Ruststalkers bounded to close the distance, vaulting easily over the low walls to attack the Tau beyond. The shriek of their transonic blades was a hideous keening, pierced regularly by the panicked cries of the hopelessly beset Fire caste. Crisis Teams attempted to intervene, using their jump jets to land close enough to bring their formidable arsenal of weaponry into play; however, they were met by the charging Sydonian Dragoons, taser lances sending forth showers of sparks as they split open battlesuits, skewering the Tau pilots mercilessly. Stalking through the carnage, the bipedal machines methodically crushed the wounded before loping off to catch up with the already advancing Skitarii.

The Tau fortifications proved much more difficult for the Imperial Guard to overcome. Casualties mounted as the Cadian Shock Troopers slogged forward, taking cover behind the burning remains of shattered vehicles. Slowly, with massed lasgun fire, concentrated mortar rounds and a surge of tanks from the armoured regiment, a section of the second Tau line was breached, but by then, the right flank of the Imperial advance was far ahead, the Skitarii and Space Marines already besieging the next line of defences.

In a hidden command nexus some distance away from the war fronts, Commander Shadowsun watched her many video feeds and holo-maps. A half smile creased her thin lips as she saw an opportunity and watched it grow. Her plans remained the same – to maximise enemy casualties while minimising her own. Yet she hesitated...



IMPERIAL BESIEGERS

There were more Tau defences than the Imperial forces had expected. Where once had been plain desert, there now stood Tidewall barricades and gun turrets. They seemed to rise like mirages out of the very sand – either by disruption field trickery or clever engineering.

The turret-mounted railguns of Tidewall Gunrigs fired shot after shot, sending geysers of rocks and splattered body parts down the line. Yet on came the Astra Militarum, leaving corpses littering the sand behind them. Fusillades of lasgun shots streaked out, a saturation of fire that forced the Tau Strike Teams to duck behind their walls, not even daring to return the shots. With a screeching of turbines, the Assault Squads of the Space Marines used their jump packs to bound up and over the defensive structures. Some landed amongst the foe, bolt pistols and chainswords wreaking bloody havoc. Others were met in turn, countered in mid-air by leaping battlesuits. While the Skitarii could not match the numbers of their Imperial Guard allies, their prodigious firepower blasted away gun towers and swept battlements clear with irradiated rays of purest death.

The Tau were not content to just sit behind their walls. Periodically, they darted out to counter-attack – shoals of Devilfish bringing Strike Teams into perfect enfilading positions or dropping Breacher Teams where they could punch holes in the front lines of the oncoming foes. Stealth and Crisis Teams struck out in bounding leaps, wreaking a terrible toll.

Under the burning yellow sun, the slaughter went on and on.





ONE FINAL PUSH....

As the desert clash unfolded, each leader looked for openings, seeking any opportunity to land a telling blow upon their enemy. Both Commander Shadowsun and Colonel Starkzahn knew that fortune favoured the bold, and that victory was seldom given, but instead must be seized. So the battle ebbed and flowed...

Tenaciously, the Skitarii pressed the attack. Their red-robed troops absorbed punishing incoming fire, their bionically enhanced bodies shrugged off what should have been mortal wounds. Even so, such was the firepower arrayed against them that the Skitarii left behind a gruesome trail – crumpled corpses and shattered gear-driven automata lay in heaps. So hard-wired was their programming that many did not even realise when they were dead – pieces of half-destroyed things still attempted to lurch forward, and the desert floor crawled with such gruesome sights as one-armed torsos pulling themselves through the sand or lumpen masses twitching forward while dragging ropes of innards and cables behind them.

The Imperial Guard and Space Marine forces attacked the Tau defence lines one by one, destroying each gun turret and stronghold in methodical order. The Skitarii, however, advanced in a straight line towards the larger installations – they cared not if their forces were subjected to enfilading fire, and they gave no concern to the multiple threats that they left behind for their allies to battle. With single-minded purpose, the maniples advanced, slew their foe, and advanced again. They slowed for nothing.

As Mu'gulath Bay had only recently been captured, it did not yet feel like a Tau world, despite the work carried out by the Earth caste engineers. Within the outer defensive walls was a sprawling desert, now purified after great effort had been expended to remove its toxins. Clusters of newly built buildings broke this empty space. Designed with future expansion in mind, the new sept world required years of development before it could rival its predecessors. Now, however, the Tau merely wished to survive long enough for reinforcements to arrive. The great leader of their people, Ethereal Supreme Aun'Va, was trapped on this planet, and his protection surmounted all other concerns.

Bypassing the Fire caste training domes, the remainder of the Skitarii War Cohort made directly for the environmental engines. These structures were guarded by encircling banks of Gun Drones that opened fire with their underslung pulse carbines, felling many soldiers of the Machine God. It was the Sicarian Infiltrators that finally cleared the defenders from the base of the engines, the scrambling pulse waves that emanated from them crippled the artificial intelligence of the Drones and left them ripe to be shot down or hacked apart. As the



Skitarii formed a perimeter around the looming engines, the air rippled ominously. Teleporting from low orbit, a Holy Requisitioner, the most avaricious office of all the Cult Mechanicus, had arrived. Surrounded by Kataphron Breachers, the red-robed priest touched the engines, cables darting out like snakes from his powerpack. He directed the Breachers to dismantle the device, and they set about cutting away coveted pieces with their powered claws. When reactor drives, ion cylinders and other precious tech had all been removed, the air shimmered once again, and just like that, the Tech-Priest and his War Cohort were gone.

On her holo-maps, Commander Shadowsun saw the large gaps growing in the enemy assault. She had intended to pull her troops further back, but she could not resist such a clear opportunity to make the enemy pay. In an unusual moment of indecision, Shadowsun almost sent in the sum of her reserves – almost joined the fray herself. Nagging doubt held her back, for this time, her goal was not to win the battle, but to safeguard Aun'Va. It was a rare lapse in judgement from Shadowsun, for she decided to commit more, but not all, of her reserve troops; it would not be enough to sustain the critical mass needed to break the foe.

Skimming low over the flat desert, Piranha Firestream Wings scythed through the advancing Cadians. Overhead, shoals of Sun Shark Bombers timed their attacks perfectly,

their pulse bomb generators sending down fizzling energy spheres that crackled and exploded. On their right, where once had been an army of Skitarii, the Cadians instead saw their flanks compromised by Fire Warriors debarking from Devilfish and pouring fire into Imperial ranks.

Had Shadowsun sent in her carefully marshalled battlesuit teams, she might have truly staggered the Imperial forces, but her half-measures were too easily countered. Colonel Starkzahn barked into his vox-caster, sending his own reserves into battle. The Valkyrie Airborne Assault Wing launched an immediate attack. Air support, armoured regiments, abhuman auxilla – he called upon it all and sent in everything to push the Tau back.

Space Marines might be tireless, but the Astra Militarum were only men – even Cadian regiments eventually succumb to fatigue and the ceaseless pressure of war. Not this day – the 625th, like its grim-faced colonel, simply refused to back down. The sight of Valkyries roaring in, supporting their grav-chute dropped troops, gave the Cadians heart, and they surged forward. More infantry regiments were moving in, and word was that a super-heavy tank company was already en route. When Colonel Starkzahn and the regimental standard bearer arrived to lead the final charge, it was becoming a rout and Imperial victory was all but assured. But then the skies turned red...







THE FURY OF THE ALMIGHTY MONT'KA

The midday sun over the primary Tau command nexus on Mu'gulath Bay burned bright and hot while battle raged below. Shafts of light cut through even the thick clouds of airborne toxins, and then, for an instant, those rays flared bright, casting stark shadows upon the battlefield below. The flash blinded all with its intensity, even as it morphed, the yellow sun suddenly taking on a blood red hue. And in that moment, they came from on high...

It was as if they came from the sun itself.

Wave after wave of red-armoured Crisis battlesuits dropped through the atmosphere. Hundreds of streaking, curling contrails filled the skies as masses of missile pods streamed out salvo after salvo. Through those twisting smoke trails cut a rain of blue streaks, plasma bolts that scythed down Imperial Guardsman and Space Marine alike. Whirring at high cycle, burst cannons stitched lines of death across the advancing Cadians below, mowing down ranks at a time. Scintillating balls of blazing lightning exploded as nova-charged ion blasts landed amidst the Imperial Guard, the XV104 Riptides making their awesome presence felt.

At the last moment, the crimson battlesuits slowed their rapid descent, their jump jets hissing in protest. They landed amongst the front lines – the broken, body-filled barriers that were the final obstacle standing between the Imperial forces and the Tau installations.

To the Imperial Guard, this death from the skies was just another, albeit furious, ambush. To them, the red armour of their foes signified only more xenos armed with advanced weaponry. To the Tau, this sudden onslaught was altogether more meaningful. The beleaguered Fire caste warriors looked to the skies in wonder. Far away, viewing on drone-captured video, Commander Shadowsun and Aun'Va shared an incredulous look. To the Tau, the red-armoured warriors meant only a single thing: Commander Farsight, the prodigal champion turned outcast, had returned.



FARSIGHT ENCLAVE ORGANISATION

When he disobeyed the directives of the Ethereals, Commander O'Shovah set up his own colonies beyond the Damocles Gulf. Known as the Farsight Enclaves, this domain expanded greatly under its dynamic leader.

A military genius, Farsight remains a dedicated disciple of the legendary Commander Puretide. Although politically separated from the Tau Empire, Farsight has continued many of the teachings of his former homelands, such as the rituals and training of the Fire caste. The armies of the Farsight Enclaves have been called upon many times to defend their worlds from invaders, cleanse new planets to colonise, and even, occasionally, participate in missions to aid their former rulers, the Tau Empire.

The armies deployed by the Farsight Enclaves are usually, but not always, centred around teams of XV8 Crisis Battlesuits, and prioritise rapid insertion formations. Indeed, the battle prowess of the red-armoured battlesuits is well known and feared throughout many sectors of the Eastern Fringe. Regardless of the exact composition of the cadres in any given Farsight Enclaves force, its warriors will place a premium upon aggressive tactics, for such is the directive of Commander Farsight himself.



DAWN BLADE CONTINGENT

The armies of the Farsight Enclaves are organised according to the philosophies of their dynamic commander, and most favour a combination of the following formations:

HUNTER CADRE

RANGED SUPPORT CADRE

RETALIATION CADRE

PIRANHA FIRESTREAM WING

COUNTERSTRIKE CADRE

FIREBASE
SUPPORT CADRE

AIR SUPERIORITY CADRE

RAPID INSERTION FORCE

SKYSWEEP MISSILE DEFENCE

ALLIED ADVANCE CADRE

THE EIGHT

Commander Farsight

Commander Bravestorm

Commander Brightsword

Shas'o Sha'vastos

Shas'o Arra'kon

Sub-Commander Torchstar

Shas'vre Ob'lotai 9-0

O'vesa

FARSIGHT'S RED SUN ASSAULT



COALITION COMMAND
Masters of the Mont'ka
 Commander Farsight (O'Shovah)
 The Eight



TRANSPORT TASK FORCE

Unable to match the Imperial Fleet in battle, Farsight employed prototype Shi'oni class cloaked ships to enter the contested atmosphere.

INTERSTELLAR CRAFT

2 Custodian class carriers
 3 Protector class warships
 4 Emissary class envoy ships
 2 Kroot Warspheres

ORBITAL WING

12 Manta Heavy Dropships
 24 Orca orbital transports
 3 Shi'oni Transports

AIR PROTECTION SQUADRONS

3 Barracuda squadrons
 2 Tiger Shark squadrons
 6 Razorshark squadrons
 6 Sun Shark Bomber squadrons

COMMUNE

Commander Farsight leads all, but beneath him in the chain of command are Commander Brightsword and Commander Torchstar.

INSERTION CONTINGENTS

Crisis Dropstrike
 Rapid Insertion Force
 Riptide Wings
 Firststrike

ENCOUNTER CONTINGENTS

Armour Execution
 Forward Stealth
 Armoured
 Interdiction

BREAKTHROUGH CONTINGENTS

Piranha Firestream
 Wings
 Ghostkeel Wings
 Riptide Rapidstrike

FORWARD SECURITY CONTINGENTS

Skysweep Missile
 Defence
 Drone-Net VXI-0
 Pulse Engine

DENSE ENVIRONMENT CONTINGENTS

Optimised Stealth
 Stingwing Hive
 Kroot Warpack

COMMANDER FARSIGHT'S DAWN BLADE CONTINGENTS

Commander Farsight divided his cadres into attacking and defensive contingents. They air-dropped immediately following the launching of a solar-flare nova missile, using the cover of its disruptive flare to gain shock advantage against the Imperial forces.

INSERTION CONTINGENT

Contingent Headquarters
 Hunter Cadres
 Retaliation Cadres
 Rapid Insertion Forces
 Counterstrike Cadres
 Air Superiority Cadres
 Allied Advance Cadres
 Drone-net VXI-0

ENCOUNTER CONTINGENT

Contingent Headquarters
 Hunter Cadres
 Retaliation Cadres
 Rapid Insertion Forces
 Counterstrike Cadres
 Ranged Support Cadres
 Skysweep Missile Defence
 Firebase Support Cadres
 Allied Advance Cadres

DIPLOMATIC CORPS

Unlike most Tau Expeditionary Forces, the Farsight Enclaves brought with them virtually no Water caste diplomats. A small team of Translation Executives were included for dealings with the gue'la, and a single Diplomatic Arrangement Council could be called in from orbit, but was deemed unlikely to be needed.

EXTRACTION WORKGROUP

Unable to maintain orbit, the Tau fleet was forced to flee. This team was brought in to create the long-term extraction plan.

3 Engineering Corps
 1 Relay Comms Team

SPECIAL EXTRACTION TEAMS

This group was included specifically to extract the Empire's Ethereals if needed.

3 Optimised Stealth Teams
 2 Engineering Support
 1 Camouflage Engine

FARSIGHT ENCLAVES RED SUN ASSAULT



When Commander Farsight leads his Enclaves to war, he does so in swift, dynamic fashion. He is the master of the Mont'ka, the art of identifying a target of opportunity and striking it with maximum force. Translated from the Tau language, the words roughly equate to 'the killing blow'.

Commander Farsight leads the assault, typically deploying from an overhead Manta Missile Destroyer. Using his jump jets, Farsight descends to his carefully selected target – for it is vital that the sudden shock and ferocity of the attack put the enemy in immediate peril. Firing his plasma rifle and crushing enemies beneath the feet of his battlesuit, Commander Farsight lands in a flurry of swift violence. He swings wide arcs with his sword, the Dawn Blade, an energy-wreathed weapon that is so potent it severs ferroconcrete as easily as if slicing through water. Before the last severed bit of his target has toppled, Farsight is already in motion; whirling, spinning and chopping until all foes within reach are dead. Activating his jump jets, he leaps into the air, plasma rifle spitting bursts of blue bolts that never miss their mark.

Not far behind Commander Farsight come the rest of the Eight, the fabled formation of battlesuit-clad elite warriors that served both as Farsight's bodyguard and war

council. Each of them is a whirlwind of devastation, dealing death in their own unique fashion, fighting as a team despite their individual modes of battle – each warrior complementing the style and weaponry of the others. All blend together into a harmony of destruction.

Sub-Commander Torchstar sends sheets of fire out even before her battlesuit touches the ground. Brightsword's twin fusion guns melt away the metal hull of battle tanks as if they are candle wax. Bravestorm's plasma rifle punches his selected targets off their feet while he closes on a suitable victim for his formidable Onager Gauntlet. Further from the front, Shas'vere Ob'lota'i sends forth steady barrages from his high-yield missile pod, his AI enabling him to simultaneously blast multiple targets even if the victims are across the battlefield from each other. Such long ranged tactics are not for O'Arra'kon, whose battlesuit is bedecked with anti-infantry weapons. With each bounding leap, Arra'kon leaves behind another heap of bodies, the dead falling so thick before his onslaught that they often obscure the ground. Of all the Eight, O'Vesa cuts perhaps the largest swathe of death, his towering XV104 Riptide Battlesuit unleashing prodigious blasts of super-charged energy from its ion accelerator. Between the volleys of his plasma rifles, Shas'o Sha'vastos relays the



enemies' fall back patterns, because he knows that, in a Mont'ka assault, should the pace of destruction slow down, the attackers might lose their momentum, and with it the opportunity to destroy their foe utterly.

As devastating as they are, the Eight are but the tip of the spear of a Farsight Enclave assault. In their bloody wake come the massed crimson-armoured Crisis Teams. As they streak groundwards, their array of weapons adds to the carnage. Fire Warrior teams – often aided by the mobility of Devlfish transports – add their sheer volume of pulse weapon fire to the fray. A Pathfinder team, supported by a Recon Drone, often plays a central role. They use marker lights to guide critical shots precisely, and if needed, the Pathfinders lay down their own formidable firepower with a mix of pulse carbines and ion rifles.

Using such devastating shock assaults, Commander Farsight has led his Enclaves to many triumphs. When a living tide of greenskins swept over the world of Nepshoon, the Farsight Enclaves did not attempt to fight a long war of attrition with the superior numbers of their barbaric foe. Instead, Farsight planned and performed a perfectly executed Mont'ka style attack. Deployed via high altitude transport, the battlesuits descended straight upon Ork

Warlord Gnashjaw and his iron-clad bodyguard. The Eight cut down the mega-armoured Orks with terrifying ease, the action punctuated when Farsight beheaded the Warlord with a single swipe of the Dawn Blade. The Tau infantry arrived on a flank, laying down a curtain of pulse fire to ensure that none of the Ork bosses escaped back to their massed armies. Suddenly bereft of all their strongest-willed leaders, the remaining Ork hordes predictably upon each other, and were easily routed by a series of successive strikes.

In the many centuries since Commander Farsight led his expedition to break away from the Tau Empire, the ancient warrior has only further perfected his battle craft. With the passing of his mentor, the revered Commander Puretide, there are none now living who can match his Fire caste academy tactical scores or his vast experience of executing the swift killing strike.

Although Commander Farsight was exiled from the Tau Empire, and reviled by the many who considered him a traitor to the Greater Good, he still led his Enclaves to the succour of the Tau upon Mu'gulath Bay in their time of need. In a flash of crimson, Commander Farsight launched one of the greatest of all his trademark assaults.

THE EIGHT

The greatest living legends of the Farsight Enclaves are the Eight. Led by O'Shovah himself, the Eight are warriors beyond compare, the greatest battlesuit pilots, true masters of the art of war. Farsight could not ask for a more loyal bodyguard.



COMMANDER FARSIGHT

The renegade Fire caste Commander is Shas'o Vior'la Shovah Kais Mont'yr, often shortened to O'Shovah, and even better known as Commander Farsight. Over his unnaturally long life span, Farsight has been known by many other names as well, for he was the most exalted of all the protégés of the legendary Commander Puretide. He was also the 'Hero of Vior'la,' and 'The Bane of Greenskins,' and after he left the Empire, he became known as the 'Great Traitor' or 'He who Renounced the Greater Good'. To the Tau of the Farsight Enclaves, he is their one true leader, a warrior who will take his people to their great destiny.

COMMANDER BRAVESTORM

Commander Bravestorm was entombed in life support systems after sustaining critical injuries during the battle at Blackthunder Mesa on Dal'yth. Since that fateful day, the scorched and twisted Tau has been confined to a battlesuit, although his core support cocoon has been reinstalled into an XV8-02 Crisis 'Iridium' mantle. Despite his hardships, Bravestorm has lost neither his fervour for the Greater Good, nor his lightning quick mind. He fights with a battle prowess and bravado that few can equal, for he has passed beyond fear and courted death itself.





COMMANDER BRIGHTSWORD

Few deliver a deathblow with such deadly efficiency as Commander Brightsword. With his pair of fusion blasters, Brightsword leads his Rapid Insertion Force from the front, and his war exploits have proven more than worthy. Many famous warriors have previously borne the same name, and its current bearer is mindful of the heritage that accompanies the honoured title. In battle, he always chooses the most powerful enemy target to annihilate first, and thus far, none have escaped his fusion blasts. He has destroyed the most hulking of war engines and monsters, and his aggressive attack style has been modelled upon the tactics of O'Shovah himself.



SHAS'O SHA'VASTOS

Commander Sha'vastos was the first Fire caste warrior to receive a Puretide neurochip. Something went amiss, however, and the prototype chip suffered rapid degeneration. Rather than allow the loyal warrior to suffer a lobotomy, Farsight had him spirited away and placed in stasis until some cure could be discovered. Many decades later, O'Vesa was able to recalibrate the neurochip, and Shas'o Sha'vastos was reawakened. A tactical genius, Commander Sha'vastos leads his cadres to victory after victory, for he always seems to know the enemy's battle plans even before setting foot on the battlefield.

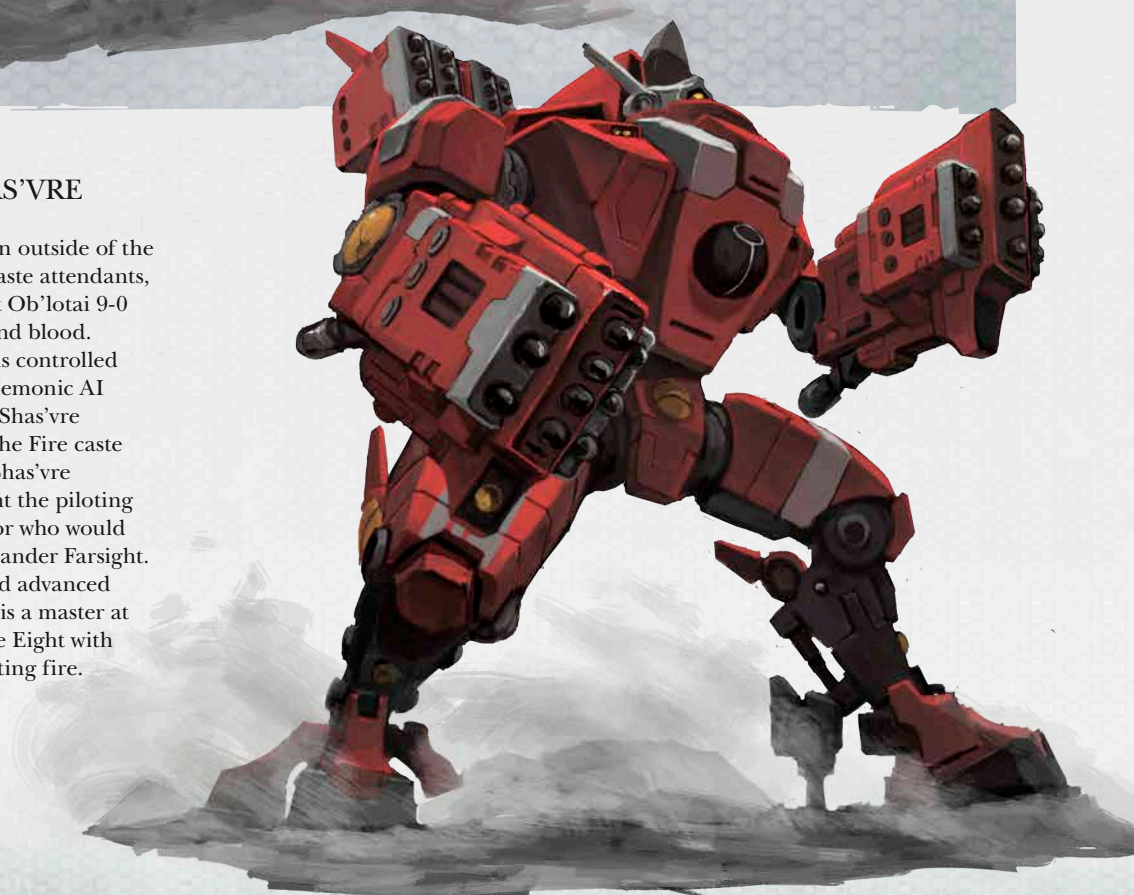


SHAS'O ARRA'KON

Equipped with an XV8-05 Crisis 'Enforcer' battlesuit, and mounting an extensive suite of anti-infantry weapons, Commander Arra'kon can leave even the largest formations of enemy troops in ruins in an instant. Willingly leaving the larger targets to Commander Brightsword, Arra'kon instead seeks out masses of enemy foot soldiers. An analytical warrior, Arra'kon encourages the Eight to review and critique all of their past battles on holo-vid – for it is his constant goal to further hone his battle arts.

BROADSIDE SHAS'VRE OB'LOTAI 9-0

Although it is not known outside of the Eight and their Earth caste attendants, the Broadside battlesuit Ob'lotai 9-0 is not piloted by flesh and blood. Instead, the Broadside is controlled by a late-generation mnemonic AI engram of the original Shas'vere Ob'lotai. Long ago, at the Fire caste training domes, it was Shas'vere Ob'lotai who first taught the piloting arts to the young warrior who would one day become Commander Farsight. Using multi-trackers and advanced scanfeeds, Ob'lotai 9-0 is a master at supplying the rest of the Eight with deadly accurate supporting fire.



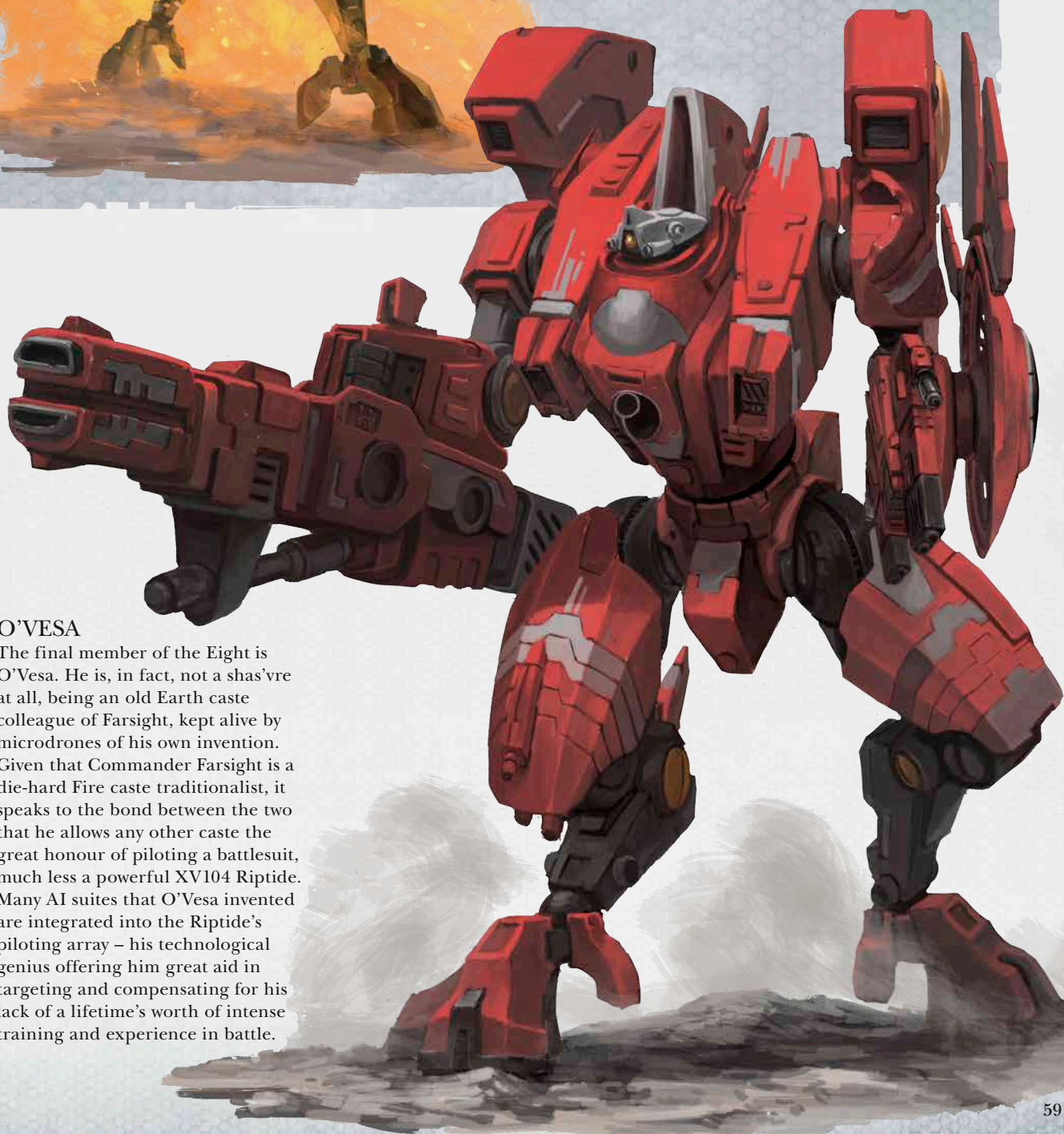
SUB-COMMANDER TORCHSTAR

A defector from the Tau Empire, Sub-Commander Torchstar is the youngest and most impetuous of the Eight. Bearing twin flamers, the Vior'lan borders on reckless as she bounds headlong into battle.



O'VESA

The final member of the Eight is O'Vesa. He is, in fact, not a shas'vre at all, being an old Earth caste colleague of Farsight, kept alive by microdrones of his own invention. Given that Commander Farsight is a die-hard Fire caste traditionalist, it speaks to the bond between the two that he allows any other caste the great honour of piloting a battlesuit, much less a powerful XV104 Riptide. Many AI suites that O'Vesa invented are integrated into the Riptide's piloting array – his technological genius offering him great aid in targeting and compensating for his lack of a lifetime's worth of intense training and experience in battle.





BATTLE OF BLACKFOSSIL RIDGE

Desperate measures were called upon if the Imperium was to counter the fierce attack by the newly arrived crimson-armoured Tau. Under the cover of an orbital bombardment, Colonel Starkzahn pulled his forces back, reforming them along an ancient ridge. There, strengthened by waves of incoming reinforcements, the Imperial Guard intended to make their stand.

The sudden shock attack of the battlesuits had been perfectly timed, quickly throwing the Imperial offensive into total disarray. Colonel Starkzahn sensed that any chance of victory had been snatched from his grasp. Worse still, the counter-attack was so fierce that he feared the imminent collapse of his whole army. With no further reserves to hand that could stabilise his crumbling battle lines, Colonel Starkzahn called in a massive orbital bombardment. The skies burned and the world shook.

Warned at the last moment by sensor arrays, many Tau battlesuits bounded away in an attempt to avoid what was coming. For long moments the world was gone, obscured by fiery explosions. So much sand erupted into the air that the sky was eclipsed. Heavy clouds of dust and sand hovered over everything, including the massive craters that had previously been a hotly contested battlefield.

Even before the orbital barrage shook the battlefield, the Space Marines had performed a Thunderhawk extraction. They had known their scattered forces were not prepared to fight the vast influx of battlesuits that had taken the field with the arrival of the Farsight Enclaves. Despite the

intense fire, the Space Marines executed the manoeuvre flawlessly, and within moments, all the Adeptus Astartes – save the White Scars – had exited the field of battle.

Refusing to give ground so near to his prey, Kor'sarro Khan and his 3rd Company joined the battered remnants of a Sentinel formation to perform rearguard duty. It was an act that, perhaps, would have been a hopeless one were it not for the orbital bombardment. The incoming lance strikes stabbed down repeatedly into the heart of the combat, the blast waves killing many thousands. It had been a risky call by Colonel Starkzahn, yet the commander had reckoned that although he would lose many troops to his own bombardment, the remaining forces would be able to pull back and regroup. As the incoming rounds continued to rain down, a barrier of explosions formed between those who survived. At the periphery of the blast, Colonel Starkzahn was already up and in motion. His order to make for the ridge was soon echoed down the Imperial line, even those whose hearing was blasted away could follow the pointing gestures. Many reserve troops were massing along that rocky elevation, and to the men staggering on the plains below, that bristling gun line looked like salvation.

Inside his XV08 Crisis Battlesuit, O'Shovah shook his head. Even with his shield generator blanketing him in a suppression field, the blast had rattled Farsight, blowing him backwards off his feet and burying him beneath volumes of sand. He felt the sting as auto-stimulants were injected into his body, a brief burn as the chemicals surged through his bloodstream. Instantly, his foggy head began to clear.

As his vision focussed and he could hear something besides that infernal ringing, Farsight began to address each of the warning signs and incoming messages that filled his internal hologram display. While doing so, he simultaneously worked his way through the signals of the rest of the Eight, checking the vitals of each. They had all cleared enough of the impact zone to have survived, although many registered damage, from compromised armour points to destroyed Drones. Next, Farsight checked the cadres and finally, he quickly reviewed the progress of the other seven strikes across Mu'gulath Bay. While he did so, he signalled his bodyguard to form up around him, and then checked the orbital map.

There was a small window of time as one Imperial battleship drifted out of position and another one took its place. The Tau had four minutes, maybe five, to move out. Now was the time to press the attack or to fall back and regroup – to stay still in the open was to die for nothing.

Quickly analysing what data he had, Farsight activated his jump jets, blasting himself out of the covering debris and landing upright. The world was a sandstorm, yet his sensor array swept the field. These gue'la, it seemed, were exceptionally well led. Farsight knew he had broken them, only moments ago they had been panicked and ripe for slaughter before his blade. Yet now, the icons falling back were not racing chaotically and were clearly no longer fleeing, but rather marching at speed. Already, a new battle line was forming up on a distant ridge – it seemed that was where they intended to stand. This was good order from the foe, and Farsight respected that control. This was a worthy adversary and the brief reprieve had served them well. The line they were forming was already being reinforced, with great waves of armour coming in behind them.

Three minutes. Time was running short.

'Honoured leader,' said Commander Brightsword, appearing by his side. Turning to face his protégé, Farsight saw that the young warrior had retrieved the Dawn Blade and was now holding it reverentially. Even in the gritstorm, the weapon glittered with strange energies. As Farsight bowed and reclaimed his weapon, the Commander had made his decision. Boosting his comms relay to maximum broadcast range while purposefully removing all encryption, Farsight addressed his many cadres – and any other Tau who were listening.

'Reform. Dawn Blade Contingents upon my lead. Counterstrike Cadres upon O'Shundra. Air Cadres one through five on sweep, six through ten on air superiority. We attack in one minute upon these coordinates,' said Farsight, forwarding attack formations and coordinates. 'Clear this area immediately, enemy artillery incoming.' With a jet-accentuated bound, Farsight leapt to the muster point, his bodyguard alongside him. Behind them, once again, the world shook beneath massive bombardments.

Never more than five steps away from his team of vox-operators, Colonel Starkzahn stalked along the battle line formed atop the ridge. It was only a slight rise, but against the flat plains of the region, the rocky bluff seemed mountainous. In the distance, all could hear the latest round of orbital bombardments striking down upon the recently vacated battlefield. Starkzahn was under no illusion that his foe had been wiped out by the strikes.

Although Blackfossil Ridge typically commanded superior views, all visibility was limited this day. The hot, shifting winds were carrying the massive dust cloud raised by the orbital strikes. Also, the damage done to the main bank of Tau enviro-engines was allowing the toxic storm that enveloped much of Mu'gulath Bay to creep in around the previously cleared perimeter. It appeared as if shapes were moving within the swirling sands below, and up and down the Imperial battle line, brief outbursts of gunfire could be heard. No enemies emerged out of the shadow, however. Starkzahn knew that with each passing moment, his own forces grew stronger – companies and entire regiments were still working up from the landing zones. Just as the Colonel began to hope his foe had actually fallen back to regroup, the assault came.

Once again, the massed battlesuits led the Tau attack. In bounding leaps, the Crisis teams surged out of the sandstorm, their jump jets kicking up more sand behind them. Despite the visual impairments, the Tau shooting was still deadly accurate. Every plasma burst or stream of

cannon fire seemed to find its mark. In two bounds, the first wave of red-armoured battlesuits was crashing into the Imperial Guard lines.

Behind the first wave came larger, more hulking varieties of battlesuit. Where the XV104 Riptide strode, it attracted immense amounts of firepower from the Imperial Guard, for they had learned of the massively destructive power of that towering battlesuit's main weapon. Anticipating this, the Riptides came forth out of the swirling sands with the full power of their nova reactors directed into their shields. Lascannon streaks and battle cannon blasts alike struck those invisible barriers, causing showers of sparks to fly while the defensive shields rippled. Only a few shots got through. The same could not be said when the Riptides levelled their own weapons. Heavy burst cannons mowed up and down the Imperial line, the large calibre pulses not just killing their targets but blasting them asunder. The damage wrought by those Riptides equipped with ion accelerators was even more horrific.

Seeing that the centre of his firing line was already being caved in by the fierce battlesuit attack, Colonel Starkzahn ordered in his countermeasures. Up from the reserve lines lumbered the squads of Ogryns, eager to at last be called into battle. Colonel Starkzahn had noted that the Tau could outshoot his armies and outmanoeuvre them, but it was his reasoning that the xenos sophisticates would not fare so well against a heavy dose of brutish and unreasoning violence.



The battle atop the ridge was proceeding as Farsight had planned – intense plasma rifle and missile pod fire was clearing a landing space along the ridge. Sheets of flame washed the zone as more and more red-armoured battlesuits bounded up to join the first wave. Heavy bolter shells hit them, clanging again and again off their armour, but seldom finding purchase. Into that maelstrom came hulking abhumans. Bullgryns hefted huge slabmetal shields before them, while Ogryns carried large calibre ripper guns – all made a straight path towards the Crisis teams.

The Ogryns were pierced through many times by plasma shots and engulfed by sheets of flame, but nothing could drop the thickly muscled abhumans. They simply waded through the enemy firepower until, at point blank range, they opened fire with their own weapons. When that close to their targets, even the Ogryns found it hard to miss, and the heavy shells chugged out by their ripper guns cracked Crisis suits and blasted away limbs. But the hulking creatures had not stormed forward for a firefight, and they did not halt their charge. The bulky Ogryns dropped their armoured shoulders or hefted high their slabshields and kept coming. Some battlesuits leapt out of range, but others, either too surprised or hopeful that their final volleys would fell the beasts, stood their ground. The impact of the ensuing collision resounded over the battlefield. The Ogryns did not stop there, however, but smashed and stomped in a flurry of fierce attacks. Behind the line of hulking abhumans came more Guardsmen, the fire of their lasguns sending forth a lattice of laser beams.

For a moment, the Tau momentum stalled behind their besieged battlesuit spearhead. Against the massed Imperial Guard firepower, such a situation could quickly prove disastrous. Yet Farsight, at the head of the Eight, made the jump up to the bluff. He had fought too many Orks to be cowed by mere atavistic savagery. Brightsword's fusion blasters single-shotted the brutes, O'Vesa lowered his powerful ion accelerator and blew apart both slabshields and the Ogryns behind it. And none could match the fury of Farsight, who spun and hacked with his Dawn Blade, cutting a swathe through the abhumans and driving straight into the infantry regiments beyond.

Perfectly timed with Farsight's entry into battle came the Piranha Firestream Wings and the Razorshark strafing runs. Within seconds, the Cadians' centre was split open, and both flanks were forced to retreat. Once again, the Tau pressed their advantage and closed quickly. With signal jammers activated at full power, there could be no more transmissions sent to the orbiting fleet.

Cursing the red-armoured foe that had beaten him twice in rapid succession, Colonel Starkzahn prepared to make a last stand with his command group when he heard a familiar sound and felt a welcome sensation beneath his boots. The unmistakable growl, rattle and clank of Leman Russ battle tanks moving at speed came to him on the desert winds. Emerging out of the toxic cloudbanks to the south were the massed tank wedges of the Cadian 423rd and 78th, Knight Commander Pask at their head.



Knight Commander Pask knew he should be communicating with his squadron leaders and coordinating the attack, but in the distance he spied a worthy target. In the swirling melee atop the ridge stood a colossal battlesuit. Although not titan-sized, it was the largest Pask had yet seen on Agrellan, and he longed to kill it and add it to his score.

Although the ground was flat, Pask was not yet fully accustomed to this latest incarnation of the Hand of Steel. The last tank had met its end when a missile had struck it as Pask and his tank companies had pursued the Tau Hammerheads. One of the tracks on the right side of this vehicle was badly bent, causing friction as it clanked around. Even so miniscule a thing was enough to throw the tank off course. Pask held fire, squinted, judged, checked for wind, and held some more. All the while, he sped forward, the tip of a great wedge of Leman Russ battle tanks churning in his wake.

Although his gun sights claimed the target was out of range, Pask ignored them. His comm-link buzzed. He ignored that too. Only the shot mattered. The enormous battlesuit moved with unexpected speed, but he tracked it. With a single command, the vanquisher battle cannon roared, its muzzle blazing fire. Pask watched, the scene obscured by dust and explosions. He kept his eye fixed on his target and saw his shot take the head structure clean off the foe, tearing with it a huge chunk of chest armour. Like a puppet shorn of its strings, the battlesuit collapsed backwards into the sand. Pask was already scanning for another worthy victim.



FOR THE GREATER GOOD

Squadron after squadron of Leman Russ battle tanks opened fire, and the sound was like thunder rolling down a valley. This was the Emperor's Might made manifest.

Made of a lightweight yet incredibly strong nanocrystalline alloy, the Tau battlesuits provided excellent impact resistance. Their well-designed shapes and angles helped deflect solid shells, sending them ricocheting harmlessly away. The armour's reflective liquid metal coating could defeat even beam technology. Shield Drones hovered near the battlesuits too, blanketing their charges with invisible barriers capable of stopping a direct hit from a lascannon. Yet against all the incoming firepower of the Imperial Guard, the red-armoured battlesuits were blasted apart by the dozen. The momentum of the battle had shifted.

As the majority of the Farsight Enclaves' long-ranged firepower – the Riptide Wings and Armoured Interdiction Cadres – were only beginning to enter effective range, they offered little assistance to the battlesuits. The Imperial

Guard infantry, no longer the main focus of Farsight's fury, were able to regroup. With mass lasgun and heavy weapon fire, they too took a measure of revenge upon the Tau battlesuits that had broken them twice already.

Farsight was aware his people were sustaining casualties. Even as he leapt atop a Leman Russ and thrust the Dawn Blade through its hull, the Tau Commander was checking his holo-screen. Activating jump jets, Farsight was airborne before the internal explosion ripped the tank apart. And then he saw what he had hoped for – his holo-screens alive with movement.

Battlesuits plummeted down around them while Devilfish sped from the flanks, and above, the air was filled with shoals of strafing Razorsharks. Farsight saw with relief that these troops wore the white sept markings of T'au, the orange lines of Sa'cea, and the red demarcations of his own home sept, Vior'la; Commander Shadowsun had arrived at the head of the forces of the Tau Empire.





GROWING CONFLAGRATION

The battle was raging. It was a spreading inferno blazing across the desertscape, and it drew in further troops from both sides. Soon, it had become the largest conflict yet fought upon Mu'gulath Bay, and neither side could back away. The fate of the planet, and therefore the star system, hung upon the outcome.

As the combined Tau forces drove deep into the Imperial armies, the skies above grew murkier. Great clouds of dust moved in on the hot winds, the sun's glare turning them into a shrouding haze. The zone of purified air had been collapsing since integral parts were taken from the largest of the networked enviro-engines. Toxic clouds of dust closed over the battle taking place upon Blackfossil Ridge.

Commander Shadowsun led the battlesuit dropstrike while shoals of Devilfish and Hammerheads surged in along the Imperial flanks, but there was another addition to the Tau forces. High above, at the edge of space, three streaking Mantas each sent forth a gravitic column. Within seconds, the beams were gone, and their cargo was delivered. It was a dangerous risk with such precious war assets.

The magnetic shafts pierced the roiling clouds, grounding themselves to the planet's core. Something large moved within those crackling shafts of light. With recoil jets and suppression fields, the hurtling object within each beam slowed its descent velocity at the last possible moment, but each still struck Mu'gulath's desert surface like a thunderbolt. Rising from out of the craters and striding

forth through swirling dustclouds came three hulking KV128 Stormsurge ballistic suits. They began their slow, churning pace towards the battle, the twin pilots within each mighty artifice already scanning to obtain targeting information. Several shoals of Devilfish came out of the clouds to travel alongside the heavy-footed giants.

The presence of the largest of the Tau weapons of war was yet to be felt upon battlefield, but that did not mean that their arrival had gone unnoticed elsewhere. High above Mu'gulath Bay, the scanning equipment aboard the orbiting Macroclasm class Tech-Cruiser *Archaetrove* came alive. An alert sounded with the clanging of a dolorous toll. Telescopic eyes swivelled out, and Tech-Priests scuttled to monitor blue-green viewscreens. For a while, there was only the sound of adjusting dials and turning cranks, marked by the steady hiss and exhale of mechanical rebreathers. The Tech-Priests had heard rumour of these large scale Tau weapons, but they had not yet been able to observe them. And what the Tech-Priests could see, they coveted. Now that they saw the KV128 Stormsurge, they wanted it for their own, to dissect and study. Within seconds, the Skitarii were activated and despatched.





Meanwhile, Colonel Starkzahn's troops – those that still lived – were being pushed steadily back from the edge of the ridge. The Colonel had hoped to form a solid battle line before the oncoming Armoured Companies, but the onset of another skyborne battlesuit assault and the thickening sandstorm had conspired against his strategy. Now the battle was disjointed, broken down into a hundred smaller conflicts amidst the clouds of cloying grit.

To Colonel Starkzahn's left, a squadron of Leman Russ tanks rumbled by, infantry advancing in their armoured lee – all firing upon the darting shapes of Tau Piranhas. To his right, a few units of White Scars Space Marines stood alongside a Cadian Heavy Weapons Platoon, fending off battlesuit assaults that attempted to silence the massed lascannons. Amidst such chaos, Starkzahn could affect little in the way of operational control. Transmissions were jammed; there was nothing else he could do but fight. The colonel had the regimental standard planted in the ground, drew forth his own power sword and arrayed his Command Squad to hold their position.

By this time, the KV128 Stormsurges were in range of the nearest of their Imperial foes. Their towering masses were obscured by the thick, billowing fog of sand and toxins, but the advanced blacksun filter and tracking suites within each hulking ballistic suit showed the Stormsurge pilots a map literally lit up with targets.

The Imperial Guard remained unaware of the encroaching new menace. The first clue that some other new weapon was being loosed upon them was the series of strobing

bright flashes from deep within the swirling mists. Moving at speeds the naked eye could not follow, hundreds of missiles streaked outwards, each leaving a snaking contrail in its wake. By the time the whoosh of their launching was heard, the missile storm had already sped by the first lines of Imperial Guard to crash into the forces sheltering beyond. The barrage sent up a wall of fiery explosions. Then pulse rounds – larger than any seen previously – burst out of the cloudbanks. The Guardsmen did not know where to aim their weapons, as at any moment, from any angle, a team of Crisis battlesuits could bound out of nowhere, delivering volleys of deadly firepower before leaping away once more.

Into this whirlwind of battle there marched a new army – the Legions of the Ommissiah, the Skitarii, had returned. From whence they came, none could say – but these troops seemed to have been buried deep in the sand, or else long-travelled through many such storms. Their eyes glowed with a incandescent light that could be seen like will-o'-the-wisps through the dust haze. To their Imperial allies, they gave no heed or greeting, instead tramping past them in mechanical lockstep. They had another calling.

Whether by plan or happenstance, the pollution storm covered the Skitarii War Cohort, their rad-signature registering as just another blot of pollution on the Tau's advanced scanners. Neither the Stormsurges, nor the Fire Warriors that formed ranks around them, had notice of the red-robed warriors until they advanced out of the swirling storm. Bursts of electricity arced outwards, and a new phase of the battle erupted.



From orbit came the binharic cant, the signals picked up by the Skitarii's antennae. Their target must be brought down. So said the encoded commands from on high, and those orders had come from holy Mars itself. To serve the Ommissiah was everything to the warriors of the Cult Mechanicus.

Backed by the enormous Stormsurges, the Tau poured forth an immense amount of firepower. Fire Warriors, and the

Drones that hovered alongside them, sent forth a furious fusillade, while battlesuits vaulted close with their jump jets to deliver withering blasts of sustained shots of pulse fire from burst cannons.

Still the Skitarii came forward, marching over their fallen, never slowing their advance. Driving over the dead came scuttle-legged Onager Dunecrawlers, their multiple appendages enabling them to climb over the piled bodies



with ease. At that range, their eradication beamers were deadly only to infantry, so they continued to crawl forward upon their mechanised crab-legs. Closer. They must get closer still. Skitarii Rangers unleashed their own electrical storm, with the Vanguard stalking closer to bring the foe within range of their radium carbines.

In the contaminated haze, the two forces clashed. One army – the upstart Tau race – believed technology was the way

forward, its use the key to progress, the best means to every end. The other – the Skitarii of the Adeptus Mechanicus – worshipped technology not for its promise of progress, but rather for its own sake. They coveted it, superstitiously finding their god hidden within its mechanical secrets.

Thus, two ideologies clashed, pitting their firepower against each other.



AND NONE SHALL STAY HIS WRATH...

In the growing storm, the battle began to break down. No longer were major army fronts colliding, but rather individuals, squadrons and small formations clashing. In this fog of battle, Farsight pushed his attack, hurtling towards the oncoming waves of tank squadrons that were arriving to reinforce the Cadians' precarious position atop Blackfossil Ridge.

Those of Knight Commander Pask's regiment that had survived many battles with their illustrious tank leader had learned a harsh truth: Pask was an indifferent, even uncaring leader.

As a tank ace, Knight Commander Pask was unmatched. In the thick of combat, he moved and fired his tank like it was an extension of his own body. As if by instinct, Pask knew when to reverse tracks and reposition, when to halt and take rapid-fire shots, and when to push full throttle to avoid incoming shells. Pask could manoeuvre the *Hand of Steel* from cover to cover like no one else, dodging incoming missiles with an adroitness that none could imitate. Although his soldiers never spoke it aloud, they knew that sometimes the objects Pask used for cover were their own tanks or those within the company. Even when he could find no cover at all, Pask knew how to keep his thickest armour towards the foe, or how to pitch his tank perfectly so that enemy shells or energy blasts ricocheted off the hull rather than pierce its steel hide. And for all his defensive tricks, he knew it was best to aim well and shoot first. When he fired, Pask was so sure of his aim that he did not just target enemy tanks, but instead could set his crosshairs upon vulnerable joints between armour plates,

or along seams where the shot would find purchase and penetrate rather than clang away. All of these skills were so instinctual to him that Pask could not find the words to explain these experiences or share his battle wisdom with the rest of his regiment. Nor did it ever occur to him to try. Although he had steadily risen through the ranks because of his unmatched kill record, the finer details of regimental command had never been his true calling.

Those who had served longest under Knight Commander Pask had learned to follow his lead. If he sped up, they did too. If he halted and his turret scanned for targets, they copied. Such mimicry had carried them over rebel lines and through Ork Blitz Brigade attacks. Yet it was not a foolproof method, for Pask's eyes constantly scanned the horizon, seeking the next target or potential incoming fire. None could duplicate his split second decisions, or equal his uncanny marksmanship or tactical manoeuvre.

In the sprawling, sandstorm-riven battle with the Tau, Knight Commander Pask was a killing machine. For a time, he called out targets so quickly his loader could not keep up. With each shot he fired, Pask added to his already impressive kill tally. The armour of Hammerheads



and Devilfish was pierced by the shaped high explosive shells that tore through their vitals, and seconds later the enemy vehicles buckled outwards as internal detonations ripped them apart. When an XV8 Crisis Battlesuit landed before Pask, timing its leap perfectly to catch the Lemn Russ when its long vanquisher battle cannon was turned in the opposite direction, the tank commander did not panic. Even as the Tau warrior's fusion blaster glowed with energy, Pask riddled the battlesuit at close range with his tank's hull-mounted heavy bolter. The Crisis Battlesuit was knocked off its feet, yet the exoskeleton armour was only cracked. The pilot lived still, as was evidenced by his attempt to raise his deadly weapon. Seeing the threat, Pask steered his tank directly over the Crisis suit, producing much snapping and a short-lived scream that was barely audible over the din of battle.

Most of Pask's 423rd Armoured Regiment was scattered across the battlefield, however, two full squadrons had managed to keep their tank ace commander in view. It was these tanks that were first beset by Farsight.

After boosting high above the swirling melee, Farsight took a moment to survey the carnage below. Even through the sandstorm, his blacksun filter and holo-map suite showed an accurate picture. It was not difficult to ascertain the largest threat – a tank spearhead that was thrusting through the Enclaves and Tau Empire forces alike. Cutting

all power to his thrusters, Commander Farsight dropped from the skies, the Dawn Blade shimmering with barely contained power. Firing his retro-burners, Farsight slowed his descent to a glide, swinging his blade as he landed. The Dawn Blade sliced straight through the turret of the nearest tank, carving down into its metal hull and slicing through the driver. Yet Farsight's attention was already elsewhere. With his plasma rifle, he loosed twin bolts at the rear of another Lemn Russ before activating his jump jets and soaring airborne once more. Both shots penetrated the exhaust, thick black smoke pouring out, but by then Farsight was gone. The third tank of the squadron swivelled its turret, trying to draw a bead upon Farsight, when they were rammed astern by the out-of-control tank whose driver had been cut in half. There was little for them to do but exit their wrecked vehicle and begin the long, treacherous trek back towards friendly lines.

The remaining squadron attempted to keep their eyes ahead on Knight Commander Pask while searching for the battlesuit that had destroyed their comrades. Their squadron leader was the first to see the red blur coming through the thick swirls of grit that wafted across the desert floor. Landing atop the turret with a resounding clang, Farsight drove the Dawn Blade down with all his augmented strength, burying his sword to the hilt within the tank's steel hide. He freed the blade by activating his jump jets, blasting skywards upon his thrusters.

Before the other tanks in the Squadron Batalica could react, Farsight's bodyguard arrived out of the skies. Commander Brightsword's twin fusion blasters melted a hole into one tank's hull even before his Crisis Battlesuit had landed. Commander Bravestorm, however, was forced to dodge a Hydra's furious salvo and hit the desert floor too far from his target. This allowed the last tank a clear shot, and its battle cannon roared. The explosion of its shell created a fireball around Commander Bravestorm, but the battlesuit emerged, still wreathed in flames, shield generator lifted high. With a leaping bound, Bravestorm covered the distance, drawing back his fist to create maximum drive for his upcoming blow. Timing the attack perfectly, he activated his Onager Gauntlet, the punch slamming through the Leman Russ' hull and sending up a storm of metal fragments that shredded its crew.

With their ability to make vaulting leaps and to hover for short periods of time, the Eight wreaked havoc amongst the oncoming Leman Russ squadrons. Soon, the desert was filled with blackened hulks, their melted and ruptured hulls spewing columns of smoke. And still Farsight's furious assault was not slowed, for he led the Eight towards an onrushing infantry company. None knew better than Commander Farsight that to be successful, the Mont'ka must deliver maximum casualties.

Oblivious to the slaughter behind him, Knight Commander Pask pressed on. He was wary of outstripping his infantry support, but the *Hand of Steel* was still periodically passing small groupings of Cadians, hunkered down in defensive positions. For a time, the tank commander had felt it was safer going forward than halting, but soon, he could no longer recognise any shapes in the sandstorm. Popping out of his hatch for a better look, Pask squinted into the stinging sand, realising that conditions were growing steadily worse. Lightning was lancing down from the swirling maelstrom, once arcing so close that it almost hit his tank and he was forced to duck back inside. So it was that he never noticed the trio of Hammerhead Gunships gliding along from the north.

At maximum range, master gunship pilot Shas'la T'au Sha'ng, better known as Longstrike, arranged the two other gunships in his Interdiction Cadre into a line abreast formation. Using their scanner arrays and blacksun filters, the Hammerheads had been making their way carefully towards a large concentration of enemy forces. Although experienced gunship pilots, they were new replacements in Longstrike's cadre and he wanted to observe how well they worked as a team. When a lone blip – most likely a gue'la tank given its tremendous outpouring of pollution, heat, and noise – appeared on their screens, Longstrike let his new comrades set up their attack run. All three railgun shots hit their mark, tearing apart the *Hand of Steel* entirely. It was a good start.





FROM OUT OF THE RISING STORM

Colonel Starkzahn's Imperial Guard attempted to hunker down while their reinforcements worked their way towards the battle. The Tau forces, meanwhile, sought to inflict as many casualties as they could upon their pinned foe. Commander Shadowsun aimed to maximise the casualties inflicted but to pull back before the Imperial forces grew too strong.

As Imperial reinforcements continued to arrive from the south, the battle spread across a wider front. Each side sought to outflank the other, and all grew leery of entering the maelstrom of fighting that had overtaken the centre. As the storm increased, it sent flying grit in whirlwinds, but as some combatants grew to trust the dense cover, the winds gusted and all would be clear until the next squall.

Even with the Tau Empire and Farsight Enclaves forces combined, the Tau were still badly outnumbered. Yet in the swirling sandstorm, their superior scanners and comms equipment gave them an advantage. The Tau forces, particularly the mobile battlesuit formations, used their speed to track enemy positions. They always sought advantages where they could concentrate their firepower upon a target and then move off into the storm before major retaliations could find them. The Tau battlesuit pilots were masters of this technique, for they could bound skyward with their jump jets, disappearing into cloud cover.

Had Colonel Starkzahn been able to organise his battle lines into the accustomed Astra Militarum combined arms approach, it is probable that he could have fended off these

hit-and-run attacks. But as it was, the Colonel was pinned down. In the strange storm, vox communications were either malfunctioning or, Starkzahn had a rising suspicion, were being blocked somehow by their technologically advanced xenos foe.

With the Tau enviro-engines still offline, the entire middle-continental region was once again subjected to the fury of the polluted sandstorms and, allowed to rage unabated, the growing weather cell had drawn in airs from the contaminated upper atmospheres. The storm grew in strength, with electrical squalls building up and rad-storms increasing. All of this hellish weather was not unlike the superstorms that raged over the northern hemisphere in what was called the *Mont'shidar* by the Tau – the deathwind – and the Contaminated Zone by the Imperium.

Commander Shadowsun, always a meticulous strategist, had staggered teams of Pathfinders between the battle site and the southern approaches. She desired comprehensive feedback on the approaching enemy troops. It was known that major Imperial forces were en route, but she wished to continue hammering the army that was pinned down now



before overwhelming numbers of new enemies could arrive. But as Commander Shadowsun led her bodyguard to destroy another circle of Guardsmen, the message she had feared flashed over her internal display. They were coming in greater numbers; whole new regiments were closing in.

Even as she fired super-heated energy bolts from each fusion blaster, Commander Shadowsun was calculating the amount of time remaining before the reinforcements arrived in critical mass. It was not long, but she knew that every second she had to take a toll upon the foes' numbers would pay dividends later. While her accompanying Shield Drone absorbed incoming heavy weapons fire, Shadowsun annihilated the nearest foes, her shots melting flesh, bones, armour and weapons alike. Before the remaining Guardsmen could turn to flee, Shadowsun's Command-link Drone fed improved firing coordinates to her Stealth Team, whose burst cannons did not miss. Checking all was in readiness, she gave the order to the enviro-engineers and weather satellite operators. It was time to fuel the storm, and she rattled off the calculations for the energy increase as she led her troops to their next targets.

Further south, new regiments were on the move. Infantry, armour, artillery and Imperial Knights were closing with the growing sandstorm. Their lead elements were just passing the hidden Tau pickets when the weather grew rapidly worse, the most violent squalls making even

standing upright difficult. Perhaps it was a trick of the rising storm, but amongst the holo-map icons flickered a distinct signal – a sign those Tau who had fought previously upon Mu'gulath Bay and Prefectia instantly recognised. The unique signature that briefly appeared was that of the Obsidian Knight, a walking nightmare that fought against the children of the Greater Good with extreme prejudice. Something about that towering engine of destruction sent ripples of fear through the Tau who marked the flickering appearance of that icon before it went out. The Tau were not superstitious, however, and they had seen the Freeblade Knight topple to certain doom upon Prefectia. There was clearly some glitch in the sensor suite, for it defied logic that the Obsidian Knight could have returned. On the Imperial side, Lord Tybalt of House Terryn had received similar reports, and he was not so sceptical; this would not be the first time that the Obsidian Knight had appeared on a battlefield where his presence could not be explained.

With the Imperium's strength growing, Shadowsun felt it was too dangerous to continue the assault, so she broadcast the fall back plan to all Tau – those of the Empire and of the Farsight Enclaves. Within moments, the Tau armies had retreated to set coordinates to meet incoming transports, soon fading away into the blinding sands. Additionally, Shadowsun had special coordinates broadcast upon channels not used since Puretide's time. She deemed it was time to bring together those who had been long separated.

Aun'Va looked imperiously at Commander Farsight as he walked into the command room.

A long and uncomfortable time passed, as neither offered the other even the slightest sign of acknowledgment. Realising that any veneration, or even the proper formal greeting required when entering the presence of the Ethereal Supreme, was never going to be forthcoming, Aun'Va opened. Using all his control, he spoke in clipped, severe tones – a reproachful father speaking to his wayward child. 'Welcome, Shas'o Vior'la Shovah Kais Mont'yr.' His head inclination was subtle, but gracious.

Always observant, Aun'Va noted that many in the control room followed his lead, nodding to the red-cloaked Commander. Some, however, bowed too low, showing too much respect for Aun'Va's liking. It was important that all knew who was in charge. Aun'Va immediately adjusted the tone of his voice, this time addressing all in the room. 'Respected warriors of the high command, high advisors, this is Commander Farsight. Once a great pupil of Puretide, now he is my greatest disappointment.'

This must not be his moment, thought Aun'Va. Do not let him make it so.

The former Fire caste officer was impossibly old, yet still lithe and still more than capable of commanding a room. Farsight let his eye leave the Ethereal Supreme. His gaze swept the command chamber and, at last, his head bowed. This gesture was directed to the room, however, and pointedly not towards the lone figure that stood atop the dais. 'As you were mine, Aun'Va. I have not come to bandy words, nor to accept the thanks that are my rightful due. I came for war council, and for war council alone,' said Farsight.

Aun'Va opened his mouth to chastise the rebel, but was immediately cut off in a savage and infuriating breach of protocol that had not happened since his rise to Ethereal Supreme.

'Enough!' said Commander Farsight, his voice rising. 'Save your manipulations, Aun'Va. I am not here for debate. My forces have, for the moment, saved those Tau trapped upon this planet. But the shock of my initial attack is gone, and

the enemy is not. If we want to leave this world alive, then we must now work together... for the Greater Good.'

Into the resounding silence, Commander Farsight added, 'Their next wave is already massing. They will soon be coming. In this direction.'

For a moment, the briefest of instances, the Ethereal Supreme stood, staring. He realised too late that his mouth had remained open. Pure rage flashed red and Aun'Va's mind screamed, yet with a single deep breath, he once again regained composure. He must find a way to regain the initiative in this crucial encounter.

And then Commander Shadowsun spoke. Aun'Va noticed, with pride, that her voice was colder than usual, but contained its usual authority. 'O'Shovah, the enemy will likely approach on this axis.' She pointed along the holo-map. 'Initial reports suggest they do not know we are directing the weather. If we time the operation correctly, we can lure them into attacking into a storm that we control.' Farsight studied the map, recognising a plan worthy of his own tactical prowess.

THE HOUR OF THE EXECUTIONER

In their original assault, the Tau had seized Agrellan in a single day. By comparison, Lord General Troskzer's attempts to wrest that world back for the Emperor had ground on for weeks with no end in sight. The main Task Force Retribution forces had had their chance. Now, other agencies were taking matters into their own hands.

Agrellan burned.

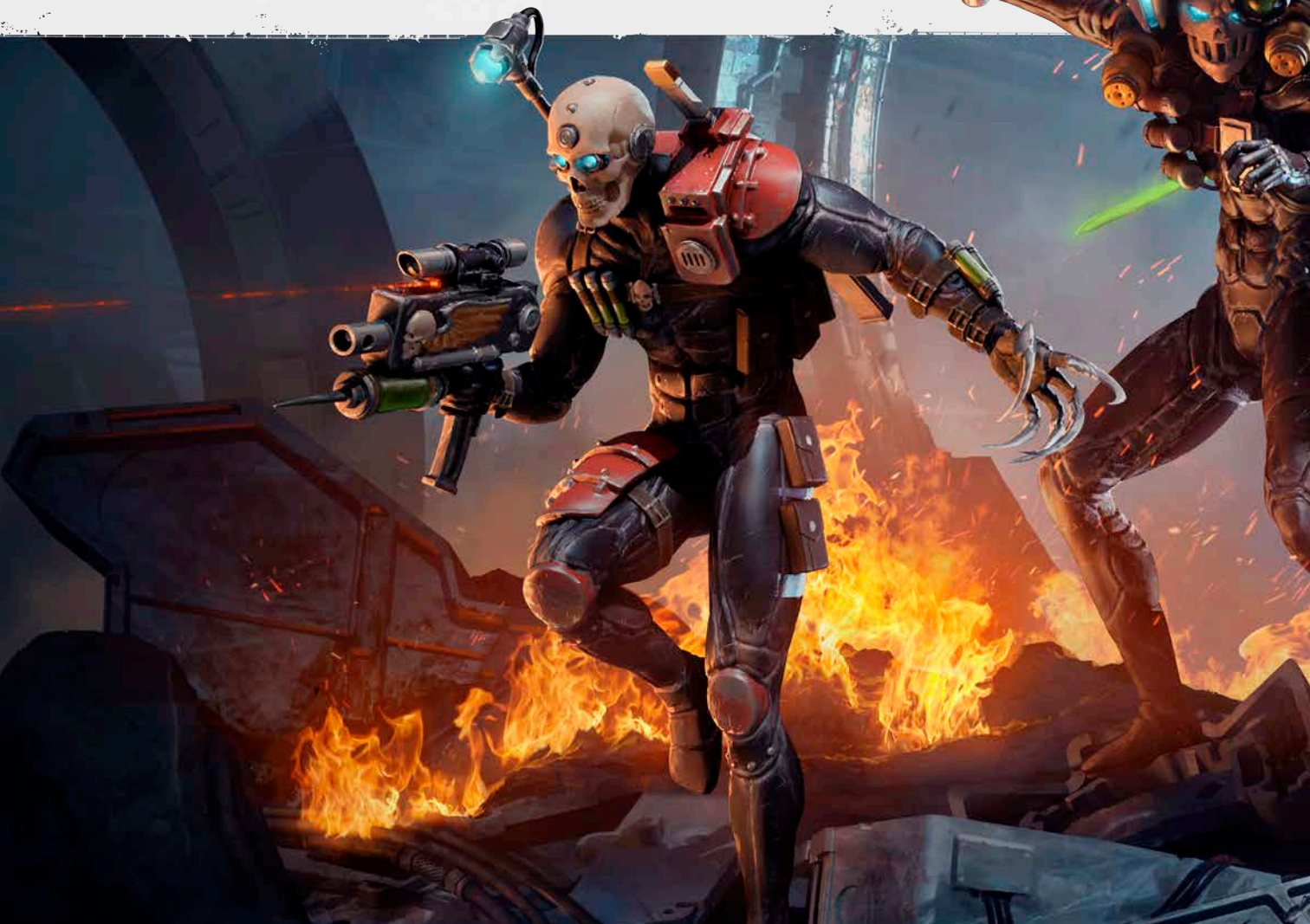
From space, the conflict wracking the world looked strangely beautiful. Continental firestorms and vast battles appeared as swirling patterns of light and shadow. The contested world flickered like a coal in a brazier. High above, in the darkness of space some distance from the most far-flung Imperial picket ships, an Adept sat in his command throne on the bridge of a small, sleek frigate. Around him, the bridge was swathed in shadow, its columned expanse busy with the quiet industry of the crew. Coloured runes winked upon ivory consoles, while brass gauges and bone horologes twitched and ticked amongst them. Everywhere, acolytes moved between banks of controls, robes whispering with every step.

The Adept turned his attention from the pict-screen to the great onyx timepiece mounted upon the bulkhead next to it. His augmetic eyes clicked and whirred as he watched its final seconds tick down, the bone hands drawing inexorably together at midnight. A bell tolled within the deathclock, a single, solemn note ringing out across the bridge and causing the crew to glance at one another from

beneath their cowls. Lord General Troskzer had been permitted a generous amount of time to purge Agrellan. He had failed. Now it fell to them to correct those mistakes.

With the slow deliberation of ritual, the Adept removed his skull-inlaid signet ring. He opened a hinged panel in the arm of his throne, and inserted the ring into the carved bone recess there revealed. Intoning a brief and sinister prayer, the Adept twisted the ring anti-clockwise. Instantly, a dread signal flashed down through miles of wiring and cable, triggering a process of arcane revivification. Deep within the bowels of the Adept's frigate, the agents of the *Officio Assassinorum* stirred slowly towards wakefulness.

In solemn procession, chanting acolytes clad in black robes and bone masks made their way into four armoured cells. Some of the robed men bore censers from which billowed clouds of acrid incense. Others beat a slow, funereal rhythm upon great black drums.



The rest carried sacred articles of wargear; masterfully crafted firearms whose worth was greater than worlds were borne alongside esoteric blades and macabre battle helms.

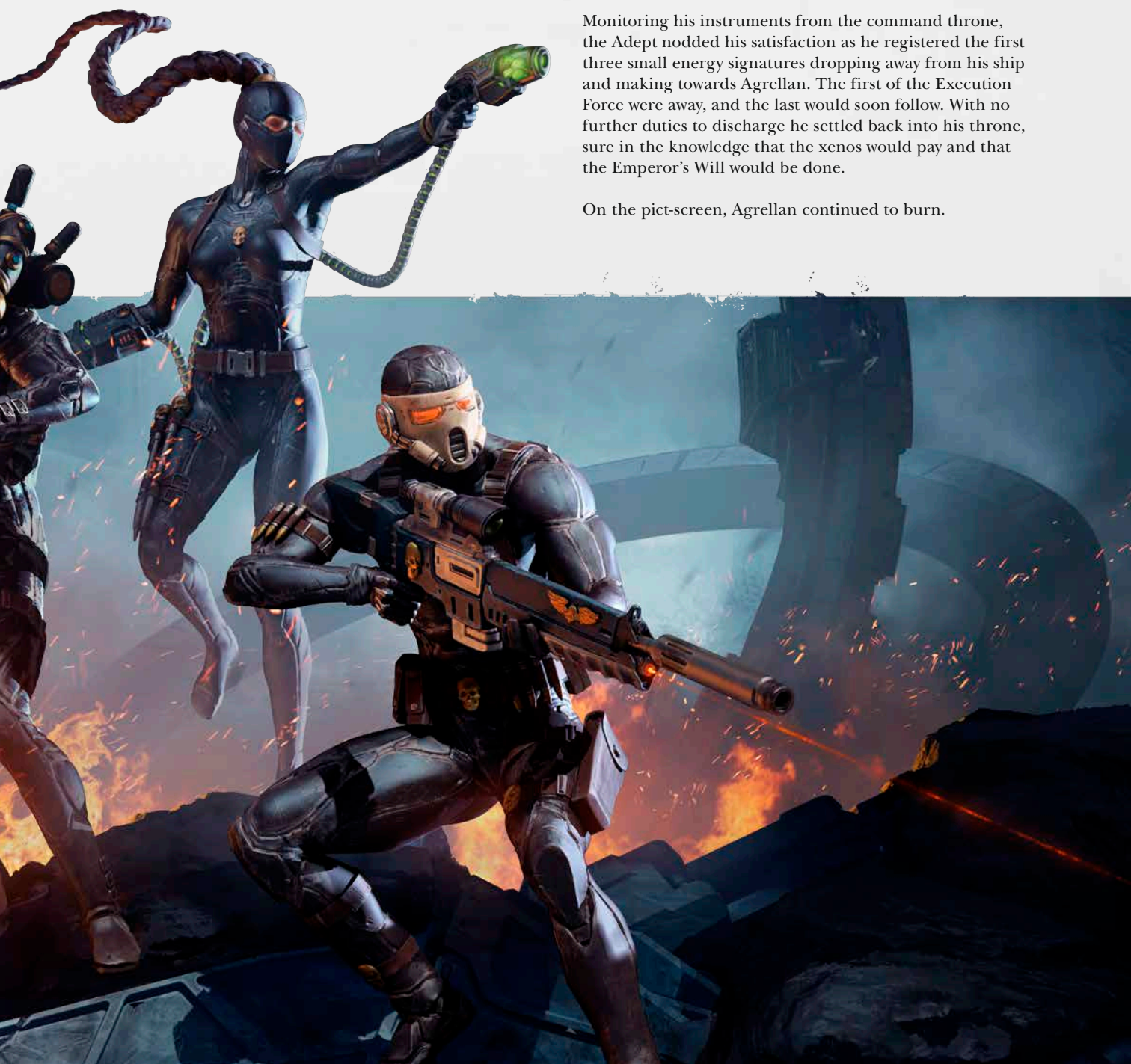
The acolytes took their places around the sepulchral cryo-crypts in which the Assassins lay. As the chanting rose in pitch, the ice-rimed armaglass lids of the crypts glowed from within, their shadow-blurred occupants writhing and twitching as consciousness returned. Cables drooled nutrient slush and coughed acrid gas as they detached and fell away from the crypts' flanks. Finally – as the drums boomed and the chanting voices reached a crescendo – the lids of three of the four crypts hinged slowly open, and their occupants stepped forth. Callidus, Culexus and

Vindicare, each moving with the lithe and deadly grace of a true predator. No words were needed, for the details of their mission had been inloaded directly to their enhanced cortexes during transit. Silently, the Assassins took their weapons from the quivering acolytes then padded away, making for the embarkation deck where their drop craft waited.

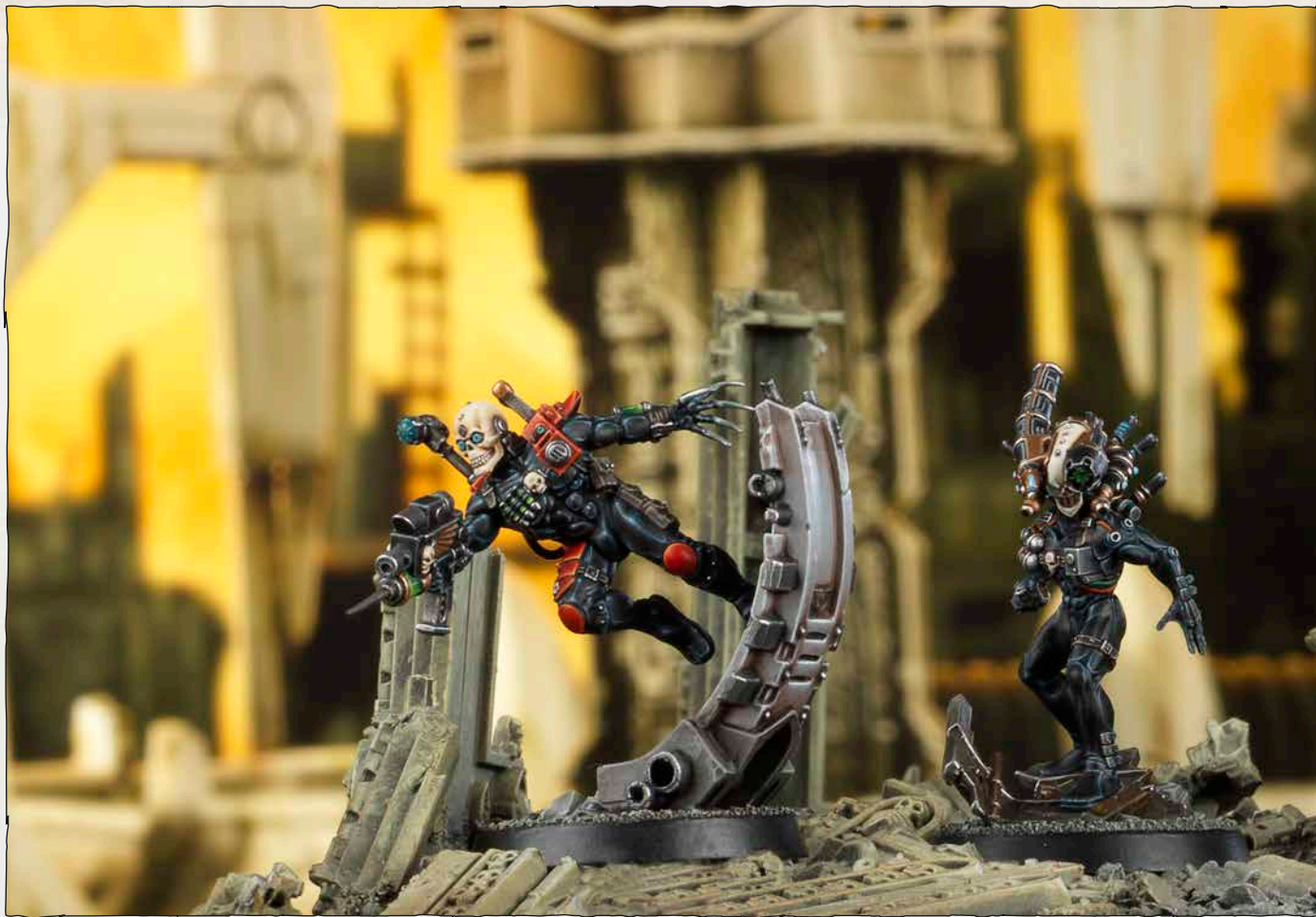
Only the fourth crypt, that of the Eversor, remained sealed. This stasis-chamber had held the berserk Assassin like a fly in amber since the culmination of his last mission. Accompanied by chanting acolytes, hulking Ogryn servitors lifted the Eversor's ominous casket and bore it away toward the Drop Pod that would carry him into the heart of battle.

Monitoring his instruments from the command throne, the Adept nodded his satisfaction as he registered the first three small energy signatures dropping away from his ship and making towards Agrellan. The first of the Execution Force were away, and the last would soon follow. With no further duties to discharge he settled back into his throne, sure in the knowledge that the xenos would pay and that the Emperor's Will would be done.

On the pict-screen, Agrellan continued to burn.



EXECUTION FORCE



The operatives of the Officio Assassinorum are never deployed lightly. Indeed, it requires a two-thirds majority vote by the High Lords of Terra simply to sanction the deployment of a single operative. The decision to deploy an Execution Force – four Assassins, one from each of the largest temples of the Officio Assassinorum – is the ultimate death sanction, a condition saved for only the direst of situations.

Only the Officio Assassinorum knew the name identifiers and past histories of each of the Assassins that made up this particular team. Three of the members – the Callidus, the Vindicare and the Culexus Assassins had taken part in a previous mission, the infiltration and execution of the nine Twisted Viziers that led the Disciples of Blue Flame cult. The mission was a success, however, the Eversor Assassin assigned to the operation died while destroying the last Twisted Vizier.

The Vindicare was a master of long-ranged pinpoint accuracy. Equipped with his exitus rifle the Vindicare had served the Emperor well, racking up thousands of kill shots during his long, successful career. With a single perfectly placed shot, he had ended rebellions, slain despotic warlords, and brought heretics the Emperor's Judgement.

His far-reaching ability had been a perfect match against the Twisted Viziers of the Disciples of the Blue Flame, and his rifle had claimed the lives of four of the targets, including, spectacularly, two with a single shot that passed through both their skulls. His preferred method of killing was to snipe from a distance, working his way stealthily into position to rain death upon his assigned target.

The hallmarks of the Callidus Assassin were much different. She worked in close, using stealth and deception. She used a specialised drug called polymorphine to alter her appearance. Given time, she would replace members of the target's inner circle, sowing discord and terror amongst her foe. Using such mimicry, she had replaced and discredited demagogues, ensuring that her work did not make martyrs but ended dissension against the Imperium. When it came to killing, she was an expert with poisoned blades, and her chosen method was to infiltrate next to her mark, taking the form of a trusted comrade or advisor. Only when she morphed back to her true shape – typically during her victim's death convulsions – did she arouse any suspicion. She had impersonated traitors, smugglers, and all manner of humanoid xenos. For slaying at a distance – when necessary – she used her neural shredder, a vicious and shockingly effective weapon against living



targets. Though short ranged, the weapon projected a cone of psionic disruption that tore apart its victims' neural pathways. Armour was no protection against it, and a Chaos Lord in Terminator Armour had once dropped before her, his liquidised brain oozing out of his helmet.

The Culexus was an altogether different kind of killer. All Culexus Assassins carry the Pariah gene, a terrible mutation that renders them psychic nulls. Others instinctively shun and fear such individuals, picking up the unnatural vibrations they emit. To psykers, however, the mere presence of a Culexus is agonisingly horrific, every moment a waking nightmare of colossal proportions. Their battle-helm, the animus speculum, can either muffle or focus the Culexus' powers as required, enabling them to seem invisible to others nearby, or allowing the full horror of their psychic nullness to billow out in mind-ripping waves. Rogue Psykers, Warp-charged Weirdboyz, and Chaos Sorcerers were this Culexus' favoured marks – although no few corrupt planetary governors or rebel agitators had died screaming at the mind-terror he had unleashed.

Compared to the other Assassins in the Execution Force, the Eversor was not a precise scalpel honed to kill in a certain manner – he was a maniacal mass murderer, a

sledgehammer of destruction and bloodshed. Stimm-charges surged through his augmented body, allowing him to fight in a frenzy beyond even superhuman. Armed with a power sword, a raking neuro-gauntlet and a close-ranged executioner pistol, the Eversor was a close-ranged killer that did not bother to choose a single target. Instead, he would violently plough through every living thing between him and his mark, caring nothing for the attention he drew. Like every disciple of his temple, the Eversor was a living weapon in more ways than one, for should he be lain low by a mortal blow, a cocktail of chemicals within his body would mix together to create a biological bomb of prodigious power.

For this mission, the Execution Team's brief was simple. Even if the planet of Agrellan could not be purged of xenos, it was essential that the greatest war leaders of the Tau must be slain. Thus, each member of the Execution Force had been assigned a prey to hunt. These xenos would be taught that the Emperor's vengeance was inescapable. Shorn of their greatest commanders, the Tau war effort around the Damocles Gulf would be left rudderless, their empire foundering until the next Imperial task force could be assembled in order to completely annihilate them. It would only be a matter of time.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

As the climactic battle loomed, both sides made plans to seize this chance to control the planet. The masterminds of the Imperial forces believed they had the numbers to crush the last resistance of their xenos foes. The leaders of the Tau, however, saw a great, if risky, opportunity...

Many battles had been fought upon Agrellan, but the greatest yet was now imminent.

Since the major clash fought over Blackfossil Ridge, there had been only probing engagements. The forces of the Imperium had used the reprieve to regroup and rearm. The remains of the three continental spearheads had now mustered, each having driven through much opposition and delays. Now, however, all was in preparation for the final offensive.

For the most part, the Tau had continued to fight a hit-and-run war, their armies retreating before the plodding Imperial forces. The Space Marines had conducted dozens of sorties – from disabling gun batteries to destroying vital comm-links. These missions had been largely successful – the only notable failures the repeated attempts to destroy the Tau leadership. Commander Shadowsun had eluded them, and despite many reports of the Ethereal Supreme Aun’Va at various locations, he could not be found.

In the end, despite the Tau winning every major battle across the whole of Mu’gulath Bay, they had only a single strongpoint left. The assault of this bastion, Lord General Troskzer had insisted, was to be the final battle.

Their destination was the newly installed Tau city that stood in the plains to the east of the former capital, the man-made mountain of the hive city, Agrellan Prime.

Although Colonel Starkzahn’s initial attack, along with forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus, had done considerable damage to the outer defences and some of the air-scrubbing machineries, they had not destroyed the shield generators. Heavy shields still held an invisible dome over the air space above, preventing the site from being reduced to ruins by an orbital barrage.

It was Colonel Starkzahn’s idea to time their attack with the coming of a large storm. Since damaging the Tau environmental engines, the area had been all but consumed by the driving sand squalls and rad-storms. It was an odd request, as it was Colonel Starkzahn’s original spearhead that had suffered the greatest losses beneath those storms, but that, he argued, had been because his forces had been caught on the run, without a coherent plan. This time, even without vox communications, the officers would be fully briefed on the exact battle plan. The Tau sensors and tracking equipment were superior – but in the midst of those hellish storms, their long-ranged weapons would suffer. And Starkzahn wanted to get in close.

The endless infantry and armoured companies of the Imperial Guard were buoyed by abhuman regiments, Imperial Knights, and the super-heavy tank company that had served Starkzahn so well earlier in the campaign. Soon, all was in readiness.

All they needed was the storm.

Commander Shadowsun turned from the holo-map and addressed Aun’Va solemnly. ‘Before the storm is set in motion, I ask you once again, Ethereal Supreme, will you not consent to be secreted off world?’ she said. ‘There are risks, but that option yields the highest percentage of success. I think only of your continued safety.’

Aun’Va stiffened, rising from the digital display to stand at his full height. ‘No, O’Shaserra. I will stay upon Mu’gulath Bay. This will be our greatest triumph yet. This is the front of our war and my presence here will help drive the followers of the Greater Good.’

‘If you are concerned with my presence,’ interrupted Commander Farsight, ‘then be at ease. After we destroy the foe, I shall depart to Vior’los. I do not contend for mastery over the Tau Empire, if that is what you fear.’

Aun’Va turned, looking down upon the figure that once offered such promise. ‘I do not fear it, O’Shovoh. Although you have lost your way, I know your word is true. Only when you remember that it is the Fire Warrior’s right to serve, not to rule, only then may you return.’

Farsight, his face an expressionless mask, turned from his multi-screens of deployed troops and vid-captures and met Aun’Va’s gaze. Shadowsun feared her former comrade would rise to the bait, his infamous temper and the old recriminations of the Ethereal Supreme getting the better of him. She spoke suddenly, her voice cold. ‘There must be unity to defeat our common foe – their numbers are too great. May I continue? Time is growing short.’

Shadowsun took the silence as assent, her fingers dancing over control panels, signalling the Earth caste engineers to unleash the storm. Moments later, all three watched vid-screens of darkening skies, the polluted upper atmosphere inversion beginning. ‘The operation is underway. Begin synchronized countdown... now,’ she said.

‘I leave to take my position,’ said Commander Farsight. He halted at the command centre’s shielded door, looking back. ‘Commander Puretide believed in balance. If he were here to see my Kauyon and your Mont’ka, O’Shaserra, it would make the old warrior proud.’ With those parting words, Commander Farsight bowed curtly to each and exited the command centre. Battle awaited.





CHAPTER 3

ULTIMATE RETRIBUTION



KAUYON, THE PATIENT HUNTER

The Tau Commanders respected the formidable war machine that was the Astra Militarum – however, there was one Imperial force that caused them great consternation. The Space Marines were the shock attack force of Mankind’s armies, and they moved with unmatched speed and ferocity. From the Tau point of view, they were the most worthy of foes. Indeed, they fought in a manner that was not unlike the Fire caste. On Mu’gulath Bay, although the Space Marines had been relatively few in number, they had still perform any number of tactical operations.

Shadowsun and her top military minds all felt assured the Space Marines would coordinate their own strike missions during the looming enemy offensive. Likely future targets included the shield generators that protected the last Tau stronghold of the Lo’vasht’au area as well as continuing

to search for Shadowsun herself and the Tau Command Centre. It was Commander Farsight who suggested himself and his own dropstrike force as a likely target for the vaunted enemy elites. Just like the Tau would do, Farsight had reasoned, the Imperial army would be looking to eliminate, or at the worst, pin down, their enemies’ most dangerous and tactically mobile counter-attack force. Commander Farsight and his many cadres of battlesuited warriors would offer themselves up as the bait. It would be an easy trap to set.

While waiting to see if the lure would be taken, Farsight stood watching the unnatural storm form across the desert basin. When the outlying curtains of sand were overhead, it happened – the first contrails of Drop Pods could be seen, tearing through the thickening cloud.





THE COILED SPRING

A master of the Kauyon can be noted by the timing with which they spring their traps: too soon, and the target will shy away or better prepare a proper defence, too late and the bait will be already be snatched. The victim should only feel the jaws of the trap enclosing them when it is too late to back out.

During the weeks since the Battle of Blackfossil Ridge, a running battle between Space Marine Scouts and Pathfinders had continued around no man's land – each side probing the other. Commander Shadowsun had worked hard to ensure the Space Marine Scouts eventually won their way through to observe where the Farsight Enclaves and their great mass of battlesuits were stationed. Amidst old Imperial ruins, new Tau barracks had been installed, protected by a ring of Tidewall Gunrigs.

Commander Farsight had been correct when he predicted the Space Marines would arrive to battle by ways the Tau could not foresee. As the storm covered Lo'vasht'au – the foundations of the future Tau city – the Drop Pods hurtled down, and Thunderhawk Gunships performed daring runs through the Tau anti-air batteries. Low altitude airdrops sent strings of Assault Marines soaring down. A spearhead of White Scars arrived via Rhino transport, accompanied by an entire company on fast-moving bikes. A strong force of Raven Guard emerged out of long forgotten subterranean tunnels, and even more Sons of Corax turned up within the Farsight Enclaves base camp perimeter, although the Tau never found their method of entrance.

The attacks were well timed and perfectly coordinated. The Fire caste, as professional soldiers whose lives revolved around military manoeuvre and warfare, could appreciate that their foes were also consummate warriors. Even though the Space Marines were launching themselves into a prepared trap, it was going to be a difficult battle.

On a signal from Commander Farsight, the holographic images of unarmed Fire caste warriors engaging in training exercises shimmered and were gone. Even as the Space Marine strikes landed, guided missiles and rockets crashed into the Tau's decoy gun emplacements and exploded. Moments later, the actual gun emplacements rose up on lifts, their cannons already firing. Bunker doors opened and the prepared Tau counter-attack was underway.

Crisis battlesuits jetted off in blasts of sand, streaking upwards to meet the descending Assault Marines. Thus began a battle that lit the clouds with gunfire. From high above, armoured figures plummeted like comets. The wounded and dead crashed to the ground, while the living landed atop the old Imperial ruins and began a running battle over the broken spires and rooftops.





Skimming low over the ruins came a tightly packed Piranha Firestream Wing. Like a school of predatory fish, they manoeuvred as one, spearing outwards to counter the incoming company of bike-mounted White Scars. Led by Kor'sarro Khan himself, the bikes of the Stormlance Battle Demi-Companies held their course, spraying bolter fire until, at the last second, the two groups broke, skidding across the sand, or swerving away on some prearranged path. For miles across the desert plains, the combatants gave chase and attempted to strafe each other in a high-speed duel through the rising sandstorm. Various factions broke off in all directions, zooming through and over lanes in the rubble, each weaving in and out of teetering archways in pursuit of another kill.

With their high-tech scanners and automated flight paths, the Piranhas attempted to shake off their pursuers, while their AI-driven Drones auto-fired at available targets, or detached to set up cunning ambushes on their own. Meanwhile, with nothing but their superhuman reflexes to guide them, the White Scars bikers more than held their own. One biker lobbed a Krak grenade to send a Piranha into a spiralling deathspin; another used a chainsword to smash down a Gun Drone before leaping off his bike to climb onto a passing Piranha. Once on board, he beheaded both pilots, then executed a tumbling leap off the careening hovercraft before it ploughed into the sand and exploded. He had barely made it back to his bike when he was cut down by pulse fire. It was deadly for speeding combatants from either side to focus too intently upon their quarry, for in the swirling melee, many realised only too late that they were being hunted in turn.

Through the growing storm, Devilfish raced out, Strike Teams disembarking to set up deadly crossfiring gun lines. Those Space Marines that arrived by Drop Pod quickly found themselves facing superior firepower. Thunderhawk-deployed Rhinos and armoured support attempted to break through to aid their beleaguered brethren, but the Tau had cleverly concealed Broadside battlesuits atop the upper storeys of the shattered ruins, with dug-in Pathfinders guiding their fire with targeted markerlights. Soon, hyper-accelerated railgun fire saw an entire company's worth of Rhino armoured personnel carriers abandoned and belching smoke. Disembarking Space Marines were met by furious hails of fire, both from the Broadside and from hidden teams of Sniper Drones. Boosting high up into the swirling clouds, the Sniper Drones were visible only when the winds periodically opened up to reveal a rare patch of blue sky.

Chapter Master Kayvaan Shrike led two companies of Raven Guard up from the depths of long lost access tunnels. With cries of 'Victorus Aut Mortis' and 'For Severax!' the vengeful Space Marines burst onto the battlefield. As this attack was completely unforeseen by the Tau, it was by far the most successful. Assembled Fire Warriors stood at their assigned jumping-off point, awaiting the signal to join the carefully choreographed counter-attack. They were not expecting to be suddenly assailed by Space Marines. At close range, the Adeptus Astartes were unstoppable, and the wisest of the shas'ui ordered their troops to re-embark into their Devilfish and flee. Many did not make it, brought down mercilessly by the dark-armoured Sons of Corvus Corax.

THE GRAND ASSAULT

The hour had come. The forces of the Imperium launched their largest attack yet on Agrellan. This assault was meant to be the final sledgehammer blow that would destroy the xenos, but the Tau defenders waited in ambush. As Aun'Va said, this was where the tide of battle would be turned and remembered forever in the legends of the Greater Good.

The Imperial Guard's artillery began to fire barrage after barrage. They had timed their salvos to coincide with the Space Marine assaults. Indeed, the Adeptus Astartes Drop Pods were in their meteoric descent through Agrellan's upper atmosphere when the rolling barrage began. The intense shelling laid down a moving carpet of explosions, the firepower clearing a path for the oncoming ground forces.

Beneath the lowering skies, deep lines of infantry and steel walls of tanks began to move. This was the hammer of the Astra Militarum – overwhelming mass in a steady, inexorable surge forward. Due to the whipping sand and the air thick with cloying pollutants, the troops could not see the massive explosions from the artillery fire that continued to pass over them, but they could hear the deafening thunder and feel the ground shake beneath that almighty fury. Despite all their losses and the hard campaigns fought merely to reach this final assault, the Imperial forces were staggering in size. To be one amongst such millions, to feel the marching footfall of all that followed on behind you, was to be part of something larger than most men could ever imagine.

From the start, the battle for Agrellan had been about punishing the xenos. No thought or effort had been given to freeing the former Imperial citizens trapped in labour domes on the planet or shipped to far off mining colonies. There were to be no efforts to recolonise the planet or to harness its resources or runaway toxic pollution. This was a punitive action to smite the Tau, to show the upstart xenos what it meant to assail the Imperium. In this battle, intended to be the last major action upon Agrellan, Colonel Starkzahn unleashed everything he had. He did not seek to beat the Tau armies, but to cleanse the planet of their presence.

Because of the storm – and the high chance that communications would be limited or non-existent beneath its fury – Colonel Starkzahn had implemented a strict plan and schedule. Once launched, the Imperial war machine would churn across the desert, a noose tightening around Agrellan Prime, working its way inward to crush the Tau city that was being developed in the eastern shadows of the former Imperial capital. It was a vast expanse, but Starkzahn had millions of Guardsmen. There were still enough to crush the Tau many times over.



Working his way higher into the shattered ruins, Chapter Master Kayvaan Shrike paused to look behind him. Down below, the desert floor was like an ocean, the gusting winds sending sand waves crashing into teetering foundations. Despite the debris-filled air, Shrike could pick out Devilfish with Tau warriors in their lee working through the ruins. They were hunting him. Once more, Shrike attempted to contact someone, anyone – Colonel Starkzahn, their orbiting Strike Cruiser Shadowblack, or Captain Solaq of the 5th Company. Nothing. Only telepathic communications had been able to get through – and their lone Librarian, Brother Zorticae, had taken a pulse round through his helmet early in the engagement. Shrike's mind was awl. Even after the harsh lessons of Prefectia, it seemed they were still underestimating the prowess of the Tau. The Space Marines had clearly been baited into another trap. And, thought Shrike, it stood to reason that the Imperial Guard were just as likely walking into another. Yet try as he might, Shrike could raise nothing on his comms. There was no time for planning now, however, as the long barrel of a rail rifle drifted by the broken arch ahead. A Sniper Drone had locked onto Shrike's comrades and was lining up a killshot. Without hesitation, Shrike launched his jump pack at maximum thrust. Too late, the Drone sought to evade, and Shrike drove into the disc, his claws shredding it as their momentum carried them far forward and through the wall of a neighbouring ruin. Rising from the rubble, Shrike signalled for his men to continue onwards. The troops below would have seen the commotion, meaning that the chase was on again.

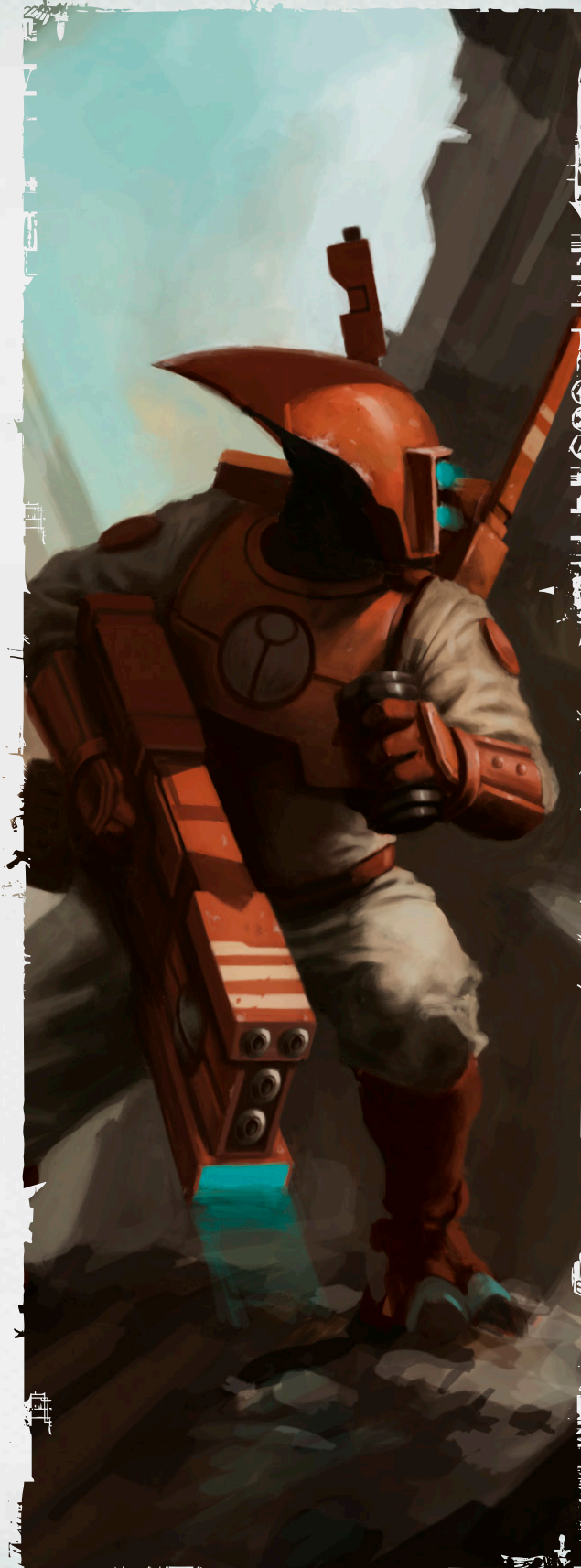
The last remaining Tau zone on Agrellan was protected by powerful force shields, thus precluding orbital bombardment support. It was possible for low atmospheric fighters and bombers to penetrate the shield-dome, but early probes had confirmed that the Tau sector was heavily lined with emplaced gun turrets. Reconnaissance had also learned that the xenos had conserved much of their airpower – formidable fighter and ground support craft. For these reasons, Starkzahn's plan to await a covering storm seemed like a wise course. At long range, and in short-lived ambush attacks, the Tau armies had proven especially deadly. However, in a conflict that was an extended, close range grind, the leaders of the Imperium's forces knew there could be only a single outcome.

Colonel Starkzahn set up his operational headquarters on the edge of some desiccated woodland, its ancient groves blackened and petrified. There, he watched waves of infantry formations disappear into the fog ahead. Company and regimental banners whipped in the stinging winds, each gust painful to bare skin, as it carried not only flying dust and grit but also poisonous toxins. Blaring fanfares and ancient battle calls from their vox-hailers, Imperial Knights strode by, those of House Terryn offering salute to Colonel Starkzahn as they passed. Hour after hour went by, without any halt to the procession making its way into the storm.

As predicted by the Imperial scans, the storm system above them only seemed to be growing in intensity. Most of the Imperial commanders believed that it would take days of marching before their forces reached anything more than scattered pickets. The first real defensive barriers, where battles had previously taken place, were several days away, even if the forces could move at a regular speed through the rising storm.

The first signs that there might be any trouble came many hours later. A distant roar could be heard, a low rumble that was barely audible over the sharp hiss made by the moving sand. The ground was already shaking, from the thousands of clanking tank tracks, but now some faraway explosion reverberated. With vox-hails only working in a very limited perimeter, there was nothing Starkzahn could do but motion more troops towards the front. He knew the flames of war must be fed and the price would be high.

From high above Mu'gulath Bay, the various Imperial Navy officers gathered upon the bridge-deck aboard Lord Admiral Hawke's flagship. They watched in horror as the unnatural clouds continued their cyclonic whirl around the outer rim of the battle site, with a large calm eye developing over Agrellan Prime. It seemed the xenos had somehow tamed the hive world's storms. Bright flashes rippled across the continent where clouds had once drifted – sure signs of large-scale explosions, and the unleashing of Titan-class weaponry. Doubtlessly, the Imperial forces on the ground were getting pounded by Tau atmospheric bombers. Waves of fighters were scrambled, sent out in thick swarms from the orbiting battleships. Regardless of xenos perfidy, the attack must succeed.





WHEN GODS OF WAR CLASH

Suddenly, the thick clouds disappeared and the biting winds lulled. The Guardsmen would have cheered for the abrupt reprieve except the light of Agrellan's sun was painfully, blindingly bright. And then the world exploded.

In many sectors, overloaded Earth caste reactors had been remotely detonated, sending huge mushroom-shaped clouds towering upwards. In other regions, swarms of missiles so thick they blotted out the sun came down, the explosions

hot enough to turn the sand below to blackened glass for miles around the epicentres of the blasts. Flesh was evaporated, steel twisted and melted beyond recognition. Yet not everything was destroyed in the maelstrom.

Lumbering across blackened and flame-scorched sands came the Imperial Guard's most impervious vehicles, the hulking super-heavy tanks. They churned forward, each a mobile fortress, as indomitable as the Imperium itself.



Turrets bearing enormous cannons swivelling in search of retribution. Behind them strode Imperial Knights, their ion shields flickering.

Shadowsun's counter-attack had kept its distance from the blast zone, and was only now racing towards the front. However, there were Tau assets already in place. Bulwarks of armour and shields, the KV128 ballistic suits had stood silent sentry while the desert exploded. Now they came alive,

swivelling at the waist to align shoulder-mounted weapons, locking onto the tanks moving across the burning sands.

Like clashing gods of war, the super-heavies unleashed their prodigious arsenals – cutting loose with firepower whose single shots could shatter mountains.

SO FALLS THE KILLING BLOW

The troops of the Astra Militarum believed they were marching into the storm to deliver the final blow to the xenos that had dared to take over the hive world of Agrellan. Imperial forces were rightfully confident, for they had the Tau surrounded and badly outnumbered. The Tau, however, had their foes right where they wanted them...

Giants duelled across the desert. The air crackled as beams of immense power streaked by, and rockets filled the skies. Flares burst like supernovae as titanic weaponry smote energy fields with ground-shaking force. The ion shields of the Imperial Knights shimmered, struggling to disperse the incoming fire of the awaiting KV128 Stormsurges.

With its own shields shrugging off the combined firepower of an entire company of super-heavy battle tanks, the nearest Stormsurge fired its pulse driver cannon, the recoil kicking up a new cloud of dust. The shot – a blaze of incandescent fury – could core through the thickest adamantium fortress or topple a Titan. This was the Earth caste's largest mobile weapon to date, carrying a calibre of pulse weapon previously found exclusively upon starships.

The Baneblade *Foebreaker* had served the Imperium of Mankind for over 10,000 years. It had been in battles that were now legend, fighting alongside Space Marine Primarchs when they still strode the stars. There was not a piece of its revered armour that had not been repaired or replaced. Always, *Foebreaker* had taken the enemy's best shot and lived to tell the tale. But not this day...

Unshielded, the Baneblade stood no chance. The blue bolt of plasma fired by the Stormsurge was of such super-heated intensity, and at such a high velocity, that it melted the armour, searing a hole and rupturing *Foebreaker's* power plant with cataclysmic results. Not a single scrap of plasteel survived the ensuing explosive meltdown.

Elsewhere, Imperial Knights of House Terryn were being obliterated at a rate hitherto unseen. A trio in an Avenger Lance formation was struck, one after the other. One pair of legs kept walking after its upper torso had been blasted away. Another received a blow through its chest and toppled to the sands. Only blackened scorchmarks remained where once the third Imperial Knight had stood. In response, High King Tybalt roared, but his rage was as ineffective as his gatling cannon – the shells bursting harmlessly off the Tau ballistic suits.

As shoals of Hammerheads skimmed into range the whip-crack of railguns could be heard. Dropping from the skies came XV104 Riptides, each emitting a high-pitched hum as they pushed their reactors, super-charging their weapons in order to better join the clashing colossi.



The battle was one-sided, but the Imperial forces exacted a toll. The Hellhammer *Emperor's Decree* blew the leg off a KV128 Stormsurge and downed a trio of Hammerheads before its crew were forced to abandon their mobile steel fortress as its hull was pierced multiple times, internal explosions seeing to the tank's destruction. The nobles of Voltoris, the famed Knights of House Terryn, charged into a great shoal of Hammerheads, their reaper chainswords and thunderstrike gauntlets flashing, but they did so at great cost. Not since the dark days of the Heresy had so many of the house's nobles fallen in a single battle. King Tybalt himself would have been destroyed, were it not for a darksome apparition from beyond the grave.

As Tybalt's ion shield faded, and his Kingsward went down upon one knee, a black Knight suit emblazoned with skulls emerged from the storm. The Obsidian Knight had returned, and it seemed to burn with vengeance, wreathed as it was by an eerie phantom light. With its battle cannon pounding out a staccato doom, the dark walker arrived in time to safeguard its downed comrades, energy blasts fizzling and sparking off its impenetrable ion shield. Never had Tybalt witnessed such a duel, as the battle-scarred behemoth fended off enemy shots, wading through a storm of firepower as it closed, until eventually its reaper blade rent armour and sent mechanical limbs flying, each strike a thunderbolt of revenge.

As the swirling sandstorm picked up, the Obsidian Knight was obscured, becoming a black blur before disappearing altogether. His heroics allowed House Terryn to regroup, but with his force halved, even Lord Tybalt knew that retreat was the only way to ensure the survival of his house. Shorn of his ion shield and bearing a cracked carapace, King Tybalt led his limping contingent back.

Except where the Obsidian Knight stalked, Shadowsun's plan to meet the opposition as they stepped from the wall of sand was proving highly successful. In well-rehearsed Mont'ka manoeuvres, Pathfinders also infiltrated the storm, setting ambushes. Amassed Stealth Drones kept Ghostkeel Wings hidden, so that Imperial troops walked into crossfiring cyclic ion rakers, or death zones where multiple fusion colliders atomised anything that moved. Those formations that emerged out of the storm were met by a wall of firepower – Cadre Fireblades directing the Strike Teams' volleys, with particularly large or formidable foes drawing special attention from Crisis Battlesuits or Hammerhead shoals. The Earth caste enviro-engines, coupled with their weather satellites, allowed them to invert the toxic upper atmosphere with pinpoint precision. One could stand beneath blue skies and breathe clean air while a stone's throw away a toxic hurricane of sand reduced visibility to a few feet. No matter how many the Tau slew, though, more and more Guardsmen kept coming.



HUNTING THE HUNTER



Despite his long life, patience was not a virtue that Commander Farsight had mastered. He longed to complete his mission and to join the main battle against the encircling Imperial Guard. This delay was not unanticipated, however, as it was known that the Space Marines would be worthy adversaries. Despite losing half of their number in the initial Tau ambushes, the remaining Space Marines were proving difficult to eliminate. Having seen first-hand the disruption the superhuman warriors could cause, Commander Farsight knew that it was wise to keep them far away from the main battle. Shadowsun's carefully constructed plan to attack the Astra Militarum forces could unravel should the Space Marines escape Farsight and regroup in strength. Their quick-strike mobility could allow the Imperial Guard to break out of the deathtrap they were marching into. So Farsight continued to lead his forces, searching for and destroying the pockets of Space Marines in the ruins of the old refinery sites, unaware that he himself was now being hunted.

A Vindicare Assassin had been deployed, his mission to kill the Tau leader known as Commander Farsight. After his lander had put down, it had taken days to work his way inside the sprawling Tau compound. Along his route, the Vindicare had used all his impressive stealth and infiltration skills, but where such tactics caused undue delay, the Assassin had resorted to his more deadly talents, leaving behind him a pile of corpses.

One Tau Pathfinder team had picked up strange scanner readings, forcing the Vindicare's hand. Each of the xenos had died with a single shot through the aperture of their helmets' optics. Next to fall was a pair of Broadside battlesuits that guarded a rubble-filled street the Assassin needed to cross. Fire Warriors, Stealth Teams and even a Hammerhead gunship had fallen victim to the Vindicare's exitus rifle.

Having reached his destination, the Vindicare sought a firing site – a place with wide sweeping vistas. Spider-like, he climbed the ruins, leaping from rooftops to spires – a dark shade slipping amongst the shadows. At last, he chose a perch in the upper storeys of a teetering building. There the Vindicare crouched silently. His form-fitting suit was designed with cameleoline-laced materials so that he blended in – just another rubble pile or broken gargoyle from the tumbledown gothic structures. Yet this statue was watching, waiting, his finger on the trigger of his long rifle. He was forced to change position once. A Drone passed overhead, then returned, hovering in place, sweeping its sensors. Somehow, the Tau technology was picking something up. With blinding speed, the Vindicare left his hunter's crouch, drop-rolled and came up firing. The single shot pierced the Drone's AI core, causing the device to cease functioning, crashing to the desert floor. Although he was sure his act had gone undetected, the Vindicare moved location. There was no margin for error.



The Vindicare knew his target was close. While Tau technology had ensured their foes' comms signals were scrambled, there was no impediment to the Vindicare's equipment. Through his spymask, the lone sniper received translated Tau communications. He listened to reports, gauging when his quarry might draw near. The Vindicare knew Commander Farsight had made arrangements for himself and his cadres to embark upon Orca dropships, and this perch looked over the site where he would board. It could only be a matter of time...

Several miles away, but closing steadily, trackers were on the Vindicare's trail. Sub-Commander El'Myamoto – more commonly known as Darkstrider – motioned for his Pathfinders to follow. A few days previously, something had flashed up on the periphery of his prototype structural analyser, something altogether disquieting. On a hunch, Darkstrider had followed the trail, tracking the unique signature. Doubts that he and his Pathfinders were chasing phantoms were put to rest when they came across the first victims – another team of Pathfinders, all slain with fully charged pulse carbines. They had not fired a single shot as they were slain. More dead marked the trail. This foe had penetrated the Tau defence lines with ease and displayed marksmanship beyond that which the Tau could achieve even with their superlative AI targeting assistance. That the path had led him straight towards the Farsight Enclaves made Darkstrider suspicious. Was this enemy an Imperial agent, or could it be a Tau from amongst the traitorous exiles who had abandoned the Greater Good?

Darkstrider and his Pathfinder team wove through the ruins of the old refinery. Twice, they ran afoul of the ongoing battles, once using their markerlights to aid Crisis Teams in destroying a squad of White Scars on roaring bikes. Now, the ghost signal was close, but the structural analyser could not pinpoint the exact position. Sweeping the ruins with his gaze, Darkstrider marked the tallest structure. That was where he would position himself. With hand signals, he set his team in motion.

Even from his perch far up in the ruins, the Vindicare felt the air rush of the landing Orca dropship. Within moments, the red-armoured battlesuits began appearing. When his mission target was sighted, the Vindicare fired two swift shots. The first was with shieldbreaker ammunition – a shot that passed through Farsight's force field and destroyed his shield generator, the device imploding with a flash. Without that protection, the second shot would penetrate the Tau Commander's armour, exploding his head.



THE BATTLE OF GARGOYLE SPIRE

Since a bodyguard had intercepted his second shot on his mission target, the master sniper had been under siege. With uplifted shield generator, Commander Bravestorm had covered Farsight, while the rest of the Eight formed a crimson wall before their esteemed leader. The remaining Tau returned fire upon the sniper. Calmly, the Vindicare Assassin loosed killing shot after killing shot into the red-armoured Tau swarming below. A Strike Team of Fire Warriors attempted to run to cover, each dropping dead so quickly it looked like some macabre chain reaction. Next, an XV8 Crisis Team were shot as they blasted upwards, the full thrust jump jets sending the dead careening wildly. While incoming fire cracked around him, the Vindicare squeezed the trigger, shifted aim, and squeezed again. A Riptide fell to its knees and did not move again. As soon as the Vindicare calculated that he would not get another shot on his true target, he was running. He leapt, tumbling in a diving roll upon another rooftop. His mid-jump volley caused both pilots of a swooping Piranha to slump, their hovercraft spinning to a fiery death below.

Seeing an escape path, the Vindicare moved over rooftops, killing as he went. Darkstrider's ambush was fast – his perfectly positioned Pathfinders sent out a hail of pulse fire. With AI guidance, the shot patterns anticipated the lightning-quick Vindicare. Struck multiple times, the Assassin's long rifle was blasted out of his hands. It wasn't the wounds that disoriented the Vindicare, but Darkstrider's perfectly timed photon grenade. The multi-spectrum light explosion erupted as the Vindicare drew and fired his exitus pistol. Six Pathfinders dropped, but Darkstrider was only wounded. Firing his own pulse carbine from the hip, the Tau seared holes in his foe, advancing until he was blasting away at point blank range. He didn't stop shooting for a long time.





THE LIVING HORROR

Through the deliberate slaughter of non-combatants, the Eversor Assassin hoped to draw in their sworn protector, Commander Farsight. There was nothing the skull-faced killer would not do to complete his mission, but he would have to get through a devout bodyguard and accompanying Crisis battlesuit cadres to reach his mark.

The Eversor's pod crashed through the nanocrystalline dome enclosing the Earth caste science centre. Alarms wailed, teams of Fire Warriors rushing toward the site where the projectile had fallen, running faster as the sound of gunfire and frantic screaming reached them. Having smashed his way from the wreck of his pod, the Eversor set about his assailants with savage fervour. He was a black-clad blur, his needler spitting death. Fire Warriors were hurled to smash against walls with bone-breaking force, or riddled with explosive bolts. Earth caste engineers hefted experimental weapons and blazed away, only to be eviscerated without scoring a hit. Panic spread like wildfire, and within minutes, distress

calls were winging their way out to the wider war. There was one who could not overlook such desperate pleas for aid, and who was in close proximity. Just as the Assassinorum Adept had intended, the distress calls reached Commander Farsight and were not ignored.

Although his shield generator had been damaged in the failed assassination attempt, Commander Farsight was eager to reach the main battle. From reports, Shadowsun's forces were hard pressed to maintain her attack. It was vital to keep the overwhelming Imperial forces wrong-footed, for they must not escape out of the storm zone. There were no half measures with the Killing Blow. Thus, it had been Farsight's plan to leave half his force to hunt the remnants of the Space Marine assault, while he took the remaining cadres to the aid of the Tau Empire forces. Farsight insisted that repairs be made en route, and was aboard an Orca



dropship when the distress signals came in. The largest of the Earth caste science domes was under attack. As Shadowsun had taken the vast majority of the Fire caste on her perimeter attack, there were few troops within the central compound of Lo'vasht'au to respond.

Without hesitation, O'Shovah ordered the Orca to plot a new course. Deploying via airdrop, Farsight and his Retaliation Cadres entered the great dome through the massive hole torn by the Assassin's drop pod. The first to land within the complex was Farsight himself. Despite having seen many horrors in the savage stars beyond the Tau Empire, Commander Farsight was appalled. The Eversor Assassin had run amok. It had not been much more than fifteen minutes since his drop pod crashed, yet the Earth caste laboratories looked as if they were a bombed out abattoir. Blood and body parts were everywhere, for the Eversor did not just kill his foes; he rent them, scattering pieces in gory arcs. Whether the enemy stayed and fought, or ran, it mattered not. Intoxicated with volatile chemicals, the augmented Assassin moved with a speed and power far beyond normal human ability. The Eversor was not just a weapon; he was an instrument of terror, a true monster. Above all, the Eversor showed Mankind's foes just how far the Imperium would go to achieve victory.

Aware that his mission target had arrived, the Eversor turned from his slaughter and sprinted back, more chemicals boosting him in preparation. Even as the sensor suites of the Tau battlesuits sounded proximity alarms, the Eversor was amongst them. He had burst through a wall, and leapt atop the nearest XV8 Crisis Battlesuit, twisting to avoid plasma bursts. Using his power sword, he effortlessly cut away the nanocrystalline alloy armour, yanking out the exposed pilot and flinging him away. Injected with a range of toxins from the Assassin's neuro-gauntlet, what hit the ground was wet and already bursting from within. By then, the skull-faced killer had moved onto his next victims. With a whirling spin he took off a battlesuit's leg with his power sword while his executioner pistol sent a flurry of explosive shells to drop another XV8. Using the falling Tau as a springboard, the Eversor leapt up to intercept more Crisis suits mid-air, performing acrobatic feats as he lopped off limbs. With a backflip the Eversor landed atop a Shield Drone, momentarily steering it with body shifts.

The Tau began to lose discipline. Attempting to gun down their swift moving foe, one Crisis suit stitched a line of burst cannon fire across his own team, while a wild fusion blast struck an Earth caste plasma tower. Thick coils of living energy snaked out, adding to the carnage. Stepping between Farsight and the Assassin was the heavy-footed Ob'lotai 9-0. The Broadside battlesuit fired a fusillade of missiles, but to no avail, as the Assassin dodged. In return, Ob'lotai received a neuro-gauntleted fist punching apart his optics. Had there been a living person within that suit, his fate would have been sealed. As it was, the AI chip was fried by feedback. Only then did the Tau land a shot, as Farsight's plasma rifle struck the Eversor, slowing him so that the remaining Eight were able to blast ragged holes in the drug-fuelled body. It fell, twitching, in a bloody heap.

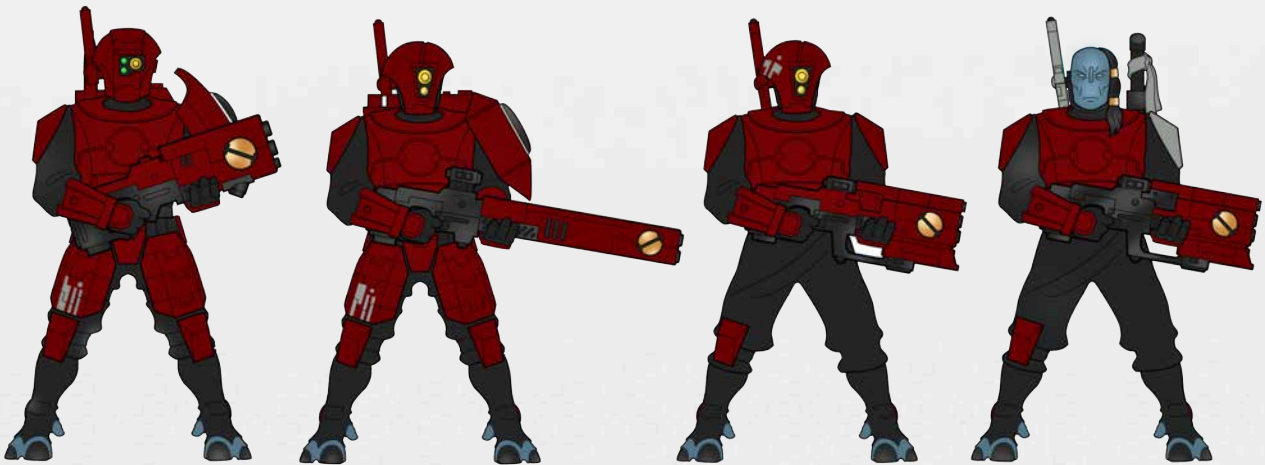


BONDED IN UNITY AND GLORY

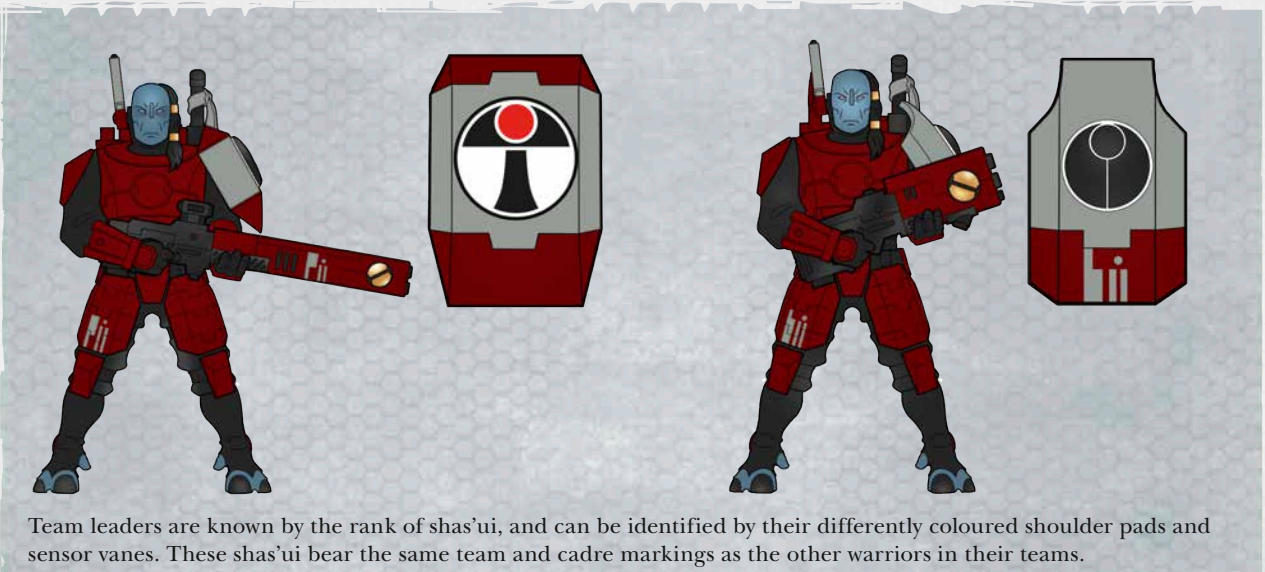
Since declaring his independence from the Tau Empire, O'Shovah wears deep red armour. This is in memory of his forsaken homeworld of Vior'la, and also honours the blood spilt by the heroes of Arkunasha. Many of the warriors of the Farsight Enclaves follow this tradition in their colour schemes and sept markings, though many, like O'Shovah, still bear the symbol of the Fire caste.



Cadre Fireblades of the Farsight Enclaves. The shoulder pad colour reflects their rank, and some bear the personal sigil that Farsight has adopted since the battles of Arthas Moloch.



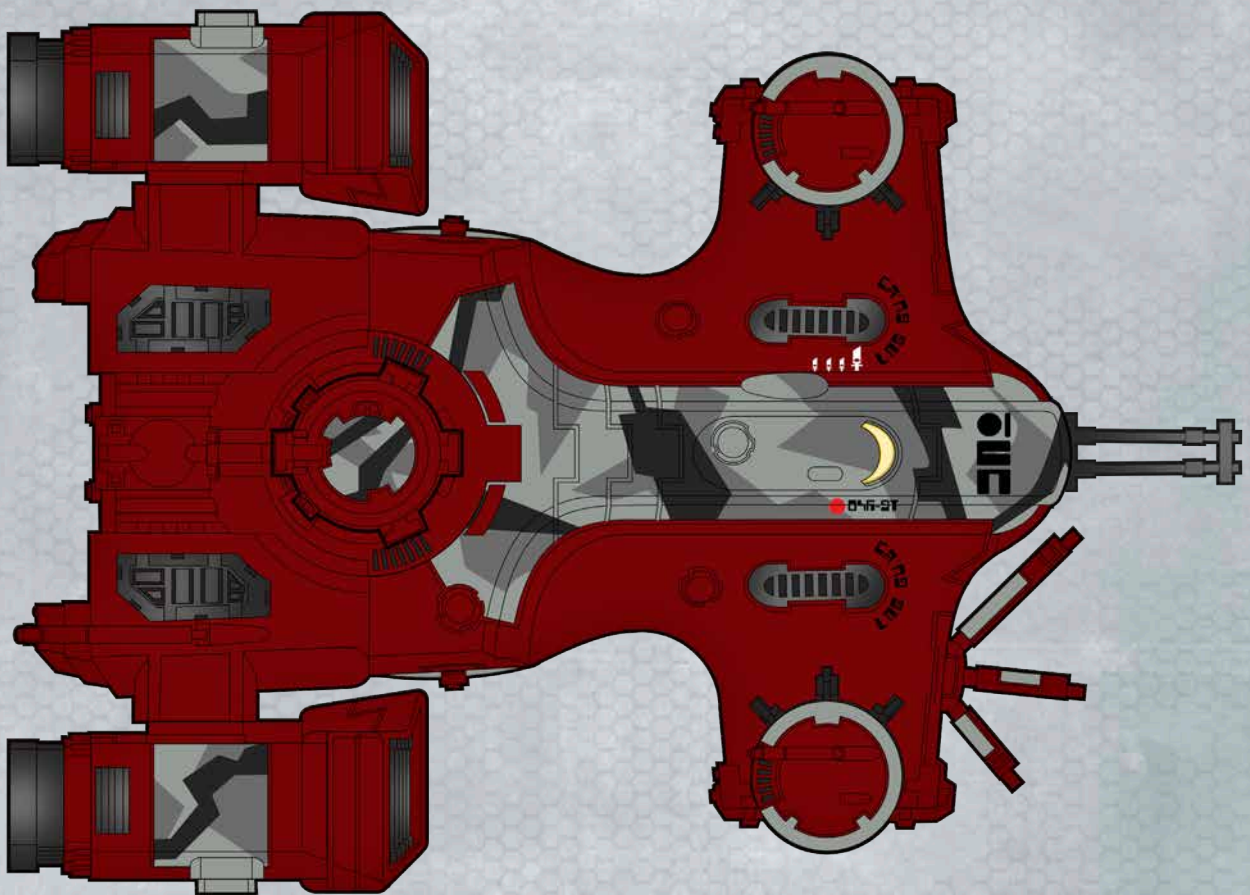
Strike Teams, Breacher Teams and Pathfinders make up a large proportion of the Fire caste warriors that serve the Farsight Enclaves. They bear the bold red of Farsight with great pride, with their markings overlaid in grey.



Team leaders are known by the rank of shas'ui, and can be identified by their differently coloured shoulder pads and sensor vanes. These shas'ui bear the same team and cadre markings as the other warriors in their teams.

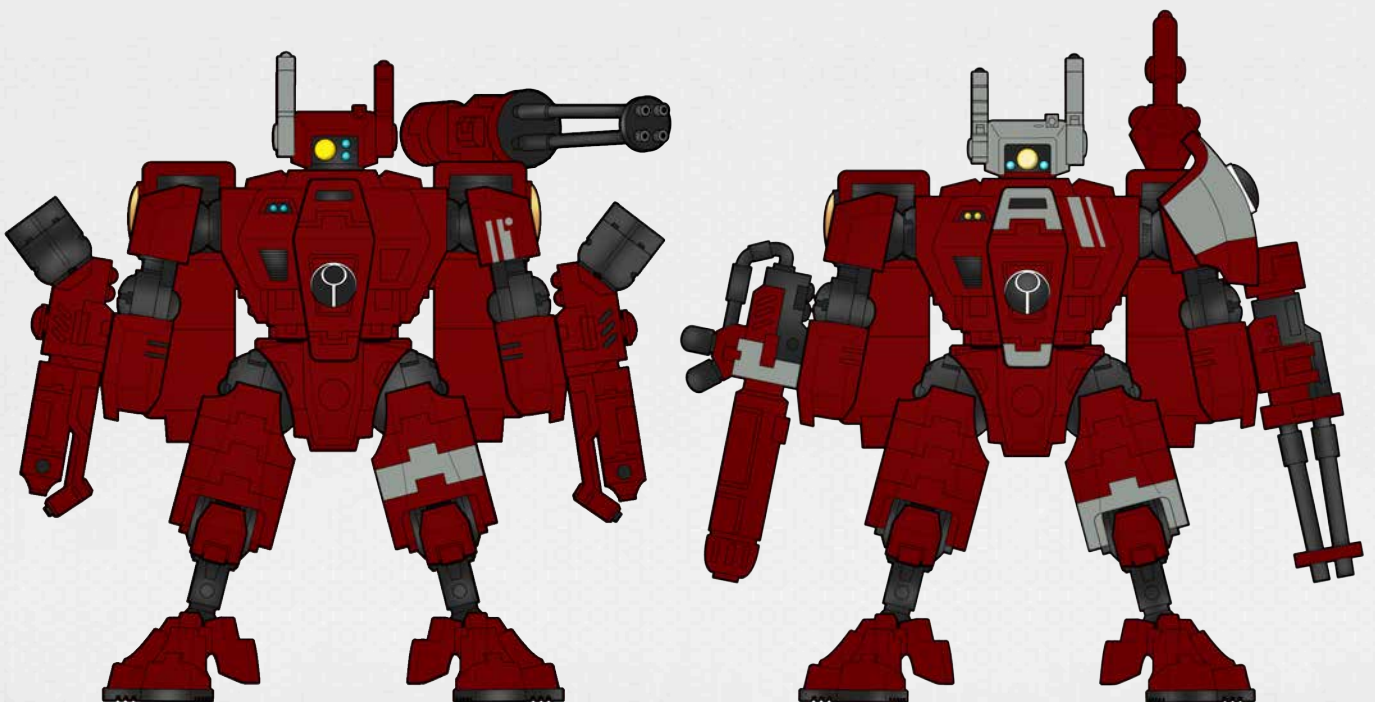
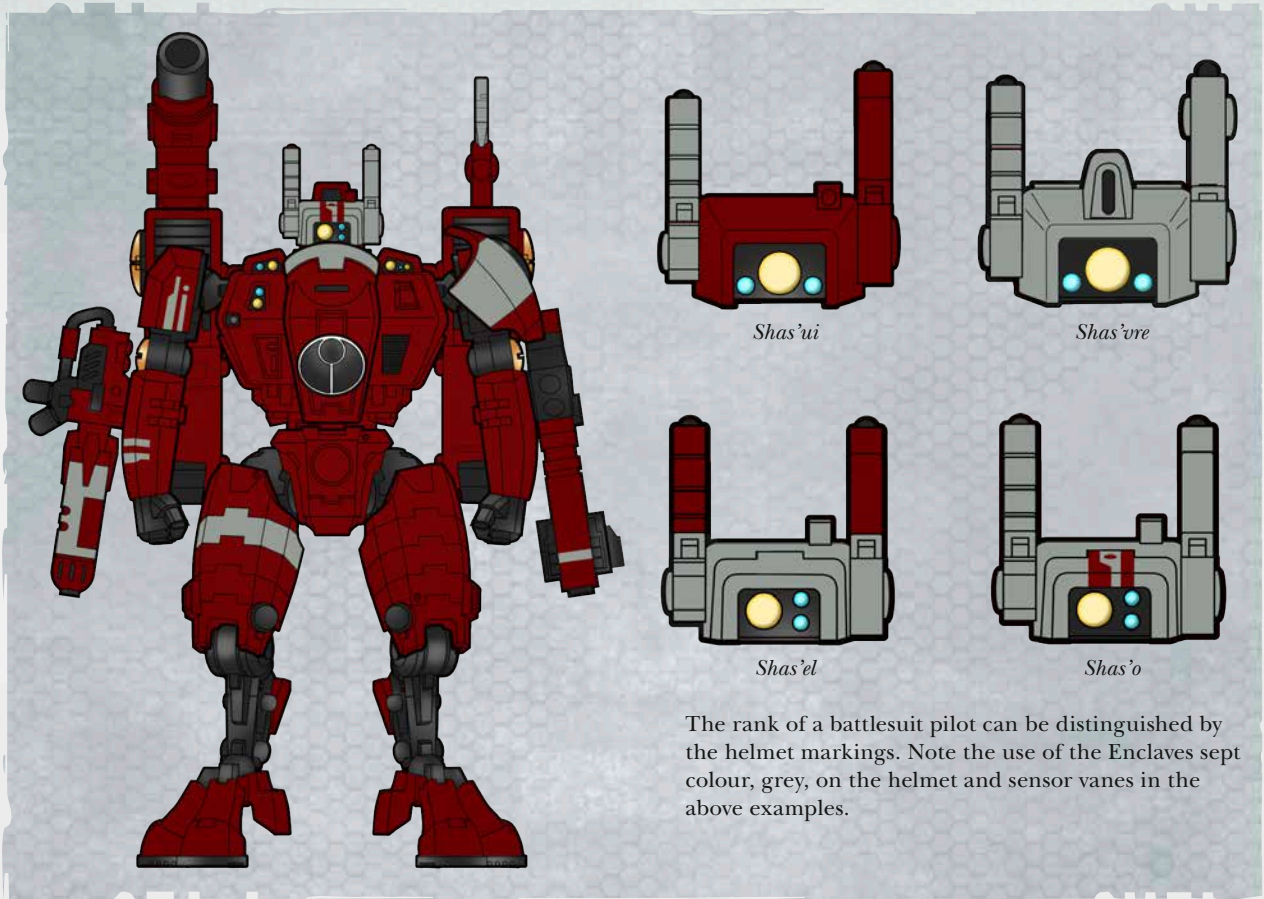


The TY7 Devilfish adds great mobility to the infantry cadres. The transport's abilities to hover, provide supporting fire from a nose-mounted burst cannon, and to detach Gun Drones, make it a vital asset to the Farsight Enclaves.

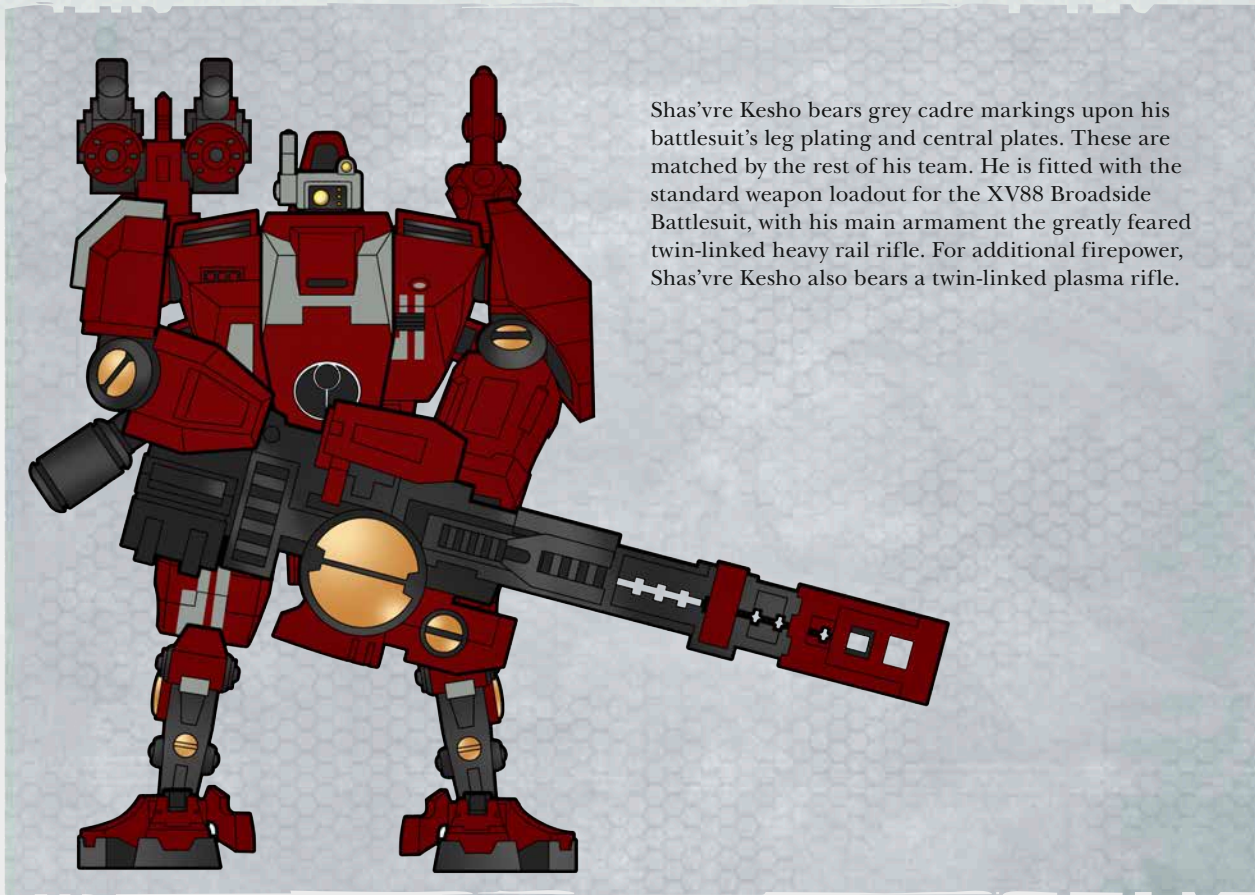


A top-down view of the TY7 Devilfish. This shows the front mounted sensor spines and vectored jet propulsion engines. It is rare, but not unheard of for vehicles from the Enclaves to adopt camouflage markings such as the urban pattern seen here.

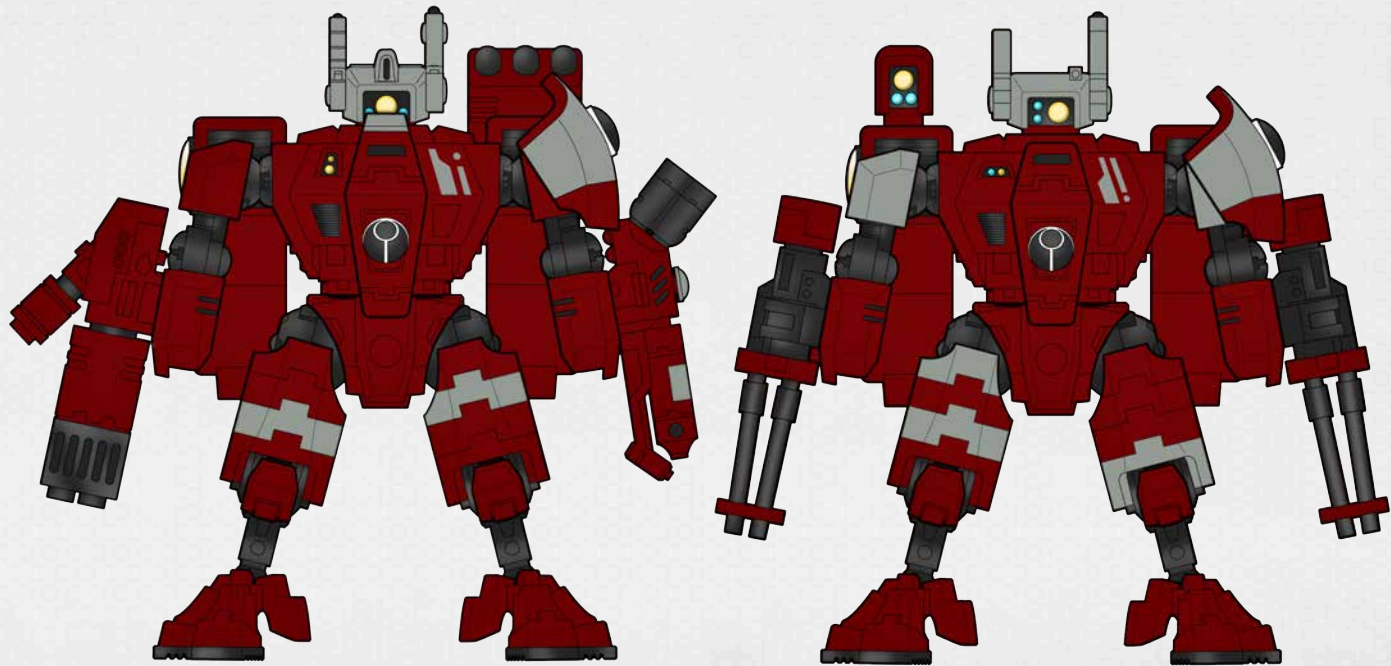
BONDED IN UNITY AND GLORY



On the left Shas'ui Kanjii bears two flamers and a burst cannon, while on the right, Shas've Tasso bears a plasma rifle and burst cannon. It is common practice for teams that have undergone the ta'lissera to bear grey swaths upon the same panels.



Shas've Kesho bears grey cadre markings upon his battlesuit's leg plating and central plates. These are matched by the rest of his team. He is fitted with the standard weapon loadout for the XV88 Broadside Battlesuit, with his main armament the greatly feared twin-linked heavy rail rifle. For additional firepower, Shas've Kesho also bears a twin-linked plasma rifle.



Both Shas've Llhana (left) and Shas've Turr'o (right) are of the same rank, as indicated by the battlesuit helm markings. Their battlefield roles are different, however, with Llhana serving as a bodyguard and Turr'o leading an XV8 Crisis Team.





