

M'yen  
By shas'la Dre'Kai

## Chapter two

H'tras looked around, scanning the area with a ferocious attention to detail that would be necessary if any of his comrades were to survive the battle. Everything depended upon his vigilance.

He gazed out over a plain. Nothing. The mountains were empty, too. He scanned a nearby forest in infrared and found it empty except for some local life-forms, the presence of which he had already reported to his fellows some time ago. There was nothing unremarkable; or, if there was, it was hidden.

The Shas'ar'tol had been told about his actions during the ambush of the fire warriors. He had told them everything he could and they had seemed to be most interested in how he managed to find the assassin - other Shas'la had, in the past, been unable to see such creatures and had paid for it with gue'la ammunition being embedded in their skulls. He, though, had been able to see it and the Shas'ar'tol had been extremely interested.

They had given him his assignment and placed him here, upon this flat rock face, overlooking an empty plain and had impressed upon him the importance of his task. He had taken to it with the determination with which he approached everything and, even now - three rotaa later, he had not relaxed from it. His muscles ached, despite the rock upon which he was resting his weapon. The sun beat down upon his back from above, drawing out sweat through his skin, even with his temperature-resistant fio'tak armour. The gun in his hands was an improvement over his previous pulse rifle by far. It was seldom seen by the basic Shas'la; mostly these were only in the hands of pathfinder Shas'la, whose duty was to stay out of the sight of anything. However, now that this was his assignment, he had familiarised himself with everything about his new gun; each contour, each line, each perfectly smooth statement of fio caste skill that adorned its casing like functional jewellery. This, he thought to himself, was a weapon.

It was a rail rifle; a miniaturised version of the rail guns used by XV88 suits and Hammerhead gunships against enemy tanks. It was a rare thing to find a vehicle with armour enough to stand up to a direct hit from a rail gun. Although the rail rifle was not as powerful it was enough to obliterate most troops and it was extremely useful against gue'la super soldiers, even the larger forms of the y'he'vre could be brought down using the hypervelocity dart it sent straight at them.

There were two other tau nearby, one Shas'la and a Shas'ui. Both of them had the same task as him - to find any gue'la presence here and report it immediately. Both were as patient as him; both were as tense. The rest of his squad was much further back, checking their weaponry and preparing for tasks that better suited their ability.

Off in the distance he could just vaguely see disturbances in the air shimmering like heat waves, the signature of the use of an antigravity engine. He had learnt some time ago to differentiate between the patterns in the ones used by the tau and most other races and he could tell that these were from a crisis suit. Of course, he did not need to be able to identify it to know that; the information had been sent to him by the Shas'ar'tol that crisis teams were operating further forward to flush the gue'la out, or worry them into making a hasty move that would skew their battle plans. So far they had been unsuccessful.

He blinked. He did not do so often. The helmet he wore was enhanced; the visor had an attachment which circulated a fine mist around his face, washing his eyes to stop him from having to blink. Every now and then, however, he had to do so; it was a muscle reflex, learned from countless millennia of evolution. To rid himself of it entirely would be impossible.

A movement on the plain made him snap his eyes wide open. He focused the magnification function in his modified helmet inward, down toward whatever had caused it to see a single gue'la, wearing the weak armour in which most of their expendable troops were clad, sprinting into his field of vision with little speed. H'tras' finger moved to the trigger and he focused in on the gue'la's head, ready to fire a single shot that would penetrate the gue'la's skull as though there was nothing there.

He hesitated. A lone gue'la running across the plains like this was, he had to admit, extremely strange, even for the odd standards of the gue'la as a whole. One single soldier could not possibly do any significant damage to the tau, and he would be picked off easily before he could get close to them. The gue'la had to know this, even though they had no knowledge of the snipers...

His eyes widened as the realisation struck him like a thunderbolt. Touching his helmet mike, he spoke quietly but forcefully to the other two snipers nearby.

"Do not shoot!" he hissed. "Whatever you do, do not fire! That gue'la must not die!"

"What do you mean?" returned the confused-sounding reply from one of his comrades.

"What possible value could that one gue'la have?"

"The value of our secrecy! If we fire, then we will reveal our position to the main forces," he said.

"He is correct," said the Shas'ui. "These gue'la sent this one troop out as bait.

Expendable. They underestimate us; they think that we will kill anything we see, with no thought for the consequences." The tau's voice hardened. "They are wrong. Hold your fire; soon enough, they shall be here. When they are, maintain constant communication. We should not shoot at the same targets."

"Of course," H'tras said, deactivating his comm system with a touch to his helmet. He returned to watching the gue'la.

The gue'la had got quite far now; he was close to the rock face. H'tras stared down at him, knowing that there was no way the gue'la could see him. This one had no helmet; he could not possibly see the snipers so far above him.

He counted seven raik'ors under his breath before the first gue'la appeared as a bright red heat signature in the forest and smiled. Their warlike nature was so predictable.

"Shas'o," he heard the Shas'ui intone into his helmet comm after activating his own.

"Enemy presence sighted in sector 002 15. Suggest stealth reinforcements; gue'la are unaware of our presence."

The Shas'o replied quickly. "Agreed. XV15 battle suits are approaching. Until their arrival, delay the gue'la by any means necessary."

"Of course," said the Shas'ui. H'tras smiled; the Shas'o had just given them permission to wreak havoc with the enemy.

"The Shas'o has told us to delay the enemy by any means necessary," said the Shas'ui unnecessarily. "Prepare your weapons."

H'tras had done so some time ago, but he checked his rifle's status anyway. The display lights in his HUD blinked at him; good, he thought. His rail rifle was at 100% efficiency.

He returned his attention to the plains below; just in time, it turned out.

The gue'la erupted forth from the forest with all of their usual subtlety. Giant black-armoured figures sprinted forth, covering each other with their archaic weapons. It was almost comical, thought H'tras to himself; he could kill any one of them, right now, and they could do nothing to defend themselves. But no; these were not worthy targets. He had to wait for the commander to appear.

More troops ran out, these ones smaller and wearing less armour. APCs moved behind them, ancient tracks moving inefficiently through the trees. Behind them came more figures, holding their weak weapons and - finally - the prize. Their commander; their "Inquisitor Lord." H'tras zoomed in on the figure with his rifle and checked for any wargear that could produce a force field; the didactic memories he had absorbed so long ago gave him a dossier on most of the gue'la equipment and this one had nothing that matched. The Shas'la smiled, then touched his helmet comm.

"Inquisitor Lord has no protection. Recommend eliminate," he said softly.

"Proceed," said the Shas'ui. H'tras' smile grew and he lined up the crosshair on one of the gue'la's two bright eyes. They flickered with an odd light; it pulsed strangely, like the light he had seen leaping between the hands of the pale, sickly gue'la that had nonetheless torn apart Shas'la with inexplicable lightning. H'tras exhaled once; the gue'la may well have some strange power, but it was unlikely in the extreme to save him. H'tras had never seen any such powers perform a feat like that. He focused further, put his finger on the trigger, and pulled.

The gue'la's head exploded outwards, unable to withstand the energies involved. A fine red mist surrounded his headless corpse as it fell backward onto the ground. All around him the gue'la fell into disarray, panicking at the sudden, inexplicable death of their leader. H'tras smiled as he watched them; they were so small. Like insects.

The unmistakable crack of air being displaced by a hypervelocity projectile sounded twice more and two of the gigantic, black-armoured gue'la fell dead, their helmets cracking under the strain and their eye lenses shattered from the impact of the snipers' weaponry. Their comrades span around looking for the source of these sudden deaths. H'tras had nothing but contempt for them as he put another dart straight through the skull of one huge figure, whose high-collared armour and melee weapon seemed to mark him out as being of a higher rank than the others.

As they ran around in disarray, H'tras heard his Shas'ui contact the Shas'o again. "Sir? The enemy are headless. Recommend mopup." The Shas'la smiled again. There was no way the gue'la could win.