

M'yen
By shas'la Dre'Kai

Chapter three

H'tras stared out from beneath the manta. He and his team had not yet been deployed near any reported enemy presence; they were to remain here, in a place of relative safety. It was the only real base that his cadre had yet set up on this world and the Shas'o had ordered them to wait until information about the enemy positions was returned to them from teams more suited to scouting ahead than H'tras', with his team's specialised marksmen. Such groups would no doubt include pathfinder Shas'la and stealth-armoured Shas'ui - the normal components of any such reconnaissance plans in situations similar to the current one.

Just like the rest of his team, H'tras was patient. It was a virtue that he had seldom exhibited prior to his inclusion in the pathfinder team and use of a rail rifle, but now he had forced himself to learn it. Just like so many other factors, it could affect the outcome of a battle - if he was fidgeting or impatient then he would be less able to identify and neutralise targets of opportunity. If his ability to do so was compromised, then an enemy could potentially get through to the tau lines and slaughter his comrades. He could not allow such a thing to happen.

The Shas'la gazed out into the surrounding forestry, magnified to a suitable degree by his helmet's inbuilt systems. He could, as ever, see nothing; no shapes moving in the trees, no silhouettes promising bloody rampages as soon as they revealed themselves. Nothing. He was, he had to admit to himself, getting somewhat tired of not being able to see the enemy before they attacked.

He shook his head. Such thoughts would, no doubt, cloud his judgement or lead him into a circle of frustration and boredom until, when the time came for action, he would be unable to deliver. He returned his attention to the sight of the forest.

The comm system situated next to his ear gave a soft chime. H'tras touched his helmet, activating the two-way feed between his helmet and the one contacting him - which, it turned out, was his Shas'ui.

"Shas'la," came the level voice. "The Shas'vere of a forward team wishes me to inform the team that the gue'la approach our position with speed. We are to be prepared for them." H'tras heard his superior's slight hesitation and an indrawn breath.

"Shas'ui?" he asked, confused. "Is something amiss?"

"The communication was severed," came the reply. "It seems that the team was discovered... which is, perhaps, odd. I had been informed that the gue'la did not possess sufficient technology to penetrate holographic disruption fields... nevertheless, I digress. We are to remain vigilant. The Shas'vere that contacted me was not far from our position. Be ready."

H'tras moved back underneath the manta slightly, under the shadow of one of its wings. He lay down on the soil, and dug himself into it slightly, letting it cover the back of his armour, breaking up the lines between his body and the ground. Positioned there he would be almost invisible to any gue'la that did not know what to look for. The Shas'la carefully sprinkled dirt over the top of his rail rifle's barrel, careful not to let any enter the actual accelerator. If something was lodged there whilst he was firing there was no telling

what would happen.

H'tras dug himself slightly further in, positioning himself comfortably, and drew his eye to the side of the rifle. He focused his eyelens in further, into the forest, and was rewarded with the sight of a mass of moving shapes.

Dark, titanic figures approached with alarming speed through the trees. At that point they were too far away for him to be able to hear the sounds they were no doubt making, but he could at least see what they were causing - their huge armour was crushing the saplings around them and knocking over the older trees.

H'tras looked further, into the middle of the group. There, it seemed, was a slimmer figure - one without the bulky armour of his comrades but almost as tall. The quality of light was too poor for the Shas'la to make out any details, but from the shapes he could almost make out it seemed that the figure was holding a small gun in one hand and some sort of close combat weapon in the other.

Over the still-active interteam communication link, H'tras heard the other Shas'la's gasp. He frowned, unable to puzzle out what had caused it - until he focused yet further and lowered his line of sight slightly.

Around the legs of the gue'la were dancing a multitude of clawing, many-legged creatures with ridged bodies and long talons. They bared shadowed fangs at the gue'la, slashing at the tall figures as they did so. Even as he watched, H'tras saw one of the gue'la fall, three of the beasts leaping onto his body and dragging him to the ground. It did not seem, however, that they were necessarily winning. The gue'la's deadly guns spat forth death at the creatures, killing one with each shot - but there were always more. H'tras was horrified and entranced at once by the sight, forgetting his task as he watched the seemingly ferocious beauty of the battle. It was strangely surreal, as though he was separate from it. As though it could have no effect on him.

This was proven entirely wrong when he heard the unmistakable crack of air being displaced by a hypervelocity slug. He stared at the flames in the air that dissipated as quickly as they had come, unable to fathom what had just happened - until he realised that his Shas'ui was shouting in his ear for him to join the fight and bring down the insectoid creatures. The y'he.

H'tras did so with alacrity, picking a target and firing in an eye blink. One of the creatures fell instantly, a cauterised hole punched straight through its chest. Even as he chose another target and fired, H'tras could not help but think to himself: what a coincidence, that both the gue'la and the y'he would be here on this world. What a coincidence for each of them, that they would find both of the others here...

He realised, suddenly, what was going on. Why the gue'la's weapons had seemed more suited to bringing down masses of enemies than combating foes that excelled at long range. Why so many of them had been adorned with symbols of beasts being dispatched in various, imaginative methods. Why they had heard nothing of the gue'la for so long... They hadn't come here to hunt the tau. They had come here to stop the y'he. This was a battle between the insane servants of the corpse god and beasts from outside the galaxy - with the tau caught in the middle.

He almost stopped firing, he was so shocked. However, the task was deeply ingrained upon him; he picked another target to fire at and, soon enough, it was dead.

The gue'la had almost reached the treeline. Now H'tras could see the strange, smaller figure in more detail - a relatively normal, if quite tall, gue'la with pale skin and a long

coat. The gun in one hand was adorned with a sight, and had a long belt of ammunition threading inside the gue'la's coat. The close combat weapon was a sword, crackling with blue electricity. And across his eyes was a device that, it seemed, mimicked the tau's blacksun filter...

This was another inquisitor, he thought numbly.

It was not, he supposed, that strange. He had been told that the gue'la would sometimes deploy an Inquisitor Lord alongside an Inquisitor, a more junior member of whatever order they belonged to. Often the Inquisitor Lord would have the larger retinue and the better equipment, but the Inquisitors were still to be feared. This one had chosen to stay with a group of the gue'la's finest soldiers in the face of this threat - and, it seemed, with good reason.

A crashing sounded from the trees and H'tras was shaken from his reverie. Three huge beasts, taller than the gue'la and almost as tall as an XV8, were running forward, with long talons and unfathomable weapons. Their flesh, he now saw, was a pale yellow and the carapaces that covered it indigo, edged with black. Some had two limbs with clawed, four-digited hands, and a second pair that carried different-looking weapons. Others were covered in bladed limbs. Yet others seemed to have nothing but ranged weapons.

Whatever they carried, he decided, they still had to die. He drew a bead on the eye of one of them, and opened fire with his weapon, expecting the dart to bore a hole into the creature's skull and straight through the other side.

Whether the eye was covered with some sort of hard transparent membrane, whether the creature had moved as he was firing or whether it simply would not die, H'tras did not know. All he saw was that the thing reeled for a couple of raik'ors, and then kept coming, apparently intent upon devouring the gue'la.

H'tras aimed at the eye, now a messy black hole, and fired again. Once more the creature kept coming. He almost spat; his efforts, it seemed, were for nothing. He fired again.

This time, the creature fell, and did not get up again. He felt like cheering; single-handedly he had managed to destroy one of these immense creatures. Quickly he dampened the thoughts. He had to stay focused on his task.

He chose another one of the creatures and fired straight into its open mouth. The slug drilled through the creature's entire head and shot out the other end; H'tras could just about see the trail of fire where it kept moving.

He snapped his attention back to the wounded creature and fired again. This time it fell; quicker than the other, it seemed. Perhaps this one's body parts were not so reinforced as the other's. Regardless of the reason, though, he knew that he still had a task to do.

He glanced around, trying to find another one of the y'he to destroy. There were none. Corpses littered the forest floor; it seemed that the rest of his team had done their jobs as well, if not better, than he. The smoking barrels of the gue'la's weapons attested to their skill, as did the cooling ichor upon the Inquisitor's blade. It seemed that, at least for the moment, they had won.

The tall gue'la appeared to be looking straight at him - not, apparently, at the seemingly abandoned manta, which was drawing the attention of his team. H'tras guessed that it had something to do with the blacksun filter-like device attached to his brow.

"Tau!" he said eventually. "Put up your weapons. We shall not harm you; we fight, it seems, a common foe."

H'tras did nothing; in one ear he could hear his Shas'ui muttering in a low voice to, he

guessed, the Shas'o, appraising him of this new development. Meanwhile, one of the black-armoured gue'la had turned furiously to the Inquisitor and was hissing in what H'tras supposed he thought was a quiet voice, enquiring if the tall gue'la had lost his mind.

The Inquisitor remained calm; more, H'tras guessed, than what he himself would have been able to do had an eight-foot-tall madman that lived only for killing been angry with him. The gue'la's reply was calm as well; that in the face of the y'he, they would have to ally with forces that they would not normally consider joining with, if necessary, to destroy the beasts.

The other one said something about being unclean - "these xenos taint us," H'tras thought he heard. Again, the Inquisitor was unperturbed, reminding the gue'la of someone called "Marneus Calgar" at a place known as "I-kar five". It seemed that the black-armoured gue'la belonged to the same "chapter" as this "Marneus Calgar."

"H'tras," said the shas'ui softly. "You were closest to the gue'la when he spoke. Did he betray any sign of a lie? A pheromone signature, a heat shift, anything?"

"Negative, Shas'ui," said H'tras. "He was telling the truth."

"In that case, Shas'la, the Shas'o informs me that we are to reveal ourselves." H'tras nodded to himself and moved forward, cradling his weapon in both arms.

It seemed that the Inquisitor and the gue'la had finished their argument, as they both turned to look at the three tau emerging from the soil and shadow. Their dark red armour was highlighted by the blazing sun as they moved, in contrast to the black plates of the gue'la. The tall one looked at them, his face carefully bland - which was more effort than that made by the black-armoured one. His disgust was palpable.

"Well, xenos, it seems that we have need of each other," said the Inquisitor, first to breach the silence. "Perhaps we should converse. Past events would seem to indicate that you are not aware of the true threat on this planet."