

FIRE WARRIOR

Non-stop carnage and mayhem based on THQ's
awesome Playstation 2 and PC game!

by Simon Spurrier

Amidst the war and destruction of the grim far future, the fledgling Tau Empire has but one aim – to unite the galaxy under its benevolent banner. But when one of the Tau's ruling elite crash lands behind Imperial battle lines, it falls to Kais, a young Fire Warrior, to attempt a desperate rescue mission and offer his life for the greater good. But as the mission begins and the death count rises, Kais quickly learns that the brutal reality of battle is a far cry from the training grounds of his home world.



Simon Spurrier has become a frequent contributor to 2000AD and the Black Library. He has completed a degree in Film and Video.

Fire Warrior can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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from FIRE WARRIOR

'TWO RAIK'ORS.'

El'Lusha's terse proclamation jolted Kais from the reverie. He found himself unconsciously clutching at the utility pack clipped to his belt, feeling the familiar shape of the old display wafer through its thin material.

He knew his reluctance to discard the token was sentimentality of the worst kind: treasuring such a bauble long after its text had been committed to memory smacked of impracticality, utterly in violation of the principles of the Greater Good. Still, it exerted some form of impossible gravity upon him – he could no more throw it away than he could believe himself worthy of its lesson.

Satisfied that the wafer remained in its accustomed position, Kais glanced around the dropship. From across the hold El'Lusha stared at him with a sort of quiet amusement, completely at odds with his grizzled, scarred features. Kais looked away.

'Helmet checks,' the commander grunted. 'One-on-one.'

Kais turned to find a partner quickly, grateful for the distraction. A hand landed heavily on his shoulder.

'Here, Shas'la. I'll do it.' El'Lusha stood over him, the same quiet smile creasing the corners of his mouth.

'Thank you, Shas'el.' Kais mumbled, uncertain. He upended the helmet and lowered it over his head, feeling the familiar surge of sensory information as the faceplate made contact with his skin. The world opened up from a

single speck of light, a horizontal explosion of colours and shapes overwritten by winking text brackets and analysis readouts.

'You're La'Kais, aren't you?' Lusha's rasping voice enquired, hands firmly joining the clasps along Kais's spine. 'I checked.'

Kais frowned, unsure how to react. Why should a shas'el know his name? Unless...

'I knew your father.'

And there it was again: that crystallisation of reality, crumbling his senses and filling him with the certainty of his own worthlessness: all he was and would ever be was a reflection, and a faint one at that, of his father.

'He was a great warrior,' Lusha continued, knuckles rapping the base of Kais's neck in a final test of the helmet's seal. 'I served with him for many tau'cyr. I was with him on Fal'shia when the Y'he came. I mourned his death.'

Kais replied without thinking. 'I didn't know him well.'

Immediately he regretted it, chastising his own lack of respect. If Lusha noted the overfamiliarity he gave no indication of it, nodding sagely.

'I don't think anyone did,' he said, thoughtful.

A set of digits in the corner of Kais's vision blurred towards zero, an interface with the dropship's systems reminding him visually of the vessel's meteoric descent. Lusha was still staring at him.

'Thank you, Shas'el,' Kais mumbled, indicating his helmet seals, this time careful to observe the commander's caste-and-rank epithet. 'Should I check yours?'

Lusha shook his head with a small frown. 'My thanks, trooper, but no. I'm staying aboard, apparently. Shas'ar'tol command doesn't like its officers getting their hands dirty if they can possibly help it.' He shook his head again, muttering beneath his breath.

Kais said nothing, sinking back into his deployment seat in astonishment at El'Lusha's open disapproval of his own

superiors. Had a shas'la ever dared express such sedition they could be guaranteed an intensive course in mental correction at the very least, not that any were foolish enough to do so.

'First combat?' Lusha grinned. 'I can always tell.'

'Yes, Shas'el.' Kais wrung his hands together, uncomfortable at the attention. He felt betrayed by his nerves, compelled somehow to prove his preparedness. 'But... I've served four tau'cyrs already, Shas'el. And the combat simulations at the training dome are—'

'Ahh, simulations...' Lusha grinned, 'and four tau'cyrs of standing about guarding por'vres and por'els, no doubt.'

Kais nodded, embarrassed. Lusha chuckled.

'Your father said something to me, once,' he grunted, pursing his lips in thought. 'Might help you.'

Kais frowned, uneasy at the prospect of hearing his father's words from beyond the funeral pyre.

'He fixed me with those eyes of his and he said, "Young one... Don't make the mistake of thinking you're ready for this." Then he opened the drop doors and out we went.' Lusha's face clouded, preoccupied by the memories.

'You don't think us ready, Shas'el?'

'No. I don't think it's possible to be ready, La'Kais. The best you can do is expect the worst.'

Kais peered past the commander to his friends and comrades. Their postures betrayed them: each as anxious as he, unwilling to admit their fear to themselves. Somehow that knowledge was strangely reassuring. He wasn't alone with his terror.

'Warriors!' Lusha boomed, startling them. 'Attend! In half a raik'or we'll be at deployment altitude! This is it! This is what you trained for! This rotaa you face your Trial by Fire. Do not expect it to be easy!'

A light began to flash. The door into the drop deck gushed open and the padded restraints around each seat relaxed.

Muscles tensed. Teeth ground against one another.

‘Details are unimportant. There’s been an incident – that’s all you need to know. Remember your niche. Remember your place. You are a cog in a machine! Ask no questions! Obey and concentrate!’

‘Your mission is simple: engage and destroy. Conduct the mont’sel combat-pattern at all times; be swift and leave nothing alive. There’s a trench network at the city’s perimeter, so spread out when you’re down and clear the area. The crisis teams are setting down on the other side of the city, so don’t expect any backup. Things are not going well down there. Let’s turn the tide!’

A chime sounded. The readout in Kais’s helmet counted away the moments implacably, refusing to slow or stop in answer to his shrieking nerves. His ears roared. Nothing was real.

‘Remain focused on the tau’va! In unity lies progress! In harmony lies victory! Don’t let yourselves down, Fire Warriors!’

The ship shuddered. The hover thrusters rumbled to life. A fragmented thunderstorm raged beyond the hull.

A siren sounded.

‘Deployment positions,’ said Lusha.

THERE WERE NINE, in total. Eight clutching guns, staring and sneering through the bars of the cage, and one bustling industriously amongst the instrumentation of the chamber.

They smelt bitter, an aroma as unvaried and unsubtle as it was unpleasant, so unlike the rich pheromone language the tau enjoyed. These creatures were a race of clones, pink, frail and moist.

Aun’el T’au Ko’vash, secured behind adamantium bars, found himself searching for traces of artificial individuality with which to tell them apart: rank stripes, facial scars, tattoos. As an ethereal, the ruling caste of the tau race, it was his particular assignation in life to understand and

appreciate the unity and the deficiency in all things. Nonetheless, before he'd ever encountered the gue'la, he'd never imagined a species so utterly ignorant of its own imperfections. The gue'la, he had quickly learned, were going to be trouble.

And now he found himself their prisoner, abducted in a storm of violence that he was still fighting to understand. It didn't matter. The reality of any situation was in its present, and in the 'now' he was trapped. Helpless. An exhibit.

To Ko'vash, accustomed to the sweeping curvature and bright pallor of tau construction, his prison seemed unbearably grim. Given the lack of windows and the broad steps leading down to this low ceilinged space, he guessed he was incarcerated underground. The room itself was small and stifling, bordered by consoles and machinery, all typically gue'la in their rambling ugliness. Each of the eight soldiers faced his cage with an expression – in as much as he understood gue'la mannerisms – of intense disgust. One spat noisily.

'Don't do that, idiot!' barked a ninth, the coarse language quickly filtered and translated by the didactic learning modules the Aun, like all tau, had absorbed as an infant. From what little of it Ko'vash could see beyond its thick black cowl, this gue'la's face was a mass of twitching implants and sensors, copper wiring visible through its necrotic flesh. It jabbed a finger at the perpetrator, even now wiping spittle from his chin.

'This is a sterile area!'

The soldier appeared appropriately repentant until the black-cowl turned away, although Ko'vash entirely failed to interpret the bizarre hand gesture that followed. The ethereal was beginning to learn that such wasteful displays, utterly redundant in any constructive sense, were typical of his captors.

He made a decision. Opening his eyes fully, he dropped the façade of unconsciousness and rose to his feet in a single

sweeping motion. The rush of shocked pheromones from each of the gue'la was, he didn't mind admitting, deeply gratifying. The black-cowl recovered first.

'Well, well...' he muttered, hands rubbing together. A slight smile played across his metallic lips and he gestured vaguely at one of the soldiers, eyes not leaving Ko'vash. 'Contact Severus. Tell him our guest is awake.' The soldier sprinted up the stairs, not looking back.

The robed human positioned himself before the cage and studied Ko'vash intently, rubbing his chin.

'Well,' he kept saying quietly, thinking to himself, 'well, well...'

Ko'vash had neither the patience nor the inclination to remain silent in the face of scrutiny. He leaned forwards slowly.

'Who are you?' he said, testing his abilities to articulate the gue'las' crude language. A second rush of astonished pheromones greeted his senses.

'You speak Imperial?' the black-cowl hissed, cable-strewn fingers clenching in surprise.

Ko'vash ignored the question, irritated by the gue'la tendency to state the obvious, and repeated: 'Who are you, human?'

The face beneath the cowl leered. 'You're very well spoken – for an abomination. I respect that.'

Ko'vash merely stared, absorbing every shred of sensory information around him. The gue'la bowed with a sarcastic flourish, the bristling components of his face twitching excitedly.

'I am Tural Farrachus,' he said, 'Genetor primus of the Magos Biologis and Adept of the Officio Xenobiologica. I'm what you might call an... enthusiast of all things "tau".'

Ko'vash nodded, mentally storing the name. As much as his helplessness galled him, his first instinct was to gather information. Conversation seemed the most probable source of answers. He dipped his head respectfully, deciding

politeness would be his best tool, and declared: 'I am Aun'el T'au Ko'vash.'

'Ah, yes,' Farrachus purred, voice thick with insincere gravity. 'Let me see now... That would make you an Aun of the rank "el", correct? The... third highest, I think?'

'Fourth,' Ko'vash interceded, interested in the gue'la's knowledge despite himself. Such basic factors of tau life were hardly secrets; surely these frail creatures didn't bring him here for this?

'I stand corrected.' Farrachus grinned. 'The central part of your name is your birthworld – what was it?'

'T'au.'

'That's it... And the last section is the "given" name, if memory serves. "Ko-vaj", was it?'

'Ko'vash...'

The magos bowed flamboyantly again. 'A pleasure to meet you.'

'What is this place, Adept Farrachus?'

'That's irrelevant,' the man smiled, turning away to continue his inspection of a blinking datascreen. 'Consider yourself a guest of His Most Sacred Majesty, the Emperor of Mankind. I suggest you enjoy his hospitality while it lasts.'

He selected a polished scalpel from a tray at his side and examined it pointedly. There was something almost amphibious to his features; the wide mouth and metal-infested skin spread in an ugly smile that derived, Ko'vash could clearly see, from his perceived seniority to those around him.

The ethereal refused to be cowed in the same way, staring disdainfully at the brandished scalpel. In truth, the didactic memories divulged little material regarding this 'Officio Xenobiologica', but the overtones were clear. Without a trace of arrogance Ko'vash was fully aware of his importance to the tau: to have fallen into the hands of beings as fiercely expansionist as the gue'la was nothing short of disastrous. He had no doubt that, at the first

possible juncture, he would be tortured for whatever tactical knowledge he possessed. The shortsightedness of the gue'la was appalling.

Whispering a calming litany, he reminded himself that even the gue'la, in time, would come to embrace the tau'va. All things would, eventually.

'How did I come to be here?' he purred, examining his memories for clues.

He'd been visiting the colony world Yu'kanesh when it happened; a riot of gunfire and madness that left his retinue pulverised and him gagging for air. He remembered the gas they'd used, curling through his mind and dampening every sensation. He remembered shouts and screams, then vast shapes in the fog hulking implacably forwards, then nothing.

'My employer organised some... mutual friends to fetch you.' The human chuckled, not looking round. 'He's most anxious to meet you.'

'Your "employer"?'

'That's right. Well... Our "host", at any rate. Ultimately I serve a far greater cause, as do all of the Emperor's flock.'

'We're not so dissimilar, then,' Ko'vash trilled, testing him.

'You're quite wrong,' Farrachus growled, smug features twisting with anger. He fiddled with the knife impatiently, testing its weight. 'We're worlds apart, you and I.'

'Perhaps. Perhaps not.' Ko'vash waved an elegant hand dismissively, gratified at the ease with which these inefficient creatures could be goaded. 'Tell me... What is your Emperor?'

Farrachus's eyes flashed angrily. 'How dare you speak his name? I'll not tolerate *xenos* sullying his purity.'

Ko'vash tilted his head, undeterred by the insult. 'Nonetheless – the question stands. What is he?'

'He is the purity of mankind. Our light and our guide. I wouldn't expect an abomination to understand!'

'Would you say, then, that he represents the whole of your race?'

‘Of course! We live and die to serve him!’

‘And in so doing, you serve all gue’la?’

The adept’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. ‘Where are you going with this, alien?’

Ko’vash allowed a serene smile to play across his lips. ‘The “greater power” that I serve,’ he said, ‘teaches us that in service to our race, we contribute to the Greater Good... Are your Emperor and my tau’va truly so different?’

‘That’s enough,’ the man growled, all vestiges of humour discarded.

‘You called yourself an enthusiast of the tau,’ Ko’vash persisted, ‘so you must know of the tau’va... You must know we seek to unite all things for their mutual benefit, not to destroy them? We are no threat to you, unless provoked.’

‘You will be *quiet!*’ the human barked, brandishing the scalpel.

‘We are no threat to you, and yet you hold me against my will. You must see the illogic of it.’

Farrachus’s advance halted, and his mouth curled with cruel humour once more. ‘I told you why you are here,’ he hissed. ‘My master was anxious to speak with you. You have so much to discuss together.’

‘Whoever he is, he can’t imagine that I’ll tell him anything important.’

‘Forgive my scepticism, alien. I’ve heard those words said before.’

‘I’ll die before I betray the tau’va.’

‘You would do well to forget whatever xeno gibberish you believe.’ Farrachus growled. ‘It won’t help you any longer. And if you think I’ll let you die before you’ve... co-operated, you’re quite, quite mistaken.’

He chuckled, turning back to the instrument panels, sweaty fingers caressing the knife’s hilt.

THE WAIT ON the drop deck was significantly shorter.

The deployment doors melted open to reveal a smoke-blotted patch of dust and mud below. The first few warriors,

crouched in readiness, shuffled agitatedly, knuckles tightening on rifles.

Early morning gloom raced by beneath, the first tentative splashes of light from the rising sun streaking the smoke and sand. Dolumar IV was a bleak world even when seen from above, and Kais glared morosely at the rocky wastes as they drew inexorably closer.

An altimeter chimed. The droplight turned green and the fire warriors in front of him began to tumble out into the haze.

Kais's leg muscles bunched, smoke and dust churning past them into the drop deck. He took a breath, swallowed hard, and jumped.

LIEUTENANT ALIK KEVLA waved forwards the ragged remnants of his squad and advanced towards the next blind corner of the trench system. More of the alien vessels were bleeding out of the skies with every moment, filling the air with the awful shriek of their engines. Mind still burning with fury at the lucky airstrike that had wiped out half of his squad scant minutes before, he cursed every inhuman abomination that ever dared draw breath within the Emperor's divine realms and gripped his lasgun to his chest.

They'd come from nowhere, unprovoked and unannounced, but by the grace of the Throne they'd regret the day they came to this world!

'Landing craft,' he snarled, peering cautiously around a corner at the pair of bulbous shuttles hovering nearby. They tilted downwards shallowly, as if sniffing at the dust, great plumes of haze lifting around their engines. Kevla turned to his squad with a growl. 'Not one of them lives that walks on the Emperor's soil. You understand? *Not one.*'

They chorused their assent, sharing his anger. None of them held any great fondness for this world or its people, but they'd be damned before they saw a single godless

xenogen sully the sanctity of an Imperial world. Kevla nodded, satisfied at their resolve, and broke cover.

Dolumar IV was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a well-developed world. The spaceport was little more than a cluster of limpet buildings and a field of rockcrete, the major city Lettica a haphazard arrangement of rock and steel and the population little more than a captive army of workers.

All through the day and night the smelting factories churned away, disgorging their noxious emissions and shattering any hope of a moment's silence. The agriculture projects had all died within a few years of the first colonists' arrival; only the relentless machines, grinding away eternity in a fugue of molten metal and weld sparks, gave the planet any sense of purpose now.

Dolumar was a weapon world. Eating itself from the inside out, its overseers kept a constant stream of impure metallic nuggets spilling onto rickety, steaming conveyors; churning out the oiled, brittle killing tools of the Imperial Guard. Give it enough time and Lettica's factories would cover its entire surface – another forge world to birth the war machines of the Imperium.

Little wonder the *Departemento Munitorum* had chosen to garrison the planet with such a high density of guardsmen. Four entire regiments were, even now, scrambling to respond to this unannounced alien threat.

Lieutenant Kevla sneered as he darted forwards, reassured by the war cries of the men hot on his heels. Yes, he told himself, these tau had made a grave mistake in targeting Dolumar.

Which was when twenty rounds of burstcannon fire shredded Lieutenant Kevla and his small squad in a cataclysm of detonating flesh and half-lived screams.

BRIEFLY, KAIS FLEW.

When it rose up to meet him, the ground seemed impossibly solid. The earth impacted against his hooves

with an astonishing lurch, jarring through his legs. He stumbled, regaining his balance in a clumsy spray of dust and rock. More troopers piled out behind him, scattering towards the myriad trench openings nearby. Thick with haze and smoke, his first impressions of the planet were uniformly cluttered, crudely constructed trench walls snaking away towards the distant angles and towers of the gue'la city.

Even over the scream of the dropship's engines, with miniature cyclones of dust fountaining all around him, Kais could hear the unmistakable rattle of burstcannon fire. The multi-barrelled weapon mounted on the nose of the dropship came to life with a hungry buzz, its bright strobe fire dazzling him. By the time his disordered thoughts were settled enough to wonder at the weapon's intended target, all that remained was a ragged cluster of shapes, crumbling and dissolving before his eyes.

It took Kais long, ugly raik'ans to realise that the red mist hanging in the air was gue'la blood. Somehow he'd expected them to have water pumping through their moist bodies, fuelling their plump, pink muscles and sloshing through their vacuous inner spaces. The vibrancy of their fluids was startling. The bodies slumped awkwardly as the burstcannon shut off, smoke gushing from its barrels, rotations slowing lazily.

And then the explosions started, and the smoke lifted, and hell opened up before him. The sky was a patchwork of pulsefire and tracer streams, arcing magnificently between unseen ordnance and unseen target. Perfect t'roi-petal detonations rippled open from horizon to horizon, sending out questing tentacles of shrapnel, churning the already frothing air in ranks of airborne metal and fire. A phalanx of Barracudas howled overhead, riding the storm of smoke and chaos; a tawny blur of pastel and black against the overcast pall. Enemy fighters gusted after them, weapons chattering.

Kais absorbed it all in stunned fascination, oblivious to the fire warriors sprinting past him. A voice in his head snapped him to attention sharply.

'All hands clear,' it barked. 'Secure the area and advance into the trenches.'

Kais glanced around, surprised to find himself alone. His comrades' armoured forms melted through the haze, pulling away from the hovering vessel towards the cover of the trenches. A second dropship, similarly poised, was settling nearby, no doubt preparing to disgorge its own cargo of troopers.

Kais focused on a pair of his comrades and stumbled after them, mind still reeling. Gunfire fought with the howl of the shuttle engines, jostling for his attention. The bright flash-flare of distant airstrikes patterned him with light and shadow, thick mushrooms of smoke pillaring upwards above the walls of the trench. On every side the mangled crudity of gue'la engineering affronted his eyes: haphazard bridges crisscrossing the channels with buckling scaffold struts, half-crumbled pillboxes overlooking each meandering twist in the sandbag corridors.

It was madness, and he gagged to find himself at its centre.

The two warriors sprinted ahead before he could catch them up, ducking beneath a wide platform that straddled the trench. Kais recognised the squat physique of the shas'la on point: a female named Keth'rit who had trained with him on T'au. The other he didn't know.

The pair stepped around the nearest corner and flew apart, las-fire knocking ugly chunks from their armour. Keth'rit's head jolted backwards with a snap, a pale jet of cyan blood hanging limpid in the air before scrawling itself across the trench wall. The other trooper fragmented at the limbs and neck as his chest absorbed a volley, slumping in a fractured heap.

Kais's momentum carried him on, too astonished by his comrades' strangled death throes to even think. By

the time something approaching reality assembled itself in his mind it was too late to stop, too late to regret the rashness of the assault, too late to recite the Sio't meditation of the Shas'len'ra – the Cautious Warrior. His legs betrayed him, carrying him past Keth'rit's jerking form and into the path of whatever had killed her. The scent of her blood was overpowering.

He dropped a knee to the floor, operating on instinct, panicked and automatic actions taken without a thought passing his mind. Grit and fabric exploded from the sand-bag wall at his back, las-blasts at head height harmlessly shredding the air above him. He raised the rifle, isolating a shape from the swirling melange of visual madness, and squeezed the trigger. Something shrieked and crumpled to the ground, legs kicking and flailing dumbly.

Kais watched the gue'la for a long time, wishing it would realise it was dead.

KOR'VRE RANN T'PELL, ensconced within the comfortable confines of the second shuttle's cockpit, nodded in satisfaction at the sensor displays. Glancing at the concave grid of viewscreens before her, she noted that her sister vessel had finished deploying its cargo of fire warriors and was beginning to lift clear. Nodding, she finalised her smooth descent with practiced ease and tapped at a control, remotely informing the deck officer that disembarkation could begin.

The controls before her could hardly be more intuitive: finely balanced level gauges, pitch and roll tracker spheres, directional touchpads on hovering drones, all within easy reach of her slender arms, themselves a physical trait common to all the spaceborn tau of the air caste. It was a design of perfect ergonomic arrangement, a symbiosis of pilot and vessel, and she never failed to spare a respectful thought for whatever earth caste fio'el had designed it.

'The doors are open, Kor've,' her kor'ui assistant trilled, concentrating hard on regulating the hover thrusters.

T'pell clucked her tongue in acknowledgement, daring to relax her tense muscles. Thus far the troop deployment had been a complete success.

As if overhearing her thoughts, the dropship's AI chimed in with a sonorous announcement. 'General alert,' it warned, voice lifeless and cold. 'Enemy ordnance seeking lock. Gridzone 3-5-2.'

T'pell hissed and forced herself to remain calm, fixing her eyes upon the appropriate viewscreen. Sure enough, a lumbering vehicle on dust-choked tracks, venting clouds of smoke, lurched along the rim of a nearby trench and swivelled its turret inexorably in her direction. T'pell stabbed at the burstcannon auto-track control and held her breath.

The two weapons fired together.

For the briefest fraction of a raik'an, T'pell was convinced she could see the artillery shell ripping through the air towards her. Then the dropship shuddered, the viewscreens flickered to darkness, and everything turned to fire.

KAIS WAS RETRACING his steps, intent upon regrouping with others from his cadre, when he spotted the tank. It squatted on the bank above the trench enormously, gunmetal flanks as chipped and stained as any of the gue'la technology he'd seen thus far. Glaring at it from below with a cynical eye, he doubted the vehicle's efficacy as a threat to his comrades. He was quickly forced to reassess.

The cannon fired, its roar shuddering through the air and lifting a layer of dust and sand from the trench floor.

Like an angry creature spasming its muscles to shed the parasites infecting its skin, the ground clenched and shuddered. Something nearby detonated, and Kais lost his footing at the rush of shockwaves that followed. Scrabbling in the sand, he dragged his gaze painfully towards the end of the trench, where boiling gouts of

smoke and dust lurched skywards. One of the dropships had been hit, toroq-side engine blown to shreds.

The comm erupted in shouts and screams and the world went white.

Burstcannon pulses punched craters in the trench-walls around Kais, knocking lumps of molten metal from the gue'la tank above his head and sending him scrabbling for cover. The tank rolled onwards in spite of the firestorm, attempting to negotiate the bridge that spanned the trench.

'...econd dropsh... oing dow—'

'...ear the site! Get to c—'

Trailing a plume of superheated fuel, continuing to spit a hail of pulsefire at the tank even as it foundered, the dropship hit the ground and dragged itself in an ugly arc. Dust churned upwards, obliterating the shrieks from the communicator and blocking Kais's view. The last thing he saw was the other shuttle, the one he'd been deployed from, pulling away to the left as its dying sister-vessel gyrated in a fiery circle, heaving smoke and flame into the dust storm.

Shredded by the burstcannon, the scaffold bridge collapsed.

Spewing its mechanical innards, venting fire from the wounds all over its hull, the gue'la tank nosedived into the trench in a cascade of rock and oil, dragging with it the ruined skeleton of the bridge. The trench walls crumbled, smearing themselves across the devastation.

Scrabbling clear of the tumbling wreckage, Kais thought of the gue'la trapped inside the vehicle, wounded and baking, wondering why the access hatch wouldn't open, slowly suffocating in the dark. Guiltily, aware of the untaulike sentiment of it, he thought: Good.

Rising up beyond the wreckage, thrusters faltering, the remaining dropship wobbled into the sky.

'General address!' his comm announced, startling him. 'This is El'Lusha. The drop site is no longer safe! All troopers

regroup! I'm sending new coordinates now. Make your way to the pick-up site and await further instructions.'

Kais felt panic gripping him, glancing around in the futile hopes of spotting other shas'las. 'El'Lusha,' he transmitted, voice growing faster and louder as his terror betrayed him, 't-this is La'Kais. I don't think I can regroup... The... the trench is blocked – I can't see any of the others! I don't know wh–'

'La'Kais.' The voice was maddeningly calm, a leaden slab that arrested his panic before it consumed him. 'La'Kais, you must focus.'

He forced himself to breathe, grinding his teeth together until the horror subsided. He hung his head, ashamed of himself. 'My apologies, Shas'el.'

'Listen to me: the rest of the cadre is scattered on the other side of the dropsite. They're regrouping, but they're too far clear of your position...'

'Shas'el? I-I don't understand.'

'I'm sorry, La'Kais. You'll have to advance to the extraction point alone.'

'T-there aren't any others?' His voice was quiet, not ready to believe itself. Without even thinking, his hand clutched for the shape of the display wafer in his belt pouch.

'None, Shas'la,' came Lusha's grave reply. 'They're making their own way.'

'I'm alone, then...' he murmured, more to himself than his commander.

'No, Shas'la. *Not* alone. No tau ever is – you know that.'

Kais breathed deep, unable to find any comfort in Lusha's words.

The disembodied voice continued with a sigh. 'You should be receiving those co-ordinates now.' A row of characters blinked to life in the corner of his HUD. He stared at them morosely, aware of the distance involved.

'You can do this, Kais.'

He watched the ship clamber into the smoke, suspecting that with it went his hopes of survival.

'Yes, Shas'el.'

NICO JUNZ WAS scared. He didn't mind admitting it. Being a coward was something he'd learned to live with long ago, refining it into a virtual art form. Now he relied upon his innate sense of terror to keep him alive.

That was the principle, at any rate.

He'd flourished amongst the grunts of the 19th Glamorgian regiment thanks wholly to his literacy. His weapon skills were negligible and any one of his comrades could, had they wanted to, pound him into the ground. But could any of them compose letters to their families, or read prayers to pass the time on guard duty? Could any of them make equipment manifestos or help the captain administer the armoury? Of course not. Being a coward was one thing, but being a *useful* coward was entirely another. Life, if not good, was at least easy.

And then, arcing out of the morning sky like a hail of meteors, the tau had come.

Suddenly nobody had the time to write letters, the captain was too busy shouting orders and killing things to worry about expenses, and the armoury, as of fifteen minutes ago, was a smoking crater. So yes, he was scared. Scared and, even worse, completely and utterly useless.

The ceiling of the tight bunker, empty but for Nico, Captain Reicz and a communications servitor, vibrated in response to some explosion outside, dust misting downwards. Nico whimpered under his breath.

'Quiet,' Reicz snorted, turning back to lean over the servitor's shoulder. Nico, pressed against a wall in an attempt to remain clear of the captain's fraying temper, regarded the ghoulish thing with a shudder. Once a living human, now its dead features were riddled with mechanical apparatus and twitching components, logic engines replacing its cauterised

brain. Its necrotic flesh tightened in concentration as it listened to the comm-feed from the sensor array on the bunker's roof.

'Tau transmission intercepted...' it hissed, dead eyes long since rotted away and replaced by glowing optics. 'Attempting to translate now...'

Its myriad fingers, branching horrendously from every part of its hands and wrists, began manipulating the gears and clattering logic devices on the console before it, every now and again pausing to tilt its head at some particularly hard-to-translate phrase. Reicz bent over it, watching the flickering display screen as the garbled message was deciphered. Nico felt himself creeping nearer, intrigued despite himself.

'Bastards...' the captain breathed, dismayed by the message. 'Sneaky alien bastards...'

Nico had just spotted the words 'deception' and 'delay' from amongst the glowing text when something clattered loudly on the rockcrete above his head, then roared like a hundred thunderstorms. The whole bunker shook.

Nico dived to the ground with a shriek, curling in a whimpering ball as the ceiling splintered and dust rained down from above. Reicz regarded the damage with rather more decorum, angrily glaring upwards. As if mewling for his attention, the console whined painfully, then shut down with a protracted hiss. The screen flickered and went black.

'What happened?' Reicz demanded.

The servitor twitched and chattered, eyebrows dipped in confusion. 'Comm link severed...' it reported helplessly. 'External channels dead.'

'Sir?' Nico quailed, pulling himself upright with helpful eagerness. 'What's wr—'

'They bombed us!' he roared furiously, hunting for someone to vent his anger at. He grabbed Nico's lapels and bellowed into his face. 'The bastards knocked out our comms, you idiot!'

Nico cringed. 'Helpful' was clearly not a wise career move. The captain dropped him and scratched his chin, furious.

'I need a line to Command!'

The servitor shook its head with a vacant rattle. Reicz's lip curled.

'You,' he snarled. Nico looked up and found a gloved finger aimed at his face. 'M-me?'

'Get to the command post. Tell them I know what the xenos are doing.'

'Wha—'

'Quiet. Listen. They're drawing our fire. Lettica isn't the target.'

'But, sir—'

'Shut up! It's a diversion! It's a warp-damned diversion, you hear me? The prison. You tell them! You tell Command from me — they're going after the prison!'

Nico's mind did a backflip. 'Wh—'

Reicz glared. 'Run!'

The whimpered complaint in Nico's throat curled up and died. A laspistol muzzle had appeared magically in front of his eyes.

He came to a sudden, adrenalin-fuelled decision. If there was one thing a professional coward was certain to be good at, it was running. He was out the door and sprinting before he knew it.

KAIS DREW A long breath and crept further along the trench. The oblique curves of the recessed corridors fractured and distorted every sound, making distances impossible to judge. Every gunfire report or roiling artillery impact was a potential threat, and every corner represented an opportunity for deadly surprises.

Behind him, one of the dead gue'la gurgled. They did that, he'd quickly learned. They jerked and groaned and dribbled. Filthy.

His mind was unsettled: a storm of turbulence and dangerous excess. He'd seen and done so much in the few raik'ors since his separation from the cadre that he could barely think straight. He'd fought and sniped and shot. He'd punched holes through soft alien guts and cut short their blind, prejudiced little lives with no more effort than a trigger pull. He'd smelled their burning flesh, wiped their blood from his pale armour and listened, annoyed, to their shrieks and pleas. They were inefficient, he had decided.

In a corner of his mind, he wondered why he wasn't dead yet.

Along this small stretch of trenchway, dwarfed by the engagement raging all around him, Kais had learnt more about the Way of the Fire Warrior than twenty tau'cyrs in the battledome on T'au. It was enough to disquiet even the firmest, most stable mind.

But worse, worse even than extinguishing the lives of these brutal, impetuous creatures, was the suspicion creeping over him that he was just like them. He had discovered within himself a proclivity for killing, and it terrified him like nothing else.

The comm interrupted his thoughts. 'Kais,' Lusha said, sounding strained. 'Kais, I want you to pay attention.'

'Yes, Shas'el?'

'There's a bunker ahead of you. You see it?'

Kais peered along the winding trench, disquieted by his commander's ability to remotely view the feed from his helmet optics. All throughout his training he'd been uncomfortable with the sensation: having someone else inside his eyes, staring out at his world without his permission, judging his actions from a distance.

'I see it,' he said, glaring at the rockcrete pillbox. He'd assumed it was deserted as he approached, a thick ebb of smoke lifting from its upper surface in silent testament to a recent airstrike. The mangled remains of a communications array sagged piteously above it.

'Listen,' Lusha commed, 'I've just had word from shas'ar'-tol. They're concerned that the gue'la in that bunker might have intercepted some... sensitive transmissions. Their equipment is more sophisticated than we thought.'

'I don't understand, Shas'el.'

'You don't need to understand, La'Kais. You just need to obey.'

The rebuke rang hollow in Kais's mind. He understood the convention of Shas'la obedience and had even thought himself prepared to abide by it, but now he came to it he felt a powerful need for information. He craved knowledge of the situation, intensely uncomfortable with blind obedience.

Ju would have called it arrogance of the worst kind, he thought with a smile. In questioning orders he was betraying a distrust of his superiors and an unwillingness to allow others to make decisions for him. He quelled the subversive sentiments and bowed his head again, conscientiously attempting to conform.

'Of course, Shas'el. What are my orders?'

'Clear out the bunker, Shas'la. Leave nobody alive. El'Lusha out.'

Kais listened to the silence of the comm-channel and breathed deeply.

Don't think about it, he told himself. Don't ask why, don't concern yourself. Just do it.

Not allowing himself time to agonise, he snatched a grenade from his utility belt, thumbed the trigger, and hurled it. Moments before it tumbled through the bunker's doorway a skinny gue'la leapt out into the trench, eyes wide in terror. The grenade skittered past him into the dark interior, and in a strangled expulsion of breath the gue'la leapt away, not even aware of the fire warrior standing three tor'leks from him.

Kais blinked. The whole thing had lasted moments.

The grenade detonated with a roar, lifting the top layers of dust from the bunker and forcing out the walls: a concrete

belly spasming with shrapnel flatulence. Smoke and flesh vented unevenly through the doorway.

He peered inside cautiously, strangely unnerved by the ease with which he'd commanded such devastation. Less than a dec ago he was awash with fear and confusion, bewildered by the strangeness and terror of it all. Now he was peering at the shredded remains of two bodies – two more bodies – with barely a jot of interest. They were just meat.

'That soldier...' came Lusha's terse voice in his ear. An orange icon blinked in his helmet display, distance tracker rising swiftly. 'You need to pursue him. He could be carrying a warning...'

'What warning?' Kais blurted, astonishing himself. He could feel the blood rushing to his face and bit at his tongue, furious with himself. He hadn't intended to vocalise the query that had bubbled impetuously in his mind, least of all in such a disrespectful manner. His inability to contain rebellious thoughts had landed him in trouble before, and he prepared himself for the chastisement that would no doubt follow.

Lusha surprised him again, sighing wearily. 'Our deployment here was a distraction, Kais. Nothing more. We're drawing their troops away from our true objective.'

'A... a distraction?' Kais felt sick. He saw again the two fire warriors dissolving before his eyes, picked apart by relentless las-fire. He saw the spinning bulk of the shuttle, whirling out of control in a storm of dust and flame. He saw the death and insanity that had surrounded him since he set foot on this planet, a web of blood and smoke and horror. All part of an elaborate ruse. 'Just a distraction...' he repeated, unwilling to believe it.

'Kais!' Lusha's voice was strained with impatience. 'Remember the machine. "One people, one unity, one person." You're a cog! You're a component in a greater scheme, and if you're ordered to take part in a distraction, then by the One Path you'll do it!'

Kais lowered his head, the shame boiling in his mind.
'Yes, Shas'el.'

'Good.' The voice softened again, almost apologetic in its tone. 'It's never easy, Kais. I know that. Accept your place in the tau'va and you'll find your peace.'

'I will try, Shas'el. Y-you have my apologies.'

'The gue'la soldier. He mustn't be allowed to raise the alarm. We think there's a command post nearby. It's possible he's heading for that.'

'I understand.'

'Good. Get after him.'

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