

When the call to battle came, Maltuan sent to Torix a division of Tanks. This nameless unit was simply known as the 1st Armoured. They were equipped with the Ramses Main Battle Tank, a fast and maneuverable but finicky vehicle.

When they returned, with barely half the tanks they had left with, the 1st Armoured refused to be known as anything other than Amir's Assegais.

This is why

16:15, 21st of January

Major Amir hoisted herself up to the rear of the turret and wiped her brow again. She briefly considered taking a sip from her canteen, but refrained. It wouldn't stick with the tough-it-out attitude she wanted to project. Everyone else was trying to bear the desert heat of the Torixian equator with some fortitude, and she was keenly aware that as one of the last remaining original officers of her battalion, she was the closest thing to an example that her troopers had left. Especially standing on top of her tank's turret, in full view of everyone else.

Stepping up between the two flags, which stood limp in the dead air, she looked down at her even more uncomfortable driver and crew mechanic, who were currently sweating profusely and using not-at-all standard operating procedures to get the optics turret rotating correctly again. After the reactor failed a week ago because of the salt spray, and the AC choking on those disgusting silk-bugs that had thrown themselves into the vents like flies into a blue light, it was only natural that the optics' turn to complain had come.

'What's the issue this time, Bontu?'

'Dust, boss. No bloody wind to keep us cool, but if anyone moves their tank even an inch, it kicks up dust like nothing else. Damn dust clogs the whole thing up.'

Amir nodded and turned away to glance at the line of tanks which had stopped by the side of the track. The various crews were mostly locked up inside, taking advantage of the Ramses' air conditioned paradise, but every now and again she could spot a plucky officer or two doing their job at seeming in charge. On top of *Thunderlance*, she could see corporal Denno and his two crewmen, working on their own autocannon turret. Next to her own tank, *Thunderlance* was probably the next most vulnerable one to gremlins of all sorts. Far up ahead, by a small mobile command post over which beat the flags of Jut Fareed and the Confederacy, a table had been set up and a gaggle of higher ranks were examining a map. Ignoring the heat for a moment, Amir fitted her ATCH back over her head. Focusing on the group, she got the helmet's computer to zoom in on them.

Their body language said a lot. Everyone was clutching stuff - notepads, maps, pens. Their demeanour was stiff and stilted. Nervous. Most of them recent promotions after the swathe of casualties. The entire command chain had been a circus ever since the Vrul managed to overrun General Ndungwane's CP on day 27 of the campaign, when barely half of the army had been properly deployed and on the field. Allah, that had been a shitshow. At least now, with most of the initial commanders dead, wounded or missing, the problem of ego had been resolved and everyone who was left was working together. It

wasn't so much a high command as a committee of cooperating generals with the remains of Ndungwane's plan and a loose idea of how they were going to win this.

The computer adjusted the display slightly as a cloud of dust floated between them. Amir removed the helmet, and looked over at the road laid down by the Tehnalian engineers - a squat column of a handful of APCs was rumbling its way down towards them now, from over the next hill. The red white and black tricolor fluttered atop their vehicles, but it was barely discernible among the troops that lay crowded on top of them.

'What's that?' Bontu grumbled as the cursed dust complicated his job.
'Convoy from the Tehnali medical. We saw them pass along last night in the other direction. You were asleep.'

The vehicles stopped by them, as an officer dismounted from the middle of the convoy to go and check up on the situation at the CP. Amir looked over the wounded, who lay more or less nonchalantly, in more or less discomfort, on top of the APCs.

- 'Hey Maltuan, don't see many of you folks around.' A raucous voice called out from the one closest by them.

Amir bristled as she looked over for its origin.

- 'No offense intended, of course.' A sergeant added. Half his face was covered in a bandage, and his arm was in a sling.

- 'Been down further south for the past month, on the smaller islands, dealing with the remnants of their factory militias.'

The Chengan NCO nodded, making a grimace. 'Ah yeah, heard that was a big one. You know how much more of this road there is?'

- 'We came from the port, three days away, but they're taking you to the medevac LZ just two hours from here. You'll be offworld in no time.'

- 'Ha...my thanks, major. If that's so, you might need this more than me.' The sergeant picked up his canteen from his side, and chucked it at Amir. She caught it neatly by the sling.

- 'Many thanks, sergeant.'

A few of the Chengan marines followed the example of their sergeant, throwing over some water at the Maltuan troopers. Even Bontu momentarily stopped his repairs to glance at them as their convoy drove off.

- 'Them the guys we're coming to back up, major?'

- 'Yeah, CAIC. They landed on this island right at the start of the hostilities, and they've been pushing through the plains ever since.'

- 'What, three straight months of pushing? Are they on foot?'

- 'Nah. Technically they're supposed to be airmobile infantry. This flank was to be done by day 30 in Ndungwane's initial plans, I think. Instead just the initial beachhead took three days of fighting in the surf to establish.'

- 'Huh.' Amir suspected that was Bontu's polite way of notifying her that he had stopped listening and was once more hard at work on the gun's autocannon.

* * *

17:22

The sun was dipping on the horizon, bringing merciful coolness with it, when the colonel came down the line, having a quick word with each of his officers as he passed by. Amir, standing by the fire which her squadron had made, nodded to him, and he gestured for her to come over.

A little ways off from the fire, he turned to speak, in a low voice. He looked exhausted. Then again, he always did these days.

- 'Major. We're moving up again, of course. I expect that by 8pm we'll be at Steel ridge. I'll need you in your seat in a few minutes for a regiment-wide briefing with the other squadron leaders.'

- 'Steel ridge, boss?'

- 'Mmh. Just check the map. I'll be on comms in five minutes.' Without another word, her CO turned away and walked down the line into the gathering darkness.

Amir sucked in air from a corner of her mouth, and almost expressed her disapproval at the 'playing it mysterious' attitude he seemed to be gaining. Yet the colonel didn't look like he was going for that. He just looked like someone who had the weight of an armoured regiment after ninety days of fighting on his shoulders.

- 'Here, give me a serving.' She said, turning back to the fire and reaching for a plate. 'I have a briefing to listen to.'

She climbed into the tank from the rear hatch, careful not to spill her meal in the cramped confines of the rear power block. Towards the front was her position, one point of a triangle formed by the driver in front, the gunner sitting on the left in a mess of optics, and her position on the right. She sat down in it, gingerly holding her plate in one hand as she flipped the switch to fold away the optics. The five screens showing her radar and crew views hissed gently as they folded up into the low ceiling, and the other implements of her station retracted into the more comfortable at-rest position, giving her slightly more space. In front of her, that was just enough room to put down her plate and look at the holographic map. She snuck in a bite, and quickly fished out the earpieces from her helmet.

- 'Major Pedro checking in, colonel.'

- 'Major Dezo, here too.'

- 'Right. Amir?'

- 'Mmm' she quickly swallowed, burning herself with the hot food. 'Yes, yes, Amir here major.'

- 'Right, putting the display up now.'

Terrain appeared on the small holographic sandtable in front of her, tracing the undulations of a ridge rising from the brush that surrounded them. Amir glanced at the scale. A really, really big ridge. Rocky too - she could see a scatter of rocks spread all over the thing in odd patterns. She reached over and pinched her view in for a close zoom.

The rocks were tanks. The whole bloody ridge was covered, swarming with the carcasses of inert tanks. She could see Vrul variants, but at least an equal proportion were Antarean.

'What the-' major Dezo blurted over the radio.

'This is a scan from a UAV we got yesterday of the area. It's why the CAIC has called this area - initially designated Hill 254 - 'Steel Ridge'. When they initially hit it, they found that the Vrul had heavily dug into it with bunkers and trenches - probably even before the war started. They sent in their armoured, and managed to take the thing with heavy casualties. Then the Vrul sent in their own armour and retook it. They've been fighting over it for three weeks at this point.

The ridge is important - for both us and them, it's the last defense line before our rear areas. For them, that's their industrial areas to the north, and for us it's our field hospitals, LZs and temporary harbours to the south. The Chengans have done a pretty good job of holding it, and enemy attacks of late have turned into factory militia charges. Nothing too dangerous. Recently though, forward elements - and specifically JF special forces scouting out front, have signalled that something is happening.'

The point of view shifted, sweeping northwards to a large valley pockmarked with indistinct shapes, artifacts created to symbolize vague echos that the drones and ground radar could pick up.

'There's a major build-up of enemy forces, taking place on the plains beyond the ridge. The Vrul are massing forces for an attack - a big one.'

'I thought we'd annihilated most of their forces?'

'Yeah, so did we. We have no idea if it is scavenged equipment, factory militia, or some kind of new force on the field. We need to blunt their attack before it hits Steel Ridge.'

'We won't be heading in for a frontal attack, up the road from Steel Ridge. They'll be expecting that. Instead, we're planning on having the engineers clear you a path through the coastal minefield. After making it to the western bit of Steel ridge' - a pan of the map - 'here, we're to move through the night, drive over and around hill 211 right here, and hit the troop concentrations from the flank, in the middle of the valley here.'

They brought up their datapads, and jotted down some notes as the Colonel went back over the manoeuvre he had described, assigning the squadrons into columns, specifying their regrouping point, and establishing a timetable for the entire operation, step by step.

‘We’ll have progress reports when you hit a checkpoint, when you run into difficulties, and on the hour, every hour. Once we get to the top of 211, we should get some indirect support for our approach of the troop concentrations. Then we will do as much damage as we possibly can, and pull out before the enemy gets organized. Are there any questions?’

‘What kind of indirect support are we talking about?’

‘We’re not sure. Various options are being studied by Retivan and Chengan troops in the area, but everything is being complicated by the minefield. You’ll be updated on that as we progress. Nothing else? Now. Three hour drive to the ridge, we’ll have a few hours to stretch our legs once we get there, and then we crack on.’

A short silence as the officers seemed to quietly calculate the odds of the task ahead, each one alone in their own steel bastion.

‘No further questions? Right. Briefing over, get going.’

Amir pulled the earbuds out, and rubbed her eyes. Turning to her side, she pulled up the comms screen with her platoon, and gently cursed at the complicated process of adding details to a new move order in the shared command system. Behind her, there was the grumble and clanging of Bilan and Bontu clambering into the tank. Bontu especially was on his usual train of uninterrupted moaning about everything from the dust to the food to the stars and then back to the dust again. His grumbling rose and fell as he fussed around the cockpit, picking up Amir’s plate and cutlery and taking it to the wash basin. *Then we’ll have bloody rat seating the cables and who will be to blame when the turbine fails and we get killed by a stray shell then eh?* She heard him mutter. Bilan was quieter, sitting down in her seat at the front, and curiously looking over her orders for the next morning.

‘Nice long drive, followed by an all-night drive, and then a fight. Very nice, I like that.’ She remarked sarcastically.

‘Yeah, it’s the five-star service.’ Amir offered as she watched the ‘confirm’ messages come in from her thirteen subordinate crew chiefs. Once all of them were in, she stowed the screen away, and leaned down her seat as far as it went. ‘How’s the squadron doing?’

‘Not too bad, considering we’ve consolidated a few times, and everything.’ she said succinctly. Bilan had served in the Maltuan armoured longer than Ramses MBTs had been

in use, and Amir trusted her with keeping tabs on how everyone was doing. The drivers in the company had their own radio net, and from what they said on it, Bilan could usually gauge how well a crew was getting along and what their morale was like. 'Denno was handing out tips at dinner while you were at the briefing, and for once everyone was listening, rather than trying to talk themselves up.'

'That's good. I thought Denno and his crew didn't talk much to anyone.' Denno, short for Dennis Muruthi, was the lone tanker in her squadron's 4 Troop. She had considered folding him into one of the other three troops, but because of the consolidations with other units, her officers were having enough trouble as it was learning how their new troopers worked. In practice, Denno was just the troubleshooter of the squadron - an ace tanker who seemed able to guide his crew out of impossible situations.

'They're not too bad. Not cold or anything, just...close, and used to just talking to each other.' Bilan cocked her head, listening as, still droning on in the background, the repetitive bitching of their gunner steadily wormed into their ears. 'You never shut up, Bontu!' Her loud exclamation was followed by a few seconds of silence, before the droning resumed, somewhat defiantly.

Amir left them to their fighting. She stowed away the last of her equipment, in an effort to make her space somewhat comfortable, reclined her seat and fell asleep to the gentle rumble of the engine.

* * *

17: 30

The turbine howled to life with a rising howl that came from the depths of a miniature sun. Denno didn't open his eyes. He reached to his right, picked up his helmet from the hook he always hung it on, and donned it. The sound came down to a manageable level, replaced with the orderly, yet slightly bleary calls of the drivers over the radio as they set themselves up into their convoy order. At the front, his driver Simran would have brought her optics back down, her head buried in the periscope-sight that showed her a fully lit-up world around her. From the outside, all that would be seen was a group of steel titans rumbling seemingly blindly through the dark. Denno knew this, and didn't need to check, because it was how his crew worked - almost completely in sync, practically without the need to check what the other was thinking.

He slept fitfully through the drive. In a strange state of semi-consciousness, he was aware of the intricacies of the Ramses' movements - the way the suspension kept them in a kind of steady glide over the terrain, the sensation of the tracks biting into the dust, the crunch of loose rocks underneath. Even their dead autocannon turret, stuck at an

incongruous angle above them, he could feel. He even reckoned, in a moment of moderate lucidity, that he could hear the snap of the twin flags as the tank stormed up the road.

* * *

20: 27

‘We’re here.’

In an instant he was fully awake, bringing down his optics, seat hissing into position. He reached forwards into the two recesses in the table, which opened to accommodate his hands around the joysticks - the autocannon turret for his right hand - useless and awkwardly dead - he hated the feeling - the optics turret for the left. The comms screen flickered on to his right, and the holographic map was propped up on an adjustable arm, and swung around to deploy on his left. All of them were picked up by the ATCH as it adjusted, giving him an all-encompassing 360-view of the outside of the tank provided by every sensor they had. Flicking through the menus with his eye-tracker, he dialed down the sounds of the tank engines around him and looked around more closely. The road had started banking upwards, and there was chatter on the drivers’ channel, as the major and his command squadron rumbled past a logistics truck stationed next to a massive concrete structure. In fact, looking over the surface of the hill they were approaching, the whole thing was dotted with concrete bunkers - and wrecks. A lot of wrecks.

‘A squadron, we’re taking the next left.’ Amir’s voice came loud and clear over the comms. She hadn’t slept through the drive, Denno could bet. Probably had been consulting the holographic map of the area, plotting out the best places to be.

‘That’s why I never want to be an officer.’ He muttered.

‘Always having to account for what others need to do.’ His gunner, Nassim, agreed. They didn’t even need to share the context of the conversation: both he and Simran would have known what Denno was thinking of.

The tank column took a sharp left up a steep track, and began to wind between the immobile husks of wrecked Vrul vehicles. He recognized the models - there was the twin-cannon ones they called ‘thumpers’, there were the plasma-throwing ones they called ‘bluelights’, and then the APCs, wheeled, with that big autocannon on top that they called ‘hornets’. Every now and then, there was also a squat shuttle, a massively constructed beast of a vehicle, stamped with the Chengan flag, and the roman numeral II, along with other identifiers he couldn’t make out.

They halted, in the steadily dying darkness of the dawn, while Amir, sharing her annotated map, gave her instructions to the three squadrons and had them break off across the ridge to various ditches and rises to hold.

‘Denno, I’m going to need you with me to talk to the Chengans.’

‘Understood, major.’

He released the joysticks for the turret, and immediately the helmet dropped the 360-degree visual of the outside of the tank, letting him see the screens folding back slightly to give him space to maneuver. Reaching behind himself, he picked up his canteen, and his Kakivak submachine gun from the wall.

‘Don’t do anything dumb with the tank.’

‘Hey, you’re the one going out into the open.’ Nassim muttered.

Once outside, Denno took a few seconds to orientate himself, unfolding the Smg’s stock and hanging it on his belt.

‘Hey, Denno.’ Amir came around the tank, slinging her own Smg over her shoulder. ‘Over there, I saw a Chengan waiting for us behind the overturned APC.’

They walked in silence through the graveyard of armoured vehicles, and ended up seeing a few more of the Chengan marines. They moved around the broken tanks with excessive comfort - most of them seemed already familiar with every corner of the battlefield, and they could see them checking in on foxholes and hideouts that were barely visible to the naked eye.

‘Hey Maltuans! Over here.’ They looked around for the origin of the voice, and only thanks to the ATCH highlighting thermal signatures with a faint red outline did they manage to spot the Chengan beckoning them over.

Standing in a trench as he was, they didn’t fully appreciate what the bulkier armour of the Chengans and their exoskeleton did. Only when they hopped in could Amir fully appreciate how it gave them a full head over either of them. The Chengan was probably carrying four times as much gear as she was, and it didn’t seem to impede him much, as he turned around and gestured for them to follow him deeper into the trench system. ‘Name’s lieutenant Truong. You’ll be wanting to see your engineers, I suppose?’

‘Yeah, pretty much. I’m major Amir, and this is corporal Muruthi.’

‘Cheers. You guys been in combat much?’

‘We got off the shuttles properly on day 17, been pretty much non-stop since then.’

‘So you’ve got a feel for how the Vrul like to conduct their business, right?’ He led them under the bridge formed by a Tenhali APC that had chosen to die while spanning the trench. Part of the concrete wall of the fortification had collapsed here, in a black charred mess obviously caved in with a plasma explosive. A collapsible ladder had been set against the rim of the hole, and Truong led them down it, into the ridge.

‘You guys blew this open?’

‘Yeah, when we turned up the whole ridge was intact - they were shooting at us from hidden nests all over the hill, and we couldn’t get in. Took hours of crawling around to get some charges planted and storm the lower galleries. This whole thing is a mess of tunnels by the way.’

‘That’s got to merge well with their infiltration tactics.’

‘It did for the first few days, when we thought we had them cleared out. Endlessly, they kept popping back out, until we just got fed up with it and sealed it all with quick-setting concrete.’

‘Did that stop them?’ Denno asked, speaking up for the first time.

‘Almost. They tried to blow the whole ridge with a plasma bomb after that. Shook us up pretty bad, but, well, we’re still here. There’ve been some pretty bad counter-attacks in the center area - further east from us - but out west here there’s no real trouble.’

They were well and truly lost down the maze of trenches by this point. It was poorly lit, but the ATCH gave them enough visibility to see the Chengans they were brushing past in the tunnels, quietly sorting through their ammunition and equipment. Down another gallery, and suddenly there was moonlight, flooding in from the end of this tunnel.

‘What was this?’

‘Logistics entrance, we think. This whole thing was probably a garage for trucks - we blew the doors off.’

The effect was similar to a kind of terrace dug into the northern flank of the ridge, facing towards the enemy. It had been transformed into a garage which the Tehnali engineers were currently occupying. A number of APCs were sat against the wall, as engineering vehicles fitted with cranes carefully fitted large assemblies to their front. There was a general mix of activity and inactivity - the vehicle mechanics readying their charges for action, and the crews themselves, catching a few moments of sleep despite the noise and bustle around them.

They considered the sight out of the open space for a while, looking over the broken remains of some vehicles outside. You could see for kilometers out there - the ridge swept gently down into a wide open plain. To the west, there was the sea, but to the north and east there was nothing but wide open dry savannah.

‘I’m guessing we’re going through that.’ Denno remarked.

‘Yeah, we’re taking you through.’ A new, fourth voice said from behind them. Amir turned around, taking in a shorter soldier who neatly breached the gap, in terms of bulk of equipment, between her and Truong. She could tell, by the pallor of his skin, that he was Tehnali before she even noticed his shoulder patch. ‘Lieutenant Vishang, 2nd Tehnali engineers. We’re going to be clearing the minefield for you guys.’

‘Right. Captain Amir, A squadron. We’re in three columns, as discussed, correct?’

‘Yeah, that’s what I understood. My own captain is currently getting some shut eye. Need anything specifically?’

‘How reliable is your equipment, in terms of clearing mines?’

‘You shouldn’t worry about it, major.’ The engineer grinned. ‘If it doesn’t work, you’ll be the first to know, and the last to care.’ He let a moment pass for grim comedic effect, which bounced right off the two tired troopers. ‘More seriously major, we’ll get your troopers across without a scratch on your tanks. Guarantee it. However I guarantee you don’t get back the other way. We’re not marking the passages - so the Vrul can’t find the corridors - and without our equipment you won’t be able to find the path back.’

‘You don’t think our computers can retrace the steps?’

‘Over short distances, the accuracy might be enough, but I wouldn’t risk it over the 71km of minefield we’ve got ahead of us.’

The engineer smiled, in a way that was meant to be reassuring. In the gloom of the night, illuminated only by the flare of a welding torch and the infra-red light that her ATCH provided, it didn't achieve much.

22:05

'This is B squadron, we are in our lane, and our engineers have just gotten to work.'

Amir jolted back from the half-sleep she had unwittingly sunken into once more. She flicked on the displays, reaching for the two joysticks and whirring the optics turret around to have a look at B. At the head of their long line of tanks, the 'crown' had deployed in front of the Tehnali engineering vehicle at the front, spreading out like a large mat ahead of it, held up by the attachment point at the front of the vehicle. It rumbled forwards slightly, and then stretched out the two rods folded along the vehicle on either side. A few seconds of stillness, and then it started rumbling forwards.

She had expected – well, she wasn't sure what she had expected. What she did see was pretty much nothing. The minesweeper simply continued rolling forwards, awkwardly followed by the tanks trailing behind, into the oppressive gloom of the minefield. Far ahead of them, the dark outline of the mountains rose above them.

01:40

Denno munched his way through a ration, looking over the horizon with the optics turret. Despite the steady stream of curses coming from above, as Nissam tried to get the turret working again, they were still down the autocannon.

He scanned around slowly with the optics turret, having a look at the progress that the other columns were making. Far in the distance, over the horizon, maybe even on another island, some tags pinned up by his computer indicated that a battery of self-propelled Retivan artillery pieces had attached to their group.

A flash of light blinded him, until the turret compensated. He panned to it – barely much at all really, just a flash of pure blue light that was streaming up from under the minesweeper for C squadron. It went out after a second or so. The minesweeper was still. Denno was about to raise Amir over the radio to ask about it when the hatch at the top of the sweeper burst off its hinges, emitting a brilliant red flame that guttered out after a few seconds, letting clouds of heavy, thick black smoke gush out of the vehicle. As C squadron halted behind it, two Tehnali vehicles – the next minesweeper, and a tow-vehicle – came up from the rear to take their place at the head of the column.

4:57

Amir woke up from a fitful sleep to feel the tank still slowly rolling forwards after the minesweeper.

'How far are we?' She asked groggily

'Another hour and we'll be out of the minefield.'

'Any losses?'

‘C squadron lost their minesweeper and have been delayed as a result – they’ll make it forty minutes after we do barring any further issues. B squadron had their minesweeper disabled – no casualties – and took only a minimal delay. The Colonel wanted to talk to you as soon as you were around.’

Amir picked herself back up, and awoke her displays again. After a few moments of fiddling, the voice of the Colonel came through.

‘Major Amir, I’ve made some adjustments to the situation, as you can see on your sandtable.’

She looked over the changed name tags.

‘C squadron in reserve, as you can see.’ He continued, ‘in the western ravine. B squadron coming over hill 211, into the camp. Your force has been switched to C’s old role, driving up the valley to make first contact. Other than that, the plan remains the same.’

‘Alright. Any news on our support?’

‘Retivan self-propelled artillery. We’re sharing data with them and they’ll shoot at targets of opportunity, using their own drones. They have a better connection and vision than us, so they’ll pick their shots. You focus on the fight. We should have some more intel by 6 am.’

6:24

‘That’s not a second-rate grouping. At all. That’s a full new army.’ The Colonel clarified.

They were looking at the latest data that the JF scouts had managed to discreetly get from one of the surrounding hills, in preparation for their attack, in conjunction with the scan from the UAV. The entire valley they were targeting was a network of compounds, in which vehicles, equipment and personnel were parked in absurd numbers that had not been seen since the beginning of the invasion. Especially not in this pristine state.

‘I’ve gotten the word out to command. Steel Ridge won’t hold against a force like that. We need to cause as much chaos as we can, and then pull out to hold against another force. When they start getting their response together, we need to pull out – we’ll be needed to fight them once they get their attack together.’

‘Any questions?’

‘Right, in that case, Amir, I need you to walk us over the plan once more, in your own words.’

‘Yes colonel. We are presently moving north up the foothills, on a parallel track to the main, mine-free savannah corridor that approaches Steel ridge, to our east. We are heading directly for hill 211. South of 211, running north-west to south-east, is a valley that is going to be our assembly area. It has been cleared of Vrul scouts by the JF teams. The target valley is much larger, running north to south, across hill 211 from us. We therefore have two corridors to attack the enemy from, one on each side of 211: Dog and Eagle. A squadron will move up Eagle, the southeast corridor, sweep the bottom of the target valley, and then retreat down Dog. B squadron will hold on hill 211. C squadron will stand

by in Dog corridor, and provide cover for when we retreat. A and B will surge forwards at 6:45 and attack the first compound - here, and then move north-west, to hit the second compound - here. If time allows, we will also try to target the third compound, located here. Once that is done, we will fall back through Dog, and drive south-east back through the assembly area valley, and into the next valley, named 'the escape corridor', which leads towards the mine-free savannah. This corridor will be cleared of opposition by 2nd battalion and the support squadron of 1st battalion, under your command, colonel. You will signal us when the Escape Corridor is clear, and we will use it to rejoin the central plain, and drive south back to Steel Ridge.'

'Excellent.'

6:30

The desert plain seemed asleep, lying under the heavy veil of darkness. Yet hulking figures of silent giants stood among the brush, their weapons raised to the sky in defiance of the stars.

Computers ticked away at their sums, numbers rolling past, too fast to be scrutinised by any biological operator. Results streamed into place like the tumblers of a lock falling away with the correct key. With a satisfying note, the end results were presented to a screen.

Casimir's operator looked over it, checking the results and the data that had been put in. All was well. A key turned, a foot was pressed down, a pedal depressed.

With a deafening roar, the gun sent its shell into the sky, depressed with a whirr, fired again, depressed, fired again, depressed fired again.

All across the plain, its siblings thundered uniformly, throwing ordnance into the sky to targets over the curvature of Torix, on another island. Six shells to a barrel. Before silence could descend again after their shoot, the barrels came back down, locked into position and the *Jagellions* gunned their engines, moving to a new position to fire from. To their south, a sister battery echoed their guns now, firing at the same target.

6:41

Denno's gaze was fixed on the ravine opening ahead of them. He could feel every bump in the drainage ditch as Simran slowly rolled them forwards. He was particularly aware of the moment when the track slipped, and the tank lurched forwards, bumping on something, jolting all of them. They climbed over it, and for a few seconds he wondered whether they had hit a mine, before becoming aware of a slackness in his right wrist. He grinned.

'Nice technical knock, Simran. Autocannon turret is li-'

He cut himself off with a reflex-burst of fire at a figure – practically only a shadow – that had rounded the corner ahead of them. Even as he identified the figure of the Vrul sentry from the remains that the autocannon had left, Simran gunned *Thunderlance* forwards, and A column behind him roared forwards.

‘They know we’re here!’ He yelled.

6:42

From the hill above, major Dezo, at the head of B squadron, had made his way onto the top of the rise ahead of his *Vigilant*, and, laid down in the grass, was observing the fall of artillery shells on the massive Vrul encampment he could see below him. Personnel was scrambling to and fro among the targeted areas, but the target zone was only a small part of the assembly area. The first shells had arrived together, coordinated as a single blast, and hammered the compound’s shields into submission. Even as the shells destroyed vehicles and wreaked havoc in what they had believed to be the main force concentration area, vehicles and equipment was being shuffled around in the other zones. He could also see the evil look of a counter-battery radar orienting itself in the direction of where the shells were coming from.

Just as he got his helmet to target the radar for a precision guided artillery round, he heard a different roar from far below, augmented by his helmet’s computer, and joined by the supersonic bangs of railguns firing. Leaping to his feet, he sprinted back to his tank, even as his B squadron stormed forwards over the ridge.

6:45

Major Amir came around the bend in the valley, and spotted a machine-gun emplacement blazing away at the tanks rushing past. She queued it for targeting by the autocannon, as well as a few heat signatures on the hillside. The turret above oriented towards the successive targets, but barely barked a few shots off. The air was thick with lead, as the entire squadron stormed past with her, taking their own shots. An answering shell from a Vrul gun somewhere in the troop concentration ahead zinged off of the turret of the tank closest to her – she didn’t have time to note its name – and Bontu let rip with the railgun, shaking the tank and letting the explosion be heard even through the dampening of her helmet. Her vision was covered with the fluorescent outlines that she was getting from Dezo’s observation of the base, shining through the dust and smoke from them and the artillery barrage. She keyed through her channels, looking for C squadron.

6:46

Major Pedro sat in his tank, his entire body tense, listening to the rumble of artillery through the vibrations in the ground. Through the hill to his right, he could see the shapes of tanks from B coming over the ridge and engaging targets in the base. He could also see, much smaller and highlighted by a tag because of their distance, A squadron storming forwards.

He was vaguely aware that he was having a short, clipped conversation with Amir about how they had begun the engagement. No particular resistance so far, stick to the plan.

He and his squadron idled, waiting for their turn.

6:48

Denno's tank stormed across the space between the valley entrance and the beleaguered compound, blazing away with both guns like a moving fireball. They smashed through the hastily erected concrete barriers that delineated the forward emplacements, and plunged into a world of neatly arrayed vehicles and crew running between them. The targeting computer was a single musical whine as the pings of new acquired targets merged together. The railgun fired every two seconds, now on its lowest power setting because of how close they were to the targets. More and more tanks arrived to join them in what was essentially an unopposed cleanup.

6:53

Dezo shot down the hill in his tank, feeling them clearly get airborne as they went over several bumps along the way. His gunner had sent a round into the counter-battery radar, and had now joined his squadron in raining down destruction on the remains of the front camp. They hit the bottom of the valley, driving the wind out of them all, and shot across the service road and into the Vrul.

7:10

Simran rounded them around the corner out of the fuel farm that they had just set alight, summoning thick, billowing clouds of smoke to wash over the entire area, and plunged them down the main alley of the camp towards the exit of the fuel depot. There were now larger amounts of Vrul running around, and just in time, Denno caught the evil blue glare of a plasma thrower powering up to his right, the manning Vrul sprinting out of the smoke and trying to get as close as it could to them, right up to where the plasma would cut straight through the hull. The revived autocannon pulverized it, and they powered through the metal gates. He blinked and looked around, not finding them where he thought they would be. Some kind of parade ground, with large prefab buildings on each side, several garages – were those cranes?

His train of thought was interrupted by a strange, metallic hiss or scraping sound. Turning over to look behind him, he saw the fading light of a stream of plasma that had shot from the barracks they were passing by to strike the tank behind him, which was now a flaming wreck skidding to a halt after its momentum carried it the last few meters forwards.

'Get us out of here!' He yelled.

7:22

The first camp was a flaming wreck. Dezo and Amir could agree on that, as they gathered from their short, tense conversations. But there were issues. In A squadron, *Valiant*, and *Sunspear* weren't responding. C squadron had managed to cover *Nino's* crew

as they extracted from their tank following a mobility kill, but they had been ripped to shreds by Vrul infantry hiding amongst the wreckage of the camp, and *Spite*, having remained stationary to get them aboard, was swarmed by Vrul infantry who managed to pry off the autocannon, destroy the optics and sensor equipment, and had almost managed to pry off the rear hatch before a supporting tank had washed *Spite* with autocannon fire, allowing it to limp away. The troopers were getting nervous at these reports, especially since it was visible that the Vrul were getting wise to the effectiveness of this tactic, and were trying to overrun them in groups, seemingly without concern for their own self-preservation. *Thunderlance* was in the northern part of the camp, where *Sunspear* had been, wrecking the fuel dumps. *Sunspear* had fried – she had seen -...heard... them go, and *Thunderlance* had just barely escaped, madly zig-zagging for survival through a thick concentration of targets with no friendlies nearby.

‘Dezo!’ She called to the commander of B.

‘Yeah?’

‘We need to get out of here, these guys are wise to us.’

‘What’s your plan?’

‘There’s no time for fancy manoeuvres – we punch straight north-west, right at the next compound. I’ll get *Thunderlance* to lead.’

‘Understood, on your mark.’

7:25

‘Go! Go! Go!’ Simran gunned them through the wall of the now ruined first compound, leading the way for the two squadrons into the field that separated them from the next camp.

Plasma beams, weak from the distance they were being fired at, streaked through the air, lighting up the dust lifted up from the artillery barrage they had called in to support their charge. Its blue energy washed over the hulls that it hit, smoke rising as it tried to eat its way through the armour and charred sensors where it could reach them. The sensors of *Thunderlance* strained, trying to give him a visual on the origin of the fire, but couldn’t make it through the curtains of smoke and obstruction raised up by the shells and put up by the Vrul themselves.

‘Are we even heading the right way?’ Simran asked, jerking the entire tank aside to avoid another blast.

‘I can’t see.’ Denno answered. He was physically leaning forwards, as if he could push his head through the dust the sensors showed him.

Suddenly, the horizon completely lit up. Denno blinked, leaning back. Glowing outlines highlighted the walls of the compound just ahead, troops firing over them, vehicles and buildings moving through the dust. A plasma thrower team, laying prone off to their right in a makeshift foxhole and washing down B squadron, was obliterated by an explosion, and a moment later the peculiar noise of a railgun round howled overhead.

7:26

Pedro's tank roared backwards, back behind the cover of the hill, as they repositioned while the gun charged back up to maximum power. The tanks of C squadron one by one peeked over, highlighting targets for the two other squadrons and carefully taking aim and destroying what they could hit. From the grateful – and somewhat out of order – messages he was getting over the radio, he judged that Amir's idea of getting him to swerve up to here was, taking Dezo's old position, was working as intended. Sure, they couldn't do much damage from up here – each Vrul compound, as they had predicted, was fitted with a shield generator that was deflecting most of their shots from on high. But they could use their shared sensors to inform the tanks below on what was going on.

Yet what he had seen in the valley was not a great source of comfort. The Vrul were reacting – much, much faster than they had thought they would. Tanks, vehicles and personnel were regrouping to attack the squadrons, and as usual with the Vrul, they weren't doing it in an improvised manner: there was a frontal force, probably composed of the support personnel whose equipment they were destroying, harassing the tanks, obscuring the main mass that was about to hit them.

7:30

Thunderlance once more burst through the wall. They were ready for her this time, and plasma smashed, at murderously short range, over the frontal glacis. There was a wash of heat that swept over them, and the screens flickered, died for a few seconds and then came stuttering back.

'Still steering!' Simran yelled. The gun fired, the autocannon responded to Denno's blind firing, and the screens slowly came back, patchy and flickering uncertainly. They bumped over something under the tracks.

'Have we still got her?'

'I think.' The gun fired again – they were pouring everything they had into the batteries to get the shots out at an infernal rate. 'We've lost power though – still losing it, there's something frying in the engine block boss.'

7:36

Resistance had gotten bad now. She had *felt* the shock as her tanks came through the barrier, as Vrul infantry in hastily dug foxholes and behind makeshift barricades riposted. They weren't fleeing anymore. The shock had already worn off. Amir could feel it in the dynamic she was having to manage – getting her tanks to support each other, more in threes and fours than in pairs now, paying attention to the swarms of Vrul which C squadron was making out for them. Pedro was trying to make her aware of something else, but in the swirling chaos of the fight she couldn't seem to find the time to focus on it.

'Bontu! Your turret!'

'My turret, understood!'

She relinquished command of the autocannon, and muted the optics' display and sound, bringing the sandtable up in front. They had lost another tank – *Lion* – she couldn't figure out how or when. Quickly she rearranged the orders for the squadrons, setting up movement orders and prioritizing a few of the targets in this compound – fuel, repair sites, identified buildings which could be collapsed.

'You've got an armoured force heading for you, A and B. An armoured force, they're entering the camp from the north. They're going to ambush you in the confined space.' She finally distinguished Pedro's voice, repeating the same information over and over again, trying to get them to pay attention.

'Pedro, understood, what do you advise based on what you see?'

'We've almost done as much damage as we're going to be able to wreak without losing the rest of the regiment major. We need to get back on the move, the Vrul are counter-attacking, big time.'

She half-anticipated the form that the counterattack would take, quickly grabbing the initiative from Dezo as he didn't seem to be on comms right now, and ordering some of his tanks to rush behind the ammo stores they were setting aflame. Mercifully, they obeyed her command – she was respected enough for them to take her suggestions. The wall of the compound caved in as the Vrul tanks stormed through, only for the first three to be blown to pieces by *Shaka* and *Isandlwana*. *Vittoria* crippled an enterprising flanker that had made its own breach, wrecking its track, but they had overestimated the amount of power to put into their railgun and the round didn't detonate inside the tank, flying off into the distance. The Vrul reacted with speed, turning and releasing a gush of plasma that coated the turret. A whole slew of data vanished from her sandtable, as plasma burned away *Vittoria's* sensors. *Isandlwana* ploughed through the building that separated them, pieces of masonry falling away in a cloud of dust, and destroyed the Vrul at point-blank range, while *Vittoria's* crew, semi-blinded, blundered her through the smoke towards the fall-back position Amir herself was holding, where *Warrior* and *Avenger* were guarding her. Another wave of Vrul came storming through the breach. The two remaining tanks dodged madly, weaving through the narrow confines of the compound, chased by the omnipresent blue streaks.

7:40

Simran had managed to drift-park them into a row of APCs. It was a bit disconcerting to realize that the Ramses', for all their massive size, were smaller than a Vrul personnel carrier, and they could relatively easily hide among them. *I suppose it's because of their individual size*, Denno mused.

'How's our power?'

'We're down to 60%. Fire suppression systems – I can't figure out if they're working correctly or not.'

'One coming.' Nassim, his gunner, said, unclenching his teeth for what seemed like the first time since the beginning of the fight. 'Two. Maybe three.'

Denno checked his surroundings, tried to feel something through the vibrations. All he could feel were the artillery shells. Their gun was set to the left. He couldn't figure out why, and was about to ask when a Vrul tank, plasma gun glowing, stormed past them from right to left at a heart-stopping distance. The gun spoke with a short bark, slamming into the Vrul and sending the entire vehicle grinding back away from them, digging a trough in the sand. Denno's crew worked together like a well-oiled machine, *Thunderlance* rumbling forwards, taking the corner to the right sluggishly as all power surged into the gun, charging it up for another shot. The two Vrul tanks Nissam had promised were standing there in the middle of the alley between the parked APCs, grinding to a halt and centering their guns squarely on what Denno could only assume was a gaping hole in their front. He let rip with the autocannon, straight into the gun of the rightmost one, watching as the shells pinged off the metal, then smashed the cooling ducts, then rattled inside the barrel itself. The Vrul tried to fire anyway. There was a surge of plasma which failed to accelerate, and instead dribbled out of the muzzle, melting the barrel which slowly dissolved into nothing. The hull of the Vrul tank sat there, and began to take on a dull red glow, as the air above wavered with the heat. The other tank had a trench cut right through the turret thanks to Nissam's second shot.

'Major, you still around?' He looked back over comms, updating himself on everyone's positions.

'Denno, that you?'

'Yeah.' His comms discipline was falling apart, he realized too late.

'Your systems are acting up, they're not transmitting your ID correctly.'

'Got hit, still moving. How are things?'

'We're pulling back soon. Try and find Dezo, his tank isn't showing up on my hud. The whole of B squadron just got hit hard, I don't know if there're many tanks left in the northern part of the compound.'

'Understood major, trying to find Dezo now.'

7:52

Things were getting pretty hot now. Gone were the precise, simultaneous arrivals of large numbers of shells. The Retivans were sending everything they had, on the fastest trajectories they could get, to try and stop the Vrul in their tracks as they attempted to envelop A and B squadrons.

Pedro snapped back and forth between his screens, designating targets, keeping an eye on the squadrons and his messages with the Colonel. He was anxiously awaiting a reply on whether the evacuation corridor was open or not.

Then there was a horrible, completely out-of-place shudder throughout the tank. 'WHAT THE-' his gunner began, as the high-pitched screech of metal on metal echoed through the hull. Pedro whipped off the helmet to see a beam of light coming from the rear of the tank, growing steadily as metal shrieked.

Fortunately for all of them, his driver wasn't an idiot, and gunned the tank into reverse, then suddenly forwards, spinning in circles and yelling for help from the other tanks. Autocannon-fire blasted the bank of their tank, rattling along it and spraying shrapnel inside, from which Pedro ducked back, putting his helmet on, and seeing, through the images composed by nearby tanks' sensors, the corpse of the Vrul that had managed to clamber onto their back end. A whole strike team had managed to sneak on from the rear. They managed to despatch them, after several minutes of panicked circling, but with a sickening sensation he realized that the decision about whether or not they should head for the escape corridor had been made for them.

8:01

They found Dezo and his crew hunkered under their tank, trying to hold off the Vrul with their SMGs. Simran spun *Thunderlance* around, and Denno opened the rear hatch for them to run in. Dezo's gunner was holding her leg. The railgun fired, deafening them for a few seconds but kicking up a cloud of dust that obscured Dezo and his two crewmen as they climbed aboard.

'You can handle that?' he pointed at the bleeding crew member.

'Yeah, get us out of here!' Dezo barked.

Denno left them to strap themselves into the emergency nacelles there were in the corridor, specifically for situations like these, and got back into his seat, just in time to see another Vrul tank explode as it came around the corner of the nearest prefab building.

'You guys know you have a massive hole in your front, right?' Dezo asked over the intercom.

'Had an inkling. How bad is it?'

'Pretty bad. The guts of your tank are in the air, I'm surprised she's still moving.'

Denno tried to establish a picture of what was going on with the squadrons. The initial shock of the Vrul counterattack had subsided, and the tanks were biting back, but it was clear that they were now in a real fight, not the harassing raid they had started out with. Amir was gathering them back into their groups but- a shadow loomed out of the fuel-smoke that clouded the main road behind them.

'TANK RIGHT!' He yelled. The turret swung around, too slowly and-

Pieces were vomited from the flank of the shadow, as it was rocked by the force of the impact. Rolling around the bend, ID as dead as *Thunderlance*, *Cetshwayo*, whom everyone believed to be gone, came into view.

'*Cetshwayo*, comms alive?' He asked. Nothing. Cursing, he flipped the loudspeaker and repeated his request.

'No.' Sara, *Cetshwayo*'s commander's voice came over in response. 'We're fried – all visuals.'

'Alright, stick with us – we're pulling out now.'

8:05

Amir had all she could get. They had lost five in total – as far as she could ascertain, from both squadrons. Dezo was still around, commanding from the rear of *Thunderlance*, and he was weaving his B squadron around Amir's, providing support and structure as they formed into an arrowhead within the swirling smoke of the former mustering ground of this camp. Just outside, the last sweep that Pedro's tanks had been able to provide showed the hornet's nest of tanks swirling outside, waiting for her to make a move. On the other hand, all that she was waiting for was for the counter she had set on the right hand side of vision to reach zero.

Four

Three

Two

One

With an almighty slam, the earth rocked as over a hundred shells simultaneously hit it just outside the base, wiping out a slew of contacts to the west. Her squadron surged forwards at the sound, powering through the gates and deploying their smokes and countermeasures to cover their escape. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she anxiously used the bird's eye-view that the interface could simulate, counting the tanks that were coming along. Plasma arced between their formations, inaccurate and answered with blasts of railgun fire. She winced at what she saw on the front of *Thunderlance* – a mess of machinery sparked and fizzed from inside, an unhealthy, yellowish smoke billowing out from it. Yet just behind of it, firing blindly into the smoke, a ghost rode out of the battle – *Cetshwayo*, navigating somewhat clumsily, and looking dead on sensors and comms, was somehow still alive.

The formation stretched out, losing its initial arrowhead as it elongated into a kind of diagonal line, the more intact tanks being able to summon more power for their engines, while others like *Thunderlance* struggled behind. As they were half-way across the valley, more shells began to land around them, the Retivans covering their retreat.

A twin-barreled tank destroyer roared out of the soup of dust, smoke and optics-obscuring countermeasures, blasting wildly at the passing Ramses', one shell sparking the explosive countermeasure of one tank's reactive armour. *Thunderlance* spoke, the railgun punching a hole through the angled tank, clear diagonally through the whole thing. They roared past the wreck as its crew dismounted, ripping through them with autocannon fire.

8:07

It felt like an hour of mad charging through open ground, but the tanks covered it in just over a full minute. Pedro counted them as they tore around the bend, into the empty valley, and he rejoined A and B as they surged as fast as they could go towards the promise of an escape. He checked his comms again, and breathed once more as he saw the latest update: a curt 'EC - C'. *Escape Clear - Colonel*.

'We're golden, Amir.' He said over comms.

‘Pedro.’ Her voice sounded strained with the effort of checking the courses of the tanks and arranging an order for them to reform into, even as they made maximum speed down the valley. ‘Is anyone guarding the other entry into this valley? The one we originally used to attack their first compound?’

His blood froze as he realized his mistake.

‘I’ll take point.’ He offered, signalling for his driver to gun it.

‘No use. Form up our left wing - damaged tanks to the right. The right, damn it, *Thunderlance*! If the Vrul have sent anything down that corridor we’ll hammer through them. Listen up everyone, I’m on all comms now. The whole of that army is out for our heads. Anyone gets stopped - its their responsibility. We haven’t scrapped that army - we’ve just bloodied them. They’re going to come down on Steel ridge, today or tomorrow, and when they do, Command is going to need these tanks at the ready. So whatever you do, keep moving down the corridor, and out. Understood?’

One by one, the crews silently flashed their acknowledgements of the order.

8:17

They’d managed to coax out some extra effort from whatever was left at the front of *Thunderlance*, and get into a leading position of the right flank. His mental image of the surrounding terrain flashed by in his head as he calculated how long it would take them to reach the junction. Further to his right (the west), over a few more hills, there was the minefield. To his left (east), there was the mass of hill 211. Ahead (south), there was the valley that they knew only as the escape corridor. After the escape corridor, there was the large savannah, a 60km drive down south towards Steel Ridge and safety. Between them and the escape corridor, there was a junction where the escape corridor, the valley they were currently driving down, and the valley he had used two hours ago to begin the attack met. And if the Vrul were half as intelligent as they usually were, they were currently moving there.

8:20

The display slowly ticked over, Images slowly downloading from the beleaguered high altitude drone, as it struggled to transmit what it could see to *Casimir*. Not enough bandwidth to transmit to the tanks. Barely enough to get a good idea of what they were seeing at the Junction that the tanks were headed towards - that place they had emerged from at the start of the attack.

‘Are you sure?’

‘They can’t see them and we can. It’s good enough for me. Switch the shell and take the shot.’

The voices echoed through the otherwise silent hull. A moment’s hesitation. An acceptance. New numbers for the computer. Deep inside the turret, the autoloader

reached into the breech, extracted the shell, and brought a new one up. *Casimir's* barrel adjusted a barely noticeable fraction of a centimeter and spoke.

8:21

The first notice that the Vrul got regarding the falling of the hated Maltuan armoured into their trap was the roar of their engines. The second was a crack, and the sudden deployment of a countermeasures screen across the whole valley, which disrupted the rangefinders on their guns. The third was a tank with a mangled front, blasting through the sparkling white screen and turning two of their own tanks into fireballs in a few seconds. Then it turned into chaos.

Amir clenched her teeth, as she once more felt, physically, the impact of her unstoppable force hitting the immovable object that the Vrul were. She could see infantry, prone in the dust and wielding plasma lances. Behind them, a smattering of tanks were positioned in the drainage ditch by the earthen road that went through the valley. Emerging from the valley to their left, another column of armoured vehicles was coming in, turrets decidedly pointed straight at the Maltuan. The air thickened with plasma arcs and shells, the answering railgun shot all but invisible because of the speed. Yet for all their suicidal resolve, the Vrul hadn't had very long to prepare themselves, and this was exactly the situation the Ramses' had been designed to fight in: a frontal charge at mid-range. Plasma sizzled at their frontal armour, and shells rebounded, blasting away reactive armour or digging troughs through the metal. No one stopped.

8:22

The Vrul didn't step out of the way, Denno had to give them credit for that. It didn't make much of a difference of course - it just made the last few meters as they closed the range a bit bumpier -

With an awful crack and a crumple, *Thunderlance* spun around, braking hard as it did a 180 turn. For an awful moment Denno thought they were going to overturn, but she righted herself just in time.

'What the hell was that?' He barked, although the massive surge of infantry that suddenly leaped out of the ditch prevented him from even hearing a response from Simran. His right hand clenched around the stick for the autocannon turret, as he fired into that mass of Vrul that rushed at him, holding AT grenades, Plasma torches, practically anything they could get their hands on that would hurt *Thunderlance*.

The howl of *Casimir's* gift came after it landed. The world outside was a hell of shrapnel and splinters for several seconds, rattling off the hull of the tank. The entire Vrul horde had vanished when he recovered. His sense of time rattled, he found himself wondering whether the rising howl signalled a second shell. Simran recovered faster than him, fortunately, and the tracks spun fast as she brought the tank back around and chased after the rest of their companions.

8:25

A ragged chorus of cheers went up from the column as they powered their way up the valley and distanced their pursuers, upon whom a rain of shells was now falling. Making a quick headcount, Amir breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Stay sharp.’ She called out. ‘Stay sharp.’

9:05

The hills rolled downwards, subsiding into low savannah rises that gently rippled an otherwise flat plain. They charted their course like ships, the computers counting down to the automatic turns to be made, the drivers shifting and turning together, a sweeping wing of metal acting in perfect coordination.

Amir had re-adjusted their formation, tweaking it to keep the most vulnerable tanks at the center. Some of them were decidedly losing power – she was half of a mind to get *Cetshwayo*’s crew to abandon the tank and hitch a ride with someone else. Yet for the moment, everyone could maintain their steady 100kmh cruising speed.

They turned again, heading down the valley formed by two of the gentle rises, Ahead, the terrain once more pacified itself, turning into the great flat plain that joined, to the west, with the minefield’s land. In fact, according to her map, they would be running direct south from now on, with only half a km between them and the minefield.

They reached the mouth of the valley, made their last course adjustment, and were out in the high yellow grass plain. They began heading straight south.

‘Dust west’

‘What?’

‘Dust, west.’ Bontu repeated.

Amir looked over, her heart sinking. It was true. What was more, as her optics adjusted to the distance and fetched more information from her with the radar, the dust was being kicked up by a swarm of small, very fast vehicles.

The Vrul tank destroyers. Wheeled, slim and mean, with two barrels in their turrets. Their course almost paralleled theirs, but was slightly tweaked to bring them steadily closer to them. They would intersect by the end of the hour.

The message passed down the line, and the gunners began to look for solutions, but between the amount of power they were diverting to the engines for their cruise, and the simultaneous calculation of their speed and trajectory, and the enemy’s speed and trajectory, even the targeting computers couldn’t output anything reliable.

Amir gnawed one of her nails. A few of her tanks, like *Vittoria*, had nothing left except for their engines. They wouldn’t be able to hold in a running gunfight against the Vrul. She could turn for a frontal charge at them, but the Vrul TD’s were in their element: they were a bit faster than the Ramses’, and could dodge like nothing else. Well-trained Vrul drivers had even learned to predict when Ramses gunners preferred to fire, executing a pre-emptive dodge at the last second, often just in time. They could drive away when

Amir charged at them. If Amir stopped to get her guns accurate, they could wheel around to shoot at her flanks, and they'd be more accurate because she would be stopped. In all cases, they outgunned what she had left. Then the solution was in front of her, with blood-chilling clarity. She lifted her display, and looked over at Bontu, who had also lifted his own. He nodded. Bilan, still focused on the road, grunted in unspoken agreement.

Amir plunged herself back into her displays.

'All tanks' She said over the loudspeaker, for *Vittoria* and *Cetshwayo*'s benefit. 'Break formation, full speed ahead. Keep heading south. Major Pedro is in command.'

There was a general acknowledgement, and the formation began to grow looser. 'Alright Bilan.' Amir said. 'Let's go for it.'

Assegai's power plant took on a new tone, moving from the easy whirr of cruising speed to the fuller roar of battle speed. Her direction shifted, parting company with the main body of the tanks, steadily curving her course to head straight at the Vrul.

This simplified the targeting solution dramatically.

Bontu changed the speed of the rounds to low, the reload rate to high, and began thumping out at the Vrul. Their formation wavered as the first couple were split apart by the force of the impact, rolling over, caught up in their immense speed. They tried to hammer back at *Assegai*, but the speed was still too great and she was strafing relative to them. Shells filled the air.

Eventually, the Vrul commander realized the situation he was going to be in: his numbers were lowering, and a *Ramses*, although not as fast, was going to be stuck front-forwards, right behind him, where his guns could do nothing to it, and it could pick his vehicles off as they chased the mauled squadrons. A third of the Vrul force – a total of around twenty or so - began to react, adjusting their speed downwards and shifting their courses. Amir's mouth set. Rookies would have slowed down to make a turn, not realizing that in this world of high-speed gun-chasing, there were better ways of getting behind someone chasing you. These crews had had time to train.

Time to train a full new army, an army of drilled regulars, in the middle of an invasion. Amir abstractly cursed the lack of bombardment that had left their facilities intact and cursed her luck. She gunned for their wheels with the autocannon and managed to smash a few off one that came alongside her, sending it into a pleasing series of somersaults. After a few more bursts, they caught onto it, and their fire concentrated onto the turret, slamming against the mantle and scraping off the top. Eventually they managed to hit the autocannon turret, ripping it clean off.

'Too many.' Bontu said through gritted teeth, firing the gun as fast as he could as they closed in, closer and closer, trying to whittle away their flank armour. A few were trying to get behind them, but Bilan was weaving to and fro, adjusting her speed to try and shake them off.

Another wave of tanks joined them, the Vrul commander having detached as many as he dared to deal with *Assegai*. Through what was left of their sensors, Amir tried to

count how many were left charging after her column. Certainty, she just wanted one last bit of certain-

A shell blasted the optics turret to pieces, and her last visuals went dark. There were a few sensors left, enough for Bontu to keep finding targets, but she was blind. She took off her helmet, kept the earbuds for their sound-dampening. She felt strangely calm.

The sand-table showed a bit over a dozen or so contacts left around them. Readings were imprecise – the gun and its targeting systems were all that mattered right now.

On that note, she thought to herself.

‘Bilan, put the handbrake on, will you?’ She asked, raising her voice to be heard over the din.

Assegai stopped with a scream of the tracks. One of the enterprising bastards that had managed to get behind them tried to swerve, failed, and crumpled its thin armour into the rear of *Assegai*.

Front-crew arrangement, Amir grinned grimly to herself. The sight from the outside wouldn’t be pretty.

With all the power on the gun, Bontu was firing with maniacal speed for a few seconds, each blast answered with a high-pitched whine from the batteries and an explosion outside the tank. Unfortunately the Vrul once again proved they had brains, and they were again wrenched aside, the tank rocking on itself.

Bontu took off his helmet.

‘One of ‘em rammed the barrel off.’ He said.

They sat in silence in the dark, quiet hull of *Assegai*. There were engine noises outside. A few of them sputtered to silence, some roared away into the plain. Amir got out of her restraint belts and reached behind herself to pull out the Kakivak smg, and flicked the fire selector to full auto. Bilan and Bontu did the same, a moment later.

It started as a metallic screech. Probably the same thing Pedro had heard earlier. Punctures appeared in the rear hatch, then claws began to come through. The whole thing slowly began to peel off.

An eye appeared, peering inside, and Bontu let rip with the smg, prompting a roar. The Vrul backed off, bullets hammering off the inside as her gunner rushed forwards, screaming with rage. Amir reached out to stop him, but he stormed on towards the door.

Another clawed hand clasped the torn corner of the door, ripped it bodily off, and the hulking form of a Vrul appeared in the doorway. Before Bontu could adjust his fire, its fist came down – how could it swing its fist in such narrow confines? And smashed him into the floor of the tank, in a broken heap gathered in a dent in the metal. Battery liquid, foul smelling and corrosive, sprayed out of the cracks.

Amir fired all she had at its head, and fumbled a reload as Bilan covered her. The Vrul roared at the pain and stinging of the bullets, brought up its other arm, grasping a hand cannon in its fist. It fired one slug, and Bilan’s cockpit vanished in a fizz of dying computers and a smashed chair. Then it reached around the side of the tank, grasped

Amir by the leg, and wrenched her out, stepping out of the tank and lifting her above its head. The nearby Vrul, including the one that had just lost an eye, howled in triumph, shaking their fists at the sky from which the invaders had come. The Vrul lowered her down, balanced itself, and then brought her swinging overhead and down onto the hull of *Assegai* with a crunch. It swung again. Crunch. Again, and again, and again, and again, until it was left with nothing but a bloodied stump in its hand.

11:34

The Vrul had caught up with the stragglers in the end. There had not been many of the foe left – Amir had done her job well, Denno concluded. Pedro had somewhat disobeyed her last orders and kept the tanks in a sort of strung-out formation, lending fire support from the front to the beleaguered tanks in the rear. A few of the Maltuan laggards had been hit, and lay as wrecks on the field around them – they took turns at keeping a lookout through the periscope, and could see them lying around. The Vrul, eager for a complete kill, had gone on after the faster tanks once they had dealt with the slower ones.

In *Thunderlance's* case, they had not done the job properly – a round carefully placed in their mangled front had put a definitive end to her capacity to move and do anything apart from be large and metallic, sure. She had then de-tracked herself as Simran lost control, rolled once because of the extreme speed, and caught another shell in the rear, which had – with *Thunderlance's* characteristic, perverse luck – not penetrated, but which had dented the rear hatch and wedged it definitively shut. The six of them sat inside, resigned to the inevitable and mostly bored. Dezo had joined Denno at the sand-table as they wrote up a report no one would ever read on the faults and virtues of the Ramses tank, and thoughts about a follow-up vehicle. Nassim was helping Dezo's other crew member perform improvised surgery on their wounded comrade. Simran was on the periscope.

'I reckon some of the other tanks might have people alive inside.'

'Yeah?' They were talking in the detached, disinterested tone of those who know that the Vrul come back to kill the stragglers left on the field after an engagement. They'd seen it done, seen propaganda videos of it.

'Mmh. No way of checking, of course. Or doing anything about it.'

19:04

Eventually, the Vrul tried to return, as night gathered, to get to the stricken tanks.

There were few rises in the terrain, out in the no man's land, in the looming shadow of Steel Ridge. But there were enough. A gloved hand gently raised the roof of a concealed shelter on a small hillock, camouflaged to fit in seamlessly with the terrain. A body, almost completely covered in hand-woven grass that melded into its surroundings whenever it stopped moving, climbed out of the hole, and brought out a long sniper rifle, similarly covered in grass. It surveyed the three Vrul vehicles detached to the task of looting the tanks and killing anyone left within. The sniper rifle could not do much against

their hulls as they rolled up, but its optics could speak to the distant watchers on Steel Ridge. It chirped as its wielder locked on to each of the three Vrul, and chirped again once it was done.

A firework puffed up from the ridge in answer, and disappeared in the night sky. Invisible in the darkness, it rotated itself as it reached the highest point of its course, and ejected three large, man-sized steel darts which glided through the air, deploying wings, and homing in on the target that the optics of the rifle designated for them. The Vrul never heard them coming, and for the rest of the savannah, the only audible effect was three thunks as the spikes hammered into the vehicles, then an explosion as each of them bloomed into a fireball.

19:26

The night fell more fully. More snipers moved around the area, fighting a silent war. The Vrul were not used to losing infiltration battles, but no matter how experienced their own snipers were, the comparatively small JSOGs could see them through the grass with optics and recon equipment that Vrul scientists had only speculated about.

Once the area was secure, a small column of sleek vehicles that were extremely quiet came down from Steel Ridge, weaving across the savannah in a way that only they understood, on a course designed by the observers that watched the area through their sniper rifles.

They rolled up to the tanks, and a number of soldiers quickly rushed out. They checked the vehicles one by one, bringing out crew that had hunkered down since the vehicle had stopped. Some in body bags, some on stretchers. Most of them could walk. *Cetshwayo* opened in a gush of engine smoke, yielding three unconscious crewmembers who had been kept alive only by their helmets' respirators. *Thunderlance's* door eventually relented after over an hour of effort with a laser torch. Once they had a thorough account, the quiet vehicles drove off, towing the tanks that could still be recuperated and which would be of use in the coming fight. *Thunderlance*, destined for spare parts, went off that way. Finally, one vehicle, alone, rumbled off further north after some hesitation.

22:44

It drove up to the last of the hulks, standing defiantly in the middle of the Savannah. Its turret was a charred, unrecognizable mess, criss-crossed by troughs dug by shells. Turned to the side, it had only half of its gun barrel remaining, and on its rear bulge, where two aerials rose to the sky, there was only the ragged remains of a green flag on one of them. The armour was black and licked by fire, the reactive panels blasted off, having dug up the earth around the tank.

They slowly crept around it to the back. A vehicle had been crashed into the rear, but it had been towed away. They could see the tracks of its wheels, but they could also see the steps of a heavy creature that had come through here, recently.

A Vrul sniper, as they had been warned, wounded and mad with pain, had hunkered at the back of the tank and waited for them. They came around the other side. It heard them at the last second and turned, roaring defiantly, but was greeted with three blasts of a shotgun to the face. It moaned blindly, tried to swipe and met nothing but air, and then stumbled onto something sharp that went under its chin and came up through its skull.

'No one ambushes a Caçadon' were the last, whispered words it heard.

They looked inside the vehicle. There was a shallow puddle of fuming liquid on the ground, slowly corroding the floor, and a body there. Not enough to take back. They recuperated personal effects.

At the front, in the smashed cockpit, they carefully cut away the chair, and pried apart the console. Broken and bloodied, but somehow, very faintly still alive, they extracted the last crewmember.

They tried for a while to tow the tank – despite the damage, Ramses' were modular, and this one could probably be broken down for parts. Their vehicle strained, dug itself into the ground pulling at the tow rope. They checked the tracks, tried to dig away some of the dirt, or nudge it forwards, yet it wouldn't move.

They gathered at the front of the tank once their efforts had been expended in vain, to consider the dead titan that stood before them. Its gun challenging some unseen enemy, the Ramses loomed in the night of the Torix savannah, unmoved. After a short pause, one of them climbed back into their vehicle, retrieved something from it, and climbed onto the turret, busying itself there for a moment. Once done, the shadow clambered down, and rejoined its friends. They considered their handiwork, nodded quietly, and drove away to the south, leaving *Assegai* to stand guard. On its twin aerials, the green confederate flag and the white and orange of Maltuan flutter defiantly.