NO EXIT

A WARHAMMER 40K NOVELLA
BY MIKE MORAN

Based upon concepts and themes from Warhammer 40,000, a tabletop wargame produced by Games Workshop Ltd. (Nottingham, United Kingdom). No challenge is intended.
The research caravan moved forward over the wildly growing kio'tor'va, traveling north this time toward the large ring wall surrounding the plain. The research skimmers rustled and flattened the large blades of grass, sending the small land animals scurrying into their holes. Consisting of one Devilfish APC, extensively modified for long-range missions, and two all-purpose transport vehicles, the convoy was barely a strain on the resources of Demlok'doran, the Tau seat of power on the planet. The Fio transports were massive, requiring dozens of directional gravitic plates on the underside to support their bulk. They more closely resembled long, floating buildings than the sophisticated research vessels they actually were; the lack of easily visible propulsion systems greatly added to this perception. That appearance, however, didn't diminish their utility to the Fio science teams that were currently navigating the wild portions of Nars'cal.

In the eyes of Shas'El Ke'Ishan Caor'savon, the commanding officer of the lone Shas cadre on the planet, the extensive use of military personnel and equipment on Fio–led research missions was an undue strain on her already thin military assets. Considering that up to a quarter of her troops could be away from Demlok'doran at any one time, not including the training missions that could last a handful of rotaa at a time, she was intensely worried about the dissolution of her military strength. This planet could be
considered a backwater of the Ke'Ishan sept, but there
were still Tau lives on the surface, and El'Caor'savon
would do everything she could to defend their safety
and well being.

The military personnel required for these trips,
however, didn't mind as much as their commanding
officer. They relished any chance to get outside of the
city walls, particularly if it wasn't part of a training
exercise, and to escape what they saw was the
unwarranted rigidity of the Shas'El's command. Some,
obviously, took that lax of military discipline to greater
extents than others. In this case, Shas'Vre Ke'Ishan
Myr'da enjoyed being away from the seven Stealthsuit
pilots directly under his command as well as the
opportunity to grant some knowledge first-hand to the
young Shas'La also on the expedition.

"Haven't ridden in one of these in a while,"
Vre'Myr'da said to the sleepy-eyed 'La, a young
Pathfinder Shas with only a single mission under her
belt. He meant this jokingly, of course; this was their
seventy-first rotaa away from Demlok'doran, most of
which were either filled of watching the working
perimeter of the Fio or sitting in the back of the
Devilfish. It was menial work, but to the Shas'Vre it was
better than countless exercises near the city walls. He
was free on the great planetary plain, even if he still
needed to stay with the research expedition.

Shas'La Ke'Ishan Elro didn't laugh, though she knew
that even a smile would help relieve the tension. Truth
be told, Vre'Myr'da's extensive bank of tactical
knowledge and his easy-going nature intimidated her
almost to the point of muteness. It was these one-on-
one encounters that the training facilities on Ke'Ishan
hadn't prepared her for. *The Shas'Vre was dropping the*
formalities, so why can't I do the same? The training is just too fresh in my memory. Maybe that ease comes from years of service, when the worries of a 'Saal are finally expunged from the mind?

"Look, La'Elro," Vre'Myr'da said, directly addressing the almost visibly shaking Shas sitting across from him, "we're a long ways from the 'El, and I don't give a Kroot's tit about formalities, if you haven't noticed. There's no need to be shut-mouth around me. Just trying to make some conversation, since you've seemed so keen to keep shut for the past four decs."

La'Elro actually smiled at the common 'Saal curse. Fine, I'll give in, Shas'Vre, at least for now, when no one else can hear my insubordination. But just for now. "Sorry, Shas'Vre. The training runs deep."

"'It's not how deep the training is, Shas'La, but what you do with it that matters.' Always my favorite quote from my days as a 'Saal." Vre'Myr'da leaned back against the bulkhead, folding his hands behind his bald head. His eyes took on the glazed-over look of a Shas just out of the academy, enjoying their few moments of relaxation before being called to join a cadre. La'Elro noticed his eyelids slowly close, followed soon after by a subdued slowing of his breathing.

It makes sense, she thought while checking the readout above the rear access ramp. It is almost local night, and we've had a long day of loading cargo and sitting around. Boredom has to set in at some point. She knew that the Devilfish pilot, a skilled Shas'La by the name of Eldi'tor, would continue driving through the night for as long as he could. The Fio crawlers would only stop once the Shas would need to, as each had multiple Tau that could pilot the craft in a moment's need. The convoy wouldn't even need to stop; a quick transfer of guidance controls to one of
the other cockpits would eliminate any need to halt the behemoths.

Ah, La'Eldi'tor. I'm glad he was assigned to this mission. She let her mind wander all over the pilot's muscular body, thinking back to that first stop when he was laying casually on a large rock taking in the dull orange–yellow glow of the sun. If only I had had the courage to talk to him then! He must think I'm a doe-eyed 'Saal, barely able to control my hormones when he's around. If only I could just say two words to him.

"Daydreaming again, La'Elro?"

The Vre's words snapped her out of the fantasy, her cheeks quickly taking on a lighter blue hue in embarrassment. Just what I need. Another snide remark from the 'Vre. She buried those thoughts immediately, since he was still her superior office on this mission. "I thought you were asleep, Shas'Vre. It is getting late, and we have been chasing sunset since leaving Demlok'doran."

Vre'Myr'da caught the Kor slang—chasing sunset—in her excuse. "No need to defend yourself, as I was doing the exact same thing," he said with a smile. "You just need to have your wits about you so you can snap out of it and be at the ready quickly. We've stopped."

The Shas'La suddenly noticed the lack of any movement indicators, the low vibration from the gravitic lift plates repelling against the ground underneath, the gentle rocking of the Devilfish as it crossed over uneven terrain. She grabbed her helmet and PX-14 Pulse Carbine, ready to jump from the side hatch of the transport. She stood waiting for the door to drop, her heartbeat accelerating with each passing raik'an. What could have attacked us out here?

She jumped when Vre'Myr'da rested his hand on
her shoulder. "No need for that, Shas'La. I think its just La'Eldi'tor getting a little sleepy."

"Apologies, Shas'Vre. I simply expected the worse." For the second time, her cheeks flooded with blood, greatly brightening their blue color as she drooped her head. Thank Aun'va for this helmet, she thought as the Shas'Vre removed his hands. I wonder what the Shas'Vre would say if he could see my face now? 'You look just like the near moon of D'Yanoi, young Shas'La!'

"Don't apologize! Anticipation of the worst is a good instinct to have," he said with a smile while picking up his own carbine and helmet, "if we were in the middle of a war zone, but there you shouldn't be daydreaming anyway. Come. We need to get to the Fio transports."

The Fio transport crawlers contained the entirety of the operation: habitation facilities, lab stations, washroom facilities, and a mess. Each one had enough fuel and supplies to support thirty Tau for four kai'rotaa, much longer than any previous expedition had been out on the plains for. The presence of two transports was primarily for the need to turn much of the cargo space into mobile Fio laboratories to start processing their collected samples immediately. To the Fio, their scientific pursuits couldn't wait a single raik'an for transit between locations. If they found something meaningful, they wanted to analyze and study it now rather than later.

One of the only reasons that a Devilfish was even necessary for these long expeditions was as an emergency evac transport. The crawlers, being the lumbering metal beast they were, could not cross even flat terrain at any type of speed, so the military
transport was needed just in case a medical emergency transpired. Most of the time, the medical facilities on
the transports and a trained Fio could handle most injuries that any of the team could encounter, but
sometimes the damages were too much for the limited supplies. In the worst situations, such as a coordinated
attack or an inter-caste epidemic, the transport would evacuate a large portion of the research team, leaving
behind the Shas personnel with any remaining Tau to begin the slow crawl back toward the city while
speedier and larger transports were queued up. The Devilfish's advanced communications equipment was
also a bonus for relaying findings back to their colleagues, although the Fio constantly trying to send
messages out annoyed the Shas greatly.

Thankfully, Vre'Myr'da hadn't had to worry about issuing a full evac order on this expedition. He stood
on guard as La'Elro and La'Eldi'tor transferred between the two craft, his eyes scanning the nearby grasses for
any sign of movement past the rustling wind. The green glow of the terrain from the Blacksun filter within
the 'Vre's helmet sent chills down his spine, reminding him of the eyes of the metallic soldiers he had fought
off nine tau'cyr ago when he was but a Shas'La. When all seemed secure, he dipped inside the transport's side
hatch, making sure to cycle the lock behind him.

Most of the crew was already asleep, with only the multiple pilots still scurrying around. La'Eldi'tor had
already entered his sleeping quarters, his mind much more exhausted than anyone else on the expedition,
leaving La'Elro alone in the main entrance.

"Upset about not getting to wish La'Eldi'tor good-night?" Vre'Myr'da said with a smile.

The young Shas turned around, her face once more
bright blue. *I should probably keep track of how many times I can do that, or I could just let the 'La go on with her life without stressing her out more than I am already. It's just so easy to embarrass her, even when there is nothing for her to be embarrassed about. Like taking pulse rounds from a 'Saal..."

"I... I think it's... good to promote intra-cadre... cama—“ she stammered out, trying to defend her feelings.

"Don't worry," he interrupted. "You can't really hide your feelings from me, even when those feelings are nothing to hide. A keen eye is useful in more areas than just the battlefield. That's another thing you'll learning outside of the Academy." With that, Vre'Myr'da entered his own quarters, leaving La'Elro alone once more inside the massive crawler.

It was a few raik'ors before La'Elro started smiling to herself, her heart finally slowed to normal. *That's probably just the Shas'Vre messing with me again. Both of us know that any romance between us would be foolhardy. We're simply on this mission together, no more, no less. Even if he did show an interest in me, any sort of action between us would be completely unprofessional.* She double-checked the outer door lock, then slowly made her way into her own quarters, thankful for the privacy that they granted.
"We've lost contact with the training mission, sir," Shas'Ui Mesa'kar said softly. He passed the dataslate containing the last handful of transmissions over to the seated Shas'El Caor'savon. She grabbed the slate and panned through the messages, noting the time of each, the frustration on her face becoming more and more defined.

"Thank you, Shas'Ui. You may leave." Ui'Mesa'kar quickly saluted before turning and exiting the makeshift office, the door sliding closed quietly as he passed through the threshold. The Shas'El was once more alone in her temporary office, situated deep within a Fio industrial complex on the edge of the capital. The deeply resonating tones from the Fio machinery constantly reminded her of that fact, regardless of the Fio's intrusions into her workspace. Since the last cadre had acted primarily in the field, they had no need for a stationary command center within the capital city; their efforts were more focused on eliminating the Y'he infestation. Before that, any Shas on the surface were there as military escorts to Fio teams. Demlok'doran could barely be considered a city!

*Those Shas will be fine, El'Caor'savon thought as she set the slate down on the metal desk. *Ui'Eoro is a good soldier. He'll be able to handle this Tau'va-given task. He's been through much worse before, at any rate*. Her mind wandered back to the airless moons of Ke'lshan, the deep darkness of the empty skies pierced
only by the Aun–forsaken green glow of the skeletal skimmers, their shifting obsidian surfaces broken only by that ethereal light. The same strong luminescence was emulated by the undead denizens that marched forward without reprise. Wave upon wave of dull metallic warriors. No emotion. No life.

A shiver shot through El'Caor'savon's spine. We've all been through much worse than a small dust storm. She stood up, shaking the last vestiges of the memory from her mind, and rested her hands on the edge of her desk. Picking the data slate back up again, she read through each transmission slowly, putting her self in the Shas' position, imagining what they were doing now. No doubt Ui'Eoro is keeping them calm. Their training can only do so much in the face of the unknown.

Again, her spine shook from the ingrained memory of that ancient foe. El'Caor'savon left the office, walking anywhere just to drive the thoughts from the front of her mind, trying desperately to bring it back to the surface of this planet. She found herself heading down the corridor toward the maintenance docks, waving off the salutes of the few Shas'La she saw on her way. Check with the Fio about the comm system. Think about reestablishing radio contact. Remind yourself that you still have troops on the ground. Check with the Fio...

If there was an over–abundance of anything on Nars'cal, especially within the capital city of Demlok'doran, it was Fio scientists and engineers. Roughly eight out of every ten Tau were Fio, a good majority of them hailing from Bork'an, and those citizens were the reason why Ke'Ishan required her cadre to be stationed here for a few tau'cyr. The planet had applied and been granted status as a border world
of Ke'ilshan, supplying the Empire with new geological knowledge and a tithe of silicon dioxide, used for thermal insulation on its starcraft. Each planet was required to have at least one cadre stationed on it at all times, and El'Caor'savon had drawn a short stick for her next rotation. "Only three tau'cyr left," she reminded herself under her breath. She waved off the Shas security guard at the entrance to the main factory and entered through the opening blast doors.

"Ah, Shas'El, just who I was looking for!" A short, even by Fio standards, Tau waved at the commander before approaching. His squat legs carried him briskly around the cluttered tables and workbenches, though his movements gave away an intimate knowledge of his surroundings. "I've just been speaking with some of my cadre, and we might have a cause of the crippling comm outages that your troops have been experiencing."

"Thank you, Fio'Vre, but do you have a solution for those outages yet?" El'Caor'savon let the frustration come out with her words, although she maintained the calm demeanor necessary for any intercaste negotiations. "The safety of my troops is first in my mind, and I can't be sure of their safety if I can barely pin down their location in times like these."

"Ah, my apologies, Shas'El, for not being more clear," said Fio'Vre Elan'tsua as he scratched the back of his head. "What I should have said was that my cadre has identified the cause and has begun preliminary tests of a work-around for this problem. We've been able to eliminate most of the interference caused by atmospheric sediment and improve the signal strength in our tests, all with limiting the power consumption increase to just a few percent. All of this is simulated,
of course, but we have high hopes for future field
tests."

The Shas'El felt a surge of relief flush through her
body, but again hid the emotion. *I can't trust these
changes until the field tests are complete. Receiving
intermittent signals is much better than no signal at
all.* "When can field tests begin? I'd like to prevent these
mishaps in the future."

"As soon as you send out the next training
mission," the Fio said with a smile. "We won't start a
cadre-wide installation until you are completely
satisfied with the alterations."

*Just as I thought. I'll be the guinea pig in this
experiment, but I can't wait any longer,* El'Caor'savon
thought. "Thank you, Fio'Vre. Start implementing any
improvements you can here. I'll send a dispatch down
when I am ready to send a team out in the field.
Continue your tests for now, though. I'd rather have a
working system than no system at all."

"Ko'vash Tau'va, Shas'El" With that, Vre'Elan'tsua
quickly turned back around and hurried to his
workbench, a small 'La meeting him halfway. The
Shas'El turned and exited the bay, her displeasure at
the current situation in the field lessened by this new
information. She looked down at the data slate again,
checking the timestamp on the last transmission, as
she passed through the large blast doors.

*We don't have much time.*
"Still can't get a feed up," Shas'Ui Eoro said under his breath. His team was camping out inside their TX-65 Stealth Devilfish, and had been for the last two rotaa. The persistent dust storm had cut out every link to the satellite comm relays, and even their location was uncertain from the drift before the Devilfish dropped skids. *That storm just came out of nowhere! We'll need to get some Fio improving our weather prediction systems.*

"Same here. This dust completely scrambles anything we try to send out." Shas'La Cova'run, the Devilfish pilot, threw his headset down. The two soldiers were sitting up in the cockpit, trying as best as they could to reestablish any form of contact with their home station. "Why in Aun'va's name weren't we informed of this storm earlier?"

Ui'Eoro felt the frustration in the pilot's words. "You know how these storms seem to jump out of the ground. For all we know, they had tried to warn us, but the storm was already interfering with our comms. We just need to keep trying." *We need to calm down. We'll figure this out.*

"You can head back to your squad. I'm sure you're sick of sitting up here. We have been at it for the last three decs, after all. I'll keep working the problem." La'Cova'run put his headset back on and double-checked the power readings to the main antenna array and the marker beacon.
"Just shut down any non-essential systems for now," Ui'Eoro said calmly. "We have no intel on how long this storm could last, but I would like to still be able to fly out of here when it does finally break."

"Copy. Shutting down non-essentials."

Ui'Eoro let the pilot be with his ship and exited out the rear hatch into the troop hold. His own missions with the small TX-24 Tetra speeders gave him a firsthand knowledge of the connection created between Tau and machine, especially a machine you've been piloting for tau'cyr. *He's not going to give up on this craft until every possible avenue is exhausted. He's in love with this transport. The Fio would be proud of us,* he though, a rare smile breaking out across his face.

"Any word from command?" a young 'La asked. The six other members of the team looked up, waiting for their team leader to answer. The rest of the pathfinder team had been kept in relative dark since the storm hit, the 'Ui had been so busy up front with the pilot. The only things they knew were what they could discern from listening through the thin metal door separating the two cabins.

"None yet. We'll be waiting out this storm for as long as we can, or until we can make contact and command calls us back," Ui'Eoro said, maintaining a roughly monotone delivery. "Until it does end, we'll be doing live fire drills outside every few rotaa. Good test of marksmanship when you can't even see the target."

A few of the Shas laughed, but those that had been out with the Shas'Ui during a dust storm knew that he was not joking. They would be firing at targets that were out of sight behind the clouds of dust, just at the edge of the visibility range, so only when they went out into the storm to retrieve their targets would they know
exactly how poorly or well they had shot.

"For now, though, relax. We won't be going anywhere for a while." Ui'Eoro took a seat near the front of the hold, watching the squad under his command react to the new situation. Most resumed their pacing or blank stares, a few re-checked their carbines for what could've been the eightieth time, but all had the same expressionless face that told Ui'Eoro that they were thinking of the Tau'va.

*I've taught them well,* he thought. He leaned back, resting his head against the cold bulkhead of the Devilfish, and closed his eyes. The low sounds of the wind gusts outside and the pinging of rocks against the transport's skin created a calming background to the chaos that raced through his mind. *If only I could be as calm in mind as they are.*
Looks like she's finally starting to loosen up, Vre'Myr'da thought, turning away from the two Shas'La to look back toward the horizon. He had been watching the two of them for the last few raik'ors, and even caught bits of their conversation through the intercom, although he had shut it off soon after. No use listening in on what isn't my business. He quickly glanced back behind him, briefly watching the Fio grab hand shovels and picks and the two Shas'La flirt, but thought better of dropping his guard for too long.

Over the past few rotaa, Vre'Myr'da had been able to convince La'Elro that there were bigger things past her training, that sometimes you didn't need to be on guard every raik'an of every dec. In fact, loosening up every once in a while was healthy for a Tau, especially those that were in high-stress situations. Not like watching a bunch of Fio dig through rocks is high stress, he thought, watching a small group of scientists celebrate a find a handful of tor'lek away. It would probably be more stressful to just completely ignore them and let my mind wander.

La'Elro, however, didn't even notice the celebration, since she was too busy talking with the Devilfish pilot. He's finally talking to me, she kept repeating in her head. I can't believe he's actually talking to me, and for this long even! Thank the Aun that he's giving me a chance.

"Yesterday's drive really took a hit out of me,"
La'Eldi'tor said, feigning nonchalance, "but I guess I'm used to it. I've been through much worse drives, and in much worse conditions, plus having a full squad of warriors in the back, but I just enjoy it. I am a Devilfish pilot for a reason, after all."

La'Elro giggled, noticing the way that La'Eldi'tor's smile widened soon after. *Such a bright smile. I'd go against the Aun just to see that smile.* "We all have our place in the Tau'va, from the youngest 'Saal to the greatest Aun'O.' I always loved that quote," she said.

"You and Vre'Myr'da seem to love your quotes, don't you?" he asked with a smile. "I guess it's something you recon types enjoy. Of course, I have a few quotes saved up myself, but they're all about being at the helm of a machine, not sulking in the underbrush."

"We do more than just sulking, ya' know," La'Elro said with a smile, letting him know that his off-hand insult of her path didn't mean much to her. *He sure is letting his guard down quite a bit. Vre'Myr'da acts the same way, even when he should be serious and stern. Was I the only uptight one in this operation?*

"Shas'La! We'll need you to move your 'fish!" a Fio'Ui shouted from across the dig site. Most of the Fio had removed their headsets and extraneous equipment in the high heat, although none of the Shas had noticed the temperature. The two Shas'La looked across the dozen-tor'lekk distance between them and the Devilfish, with the Fio excavation machines just beyond the transport. The displaced dirt shrouded much of the dig site from their view, blocking all but a few of the scientists from their view, but both knew that there were at least twenty Tau working at that location.

"Copy, Fio'Ui!" he called back. *Gives me more to do*
than just sit around and talk, even if it does mean I get to be out of the 'fish for a while. La'Eldi'tor started to head toward the transport, but stopped mid-stride and turned back to La'Elro. "You should probably get back to watching the perimeter anyway. Talk with you soon."

La'Elro could barely respond before La'Eldi'tor turned back and started running across the plain, his hooves kicking up little mounds of dirt with each stride, back to the waiting vehicle. The Shas covered the distance in only a handful of strides, reminding La'Elro of the Jikita in the middle of a hunt. He gracefully jumped onto the front drone nacelles and dipped into the cockpit, the hatch swinging closed effortlessly behind. It wasn't until a few raik'ans after he entered the vehicle that La'Elro was finally able to look away.

Now, back to business. I can only follow the Shas'Vre's method for so long, she thought, picking her carbine back up off the rock she had rested it on. La'Elro activated the gun sight and scanned it across the horizon, the magnification enhancing the shifting colors of the sky from a distant dust storm. Good thing the wind isn't blowing this way, she thanked. I'd hate to be caught in the middle of that.
"Shas'La, retrieve your targets," Ui'Eoro shouted through the comm system. The dust had degraded the comm systems to a point where even close-range communication was troublesome, even with the augmentation from the Devilfish's antenna array. He watched as the four pathfinders, in two separate groups, slowly made their way into the dust storm, their dark shapes slowly melding into the swirling brown winds until they finally disappeared.

Thank the Aun they've had advanced survival training, he thought, keeping an eye out for his troops' return. I know how disorienting these storms can be, but they'll be able to find their way back here eventually. Or survive until I can wrangle them in. He mentally ticked away the raik'an in his head, counting how long it took for the Shas'La to return to the transport.

"Shas'Ui," the call came in from the Devilfish, "we've sta...lized La'Yio'va. His wounds h...tarted to heal up." Even at this range, and with the increase power output of the transport, the dust has still affecting every word they tried to communicate. Each passing rotaa had just made things worse, but trying to fly out of this storm could irreversibly damage the vehicle, grounding them for good.

Two Shas'La reappeared, carrying the small metal target between them. Ui'Eoro watched as the two pathfinders cycled the port hatch, sensed their haste in
getting back inside the transport. *I can't blame them. I'd much rather be inside too, but we need this environmental training. You just can't simulate these storms back at the capital,* he thought while the hatch recycled up and into a locked position, returning the interior to its pressurized state.

*Good, now where are those other two?* the Shas'Ui thought, his eyes darting back and forth across the thick veil of debris constantly shifting around him. He stood motionless, barely turning his head, all of his senses tuned into his sight and hearing. *I'll probably see their shadows before they can hail me,* he thought with a smile. *This dust completely negates any technology we try to use.*

A small crackle over the intercom interrupted his thoughts. *Static,* he cursed, resuming his vigilant watch for the last two Shas to come back. The internal timer of his helmet told him it had been twenty raik'ors since the first team had arrived, more than enough time for the Shas'Ui to change from a frustrated team leader to a worried one.

"La'Cova'run, I'm heading away from the vehicle to retrieve the last two Shas'La. Expected duration of one dec or less." He knew that the storm would clip some of the message, but hopefully the pilot could extrapolate the full meaning.

"Cop...has'Ui. One dec," the return came through from the Devilfish pilot. "I'll divert po...o comm system...il your retur..."

Ui'Eoro noted the compulsory optimism in the pilot's tone. Both soldiers knew exactly how damaging the dust could be to equipment and personnel; La'Yio'va had just been a harsh reminder of that fact. He compulsively re-checked his helmet seals for the third time, ensured all of his gear was tightly fastened,
and started walking out into the dust. He had barely walked eight tor'lek when the silhouettes of the two Shas appeared deep in the dust. He watched the shapes grow and darken as he continued slowly making his way away from the Devilfish, but otherwise didn't see any other change. "Shas'La, do you read?"

The Shas'Ui was greeted with a burst of static. At least that's something, he thought, covering a few more tor'lek before the shapes took on a more defined form. Aun-forsaken rocks! Where in the Empire are those Shas? he swore, quickly taking a full rotation glance at his position. Those targets were here when I set them up, and so too should the Shas.

He took another glance behind, thanking the Devilfish's large dark outline that it could still be discerned. Ui'Eoro knelt down, his trained eyes picking out the faint compaction of the dark soil, betraying hoof prints that would've been otherwise indiscernible in the storm. Just outbound tracks, he thought, knowing that his Shas were somewhere down this path.

"Shas'La, do you read me?" he called out, but to no avail. Not even static greeted his hails, so he bent down once more to check the tracks. His subconscious hunter instincts kicked in, his eyesight improved even beyond the helmet sensors, and the adrenalin flowed swiftly through his veins. This was his hunt, his chance to live the life on his ancestors.

"Shas'La, do you read?" he called out. Nothing but silence again. The clock read forty raik'ors since he left the side of the transport to look for his lost Shas. I'm running out of time, he thought, double-checking the prints in the ground one more time. I need to make sure that I'll still be able to get back too.
He took three more steps, and a burst of static erupted from his earpiece. Ui'Eoro's head shot up, quickly scanning his entire front arc for any signs of his missing troops. Another burst of static, and the Shas'Ui stood fully erect, carbine at the ready, waiting for a dark shape to appear anywhere around him. He turned around slowly, checking everywhere around him, but all he saw was the brown blanket of the dust storm.

"...as'Ui...ad...c...us?"

Ui'Eoro quickly took a full circle, looking for any hint of the hailing Shas'La. "Repeat, Shas'La. Negative on visual contact." His heart started pounding, the adrenalin of the hunt keeping his senses focused. *I'm already past the dec-mark*, he thought, waiting for a return hail. *This better not be a trick of the storm, or my mind.*

"...as'Ui, we'r...ght be..."

The Shas'Ui quickly turned around, carbine at the ready, and saw two faint shapes far off in the dust. *Was that toward or away from the Devilfish?* he thought as he slowly made his way toward the quickly darkening shapes. The outlines of the Pathfinder armor solidified, the helmet sensors winking in the shifting sands as the three warriors approached each other.

"Sorry, Shas'Ui. We...uldn't recover t...arget," one of the Shas said through the comm. With all of the interference, Ui'Eoro couldn't tell which warrior was which. The wind whipping like a Mal'kor's wings didn't help discerning the words from the static, either.

*I'm just glad that I didn't lose two of my men on a training mission.* "Let the Aun find it," Ui'Eoro replied. "I'm calling off future exterior drills for the remainder of this mission. I'd rather have all of us return to Demlok'doran in one piece than be marginally better at firing in zero-visibility conditions. Now, let's get back
to the transport."

Once again, his tracking senses kicked in, and he bent down to find his own track that would lead back to the Devilfish and out of the swirling confusion of the storm. The three Shas followed the hoof prints, each bent over to provide their own eyes to the search, for around twenty tor'lek before the prints disappeared.

"Hold it," the Shas'Ui said, raising his clenched fist beside his head. "My tracks obviously lead from this direction, but I'd rather get back to the Devilfish without taking any wrong turns. We need the next section of path before we continue on." The two Shas'La nodded in approval, understanding the main points even through the static.

Ui'Eoro's heart started pounding again, only this time from fear. He had three lives at stake directly in his hands, and only he had the proper rations for an extended stay away from the transport. *How long would those rations hold if they're not just for my sake?* "La'Taal're, look ahead for the rest of the tracks, but maintain visual contact," he said, using the standard Shas hand signals throughout to ensure that his commands weren't misinterpreted.

The Shas'La showed her understanding visually before slowly moving away from the other two Shas, her hands hovering a few tor'ils above the ground. Shas'La Bap'gal knelt down, knowing there was nothing more for him to do until the three Shas had to move again. Ui'Eoro took the same stance, if only to slow his heartbeat down to more manageable levels.

*I need to get these two back,* he thought as the clock ticked past eighty raik'ors. *I need to get all three of us back.*
Shas'El Caor'savon stormed down the hallway, her frustration bubbling just below the surface of her blue skin. *Those Fio better have some good news. Those Shas need to get out of that storm, and soon.* She turned a corner, but paused briefly to calm her nerves down before storming into the Fio workstations. *Those Fio are also my only hope for getting my troops out. The Tau'va will decide the fate of all of us.*

The various field tests that the Fio had organized hadn't gone to plan. Reception was poor once the Shas teams left the vicinity of Demlok'doran, and that was without being within the middle of a dust storm. While each improvement did better the situation, at the rate they were going the dust storm would be long over, or the team caught in the middle of it beyond hope and beyond the limit of their supplies. The Shas'El wouldn't let the second situation happen.

She didn't even pause to salute the security Shas before entering the workroom, the large blast doors opening on her approach. Only four Fio workers could be seen, which was normal for this time of the night. "Fio'La," she called to one of the engineers, "where's Vre'Elan'tsua?"

"Backroom," said the Fio, not even raising his head to look as he pointed to another set of blast doors. "At least, he should still be. I haven't seen him leave yet tonight."

*Probably because you're too busy fiddling with your*
trinkets, El'Caor'savon thought, but immediately buried the anger. *He's probably working overtime on a fix for this dust problem. 'May the Aun forgive my displeasure with another caste, lest the Mont'au return.'* She walked around the workstations, noting the tiny electrical components that the Fio was soldering together, and made her way toward the doors in the rear.

"Ah, Shas'El, so glad to see you," Fio'Vre Elan'tsua called from her left. El'Caor'savon turned and saw the Fio walking slowly toward her, a mug of fresh pech'caffe steaming in his left hand. A large dataslate was cradled under his right arm, the screen still glowing a faint blue from recent use. "Just needed a late night kick for this project. If you'll just follow me inside, we can speak a little more candidly."

The blast doors opened wide, and the Shas'El followed the Fio'Vre inside. The walls of the relatively small room were completely hidden by shelving and bins; it seemed like every tor' ils of space was given up to storage. The workstation in the middle of the room was a harsh contrast to this, as nothing marred the jet-black surface. Vre'Elan'tsua set the dataslate on a corner of the table, and the entire surface leapt to life.

"We've been able to identify roughly where your lost Devilfish is right now," he said as the three-dimensional map rotated between them. "Thankfully, it appears like they are near the edge of the storm, but with shifting winds that could change by the next rotaa. We just can't know for sure until our meteorologists and planetologist pin down what feeds these storms and how they evolve over time."

"So then it should be a simple manner of sending waypoint data down to the 'Fish and getting them out now," El'Caor'savon said, eyeing the blinking green icon
in the midst of the brown cloud. *Only a few tor'kan away from the edge. More than reasonable driving distance, even in a dust storm. As long as they head in the right direction...*

"I'm afraid it's not that easy, Shas'El," the Fio said, punching a few floating images. The map zoomed out, still centered on the downed Devilfish, until Demlok'doran appeared on the edge of the map. "Even if they do exit the storm, they'd still need to make it back to the city, and I have no idea what their fuel and consumable reserves are. They may not even make it back to the city. You'll need to send an evacuation team, just to make sure they make it out."

The map shifted once more, revealing more of the great planetary plain, and a second green icon winked onto the screen. "There's currently an extended duration expedition here, along with a few of your Shas and a modified Devilfish. They're the closest option, and we can send them out as soon as you make the call. We may need to leave the transport until the storm dies down, but at least we can get your Tau out of there."

*As much as I dislike taking advice from this Fio, I know he's right. Thank Ke'Ishan there's a 'Vre with that crew,* El'Caor'savon thought after the dossiers of the Shas security detail flashed on the screen. "Thank you, Fio'Vre. I'll put in the call immediately."

Fio'Vre Elan'tsua lifted the dataslate off the table, the map disappearing with the broken connection, and handed it over to the Shas'El. "You'll find all of the position data you need there. Ko'vash Tau'va."

"For Ke'Ishan and Empire," El'Caor'savon returned before turning and leaving the room, the dataslate warm in her hands. She calculated a quick timetable in her head as she left the work area, her powerful legs
Only a few deces until this ordeal is over. 'Aun, guide us.'
Shas'La Eldi'tor couldn't sleep, no matter how exhausting the rotaa had been. The research convoy was moving back toward Demlok'doran, but not without a detour to the ring wall hills and mountains surrounding the great planetary plain. The past few rotaa had been nothing but driving, with stops simply to eat and sleep. La'Eldi'tor had done nothing else, his mind focused on navigating the rolling and occasionally broken countryside. It was a test of endurance at its finest, and La'Eldi'tor wouldn't let that test get the better of him.

Still, he couldn't seem to simply close his eyes and sleep, if only for a dec. Something just wasn't sitting right in his mind, but he had no idea what to make of the strange sensation. *Tau'va knows what I should be feeling like right now. I just need to calm myself down before the day begins, and I'll be set. I'm not going to be the reason this convoy slows down.*

He exited his sleeping nook and walked down the central aisle of the Fio vehicle. Every other Tau was asleep, or else working away diligently in their labs at the far end on the transport. The walls softly echoed each step, creating a prominent bass line for the more distant hum of the air circulation units. *How long have we been out on the plain? A kai'rotaa? More? Each rotaa seems to have melded into the others...*

His hooves carried him to one of the exterior hatches. La'Eldi'tor grabbed one of the work jackets
from the sealed closet and threw it on, knowing the
cold of night was much worse out on the plain. The
hatch cycled, and the Shas stepped out into the night,
greeted by a sharp burst of icy air.

The slowly waving blades of ko'io'nai and the
protruding rock on the hillsides were illuminated only
by the two crisscrossing arcs of light in the night sky,
the fainter reflections off the icy scattered disc bodies
in the system dominated by the wide band of the
t'koreth. His survival training allowed him to pick out a
few of the star systems: the yellow of Dal'yth, the bright
blue-white of Sa'cea, the distant glow of T'au. His keen
eyes could even pick out the deep red of Vior'la's
primary sun, but its binary partner was lost in the glow
of the other stars.

La'Eldi'tor caught himself staring up at the night
sky after a few raik'ors. Every time, he thought,
smiling. I just get lost in the knowledge that we're
bringing peace and stability to those stars, all in the
name of the Tau'va. What greater purpose could there
be in life?

Almost compulsively, he walked over to the landed
Devilfish, all of its systems powered down for the
night. Such a good ship, La'Eldi'tor though, running his
hands over the bright yellow numbering on the nose
cone. We've been through a lot in our few short tau'cryr
together, but I couldn't ask for a better craft.
Something still didn't feel right to him, so he opened
up the front hatch and climbed into the driver's seat.

Everything seems to be in order, he though,
looking at the passive readouts on the Devilfish's
various systems. He was just about to get up and leave
when he noticed a flashing red icon out of the corner of
his eye. He tapped the icon, opening up the received
message on the side display.

Emergency Evacuation Order | Group P-272-D
Personnel: 8 Shas'La / 1 Shas'Ui
Location: 2.41602 x 128.30938
Time: 00.35 DDL

"Klkn! That's almost twenty raik'ors ago!" he shouted. La'Eldi'tor knew how serious a standard evac order was, but this was coming straight from the Shas'El. I need to wake up the 'Vre and 'La, plus leave a message for the Fio teams, he thought as he leapt from the transport, leaving the front hatch open, and ran the handful of tor'lek back to the crawler. He reentered through the same hatch he had left the vehicle from, and ran down the hallway, quickly reading the door numbers to find his fellow Shas' sleeping quarters.

Vre'Myr'da awoke once La'Eldi'tor opened the door, his upper body swinging quickly up off the mat. "What is it Shas'La?" he said through a yawn, but his serious tone wasn't lost.

"Just got a message from the Shas'El. Evac order about eighty-five tor'kan away. Message received twenty-one raik'ors ago, but I just saw it in the Devilfish cockpit."

"Go warm up that 'Fish. I'll wake La'Elro. Be there in a raik'ors."

La'Eldi'tor ran back out of the room, his heart pounding. He jumped over the drone nacelle and into the cockpit of the Devilfish, swinging the hatch quickly closed behind him. His fingers danced across the touch screens, activating the power systems, gravitic plates, propulsion, weapons. The order still flashed on the side display, coupled with a clock displaying the time elapsed since the message was sent. Twenty-two
raik'ors.

"Let's move, Shas'La," he heard through the intercom. Vre'Myr'da and La'Elro were closing the rear access ramp, belting into the side benches opposite of each other.

"Copy." The transport leapt off the ground, burners open wide. The whole craft shook, vibrations from the overdriven engines carrying through the entire support structure.

_We don't have much time..._
"Any word from the team on the ground?" Vre'Myr'da asked. The last forty raik'ors had passed quickly, all three of the Shas' minds preoccupied. Now, they were only a few short tor'kan away from the waypoint, but all three of the Shas knew that those last tor'kan would be the most arduous for them.

"None, Shas'Vre," La'Eldi'tor responded over the intercom. "My hail attempts haven't gone through either. They may not even know we're on our way."

How can we rescue them if they don't even know we're here to do just that? Vre'Myr'da checked the display once more, noting their proximity to the waypoint. "Copy. We'll be going in blind either way. Nothing we can't handle."

Shas'La Elro, however, was not as calm as her two Shas companions. She had heard of the damage that the dust storms had caused to past expeditions, and they were willingly dropping into the center of one? Her hands could barely stop their shaking around the solid bulk of the PX-14 carbine, her pulse echoed loudly within her shaped helmet. We've got to go quickly, or else we may end up in the same position as them.

A faint chime rang through the troop compartment, coupled with the stalling of the Devilfish's movement. "We're over the waypoint," La'Eldi'tor said. "Orders, sir?"

The Shas'Vre sat in silence, his eyes closed behind the blank stare of the Pathfinder helmet. There would be no time to dress in his XV-25 Stealth battlesuit, nor
would the extra bulk aid them in a speedy rescue. It would just be him and the Shas'La, both in light line armor, jumping into the midst of a dust storm to rescue nine fellow Shas. Orders. This is my rescue to coordinate, my orders to give. How can we get those Shas out safely? How can we get ourselves out safely?

"Maintain position here above the storm," Vre'Myr'da said, softly at first, but his voice's volume grew with each word. "La'Elro and I will rappel down, drop the last few tor'lek, and zero in on the location of the 'Fish. We'll relay updated coordinates up, at which point you'll drop down and land alongside the other transport. From there, it's a straight evac up through the storm and back to Demlok'doran. Total time in storm will be sixteen raik'ors, less for you and the 'Fish."

"Copy," the two Shas'La said immediately after, their replies sounding in the 'Vre's helmet as their activation icons winked to life on his HUD.

"Stow your weapon, Shas'La. You'll want both your hands for the drop," Vre'Myr'da said as he clamped his own carbine to his back, the magnetic strips holding the weapon securely to his back and out of the way. La'Elro followed suit, her heart rate accelerating almost to unbearable levels. "And try to calm down. Remember your training."

Yes, remember the training, the Shas'La thought. We're finally getting back to the training. This is what I've been waiting for. She walked across the small compartment, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Shas'Vre, waiting for the port hatch to drop. "How far down will this drop be?" she asked, controlling her tone.

"Eighty tor'lek, give or take, with a final two a
straight drop to the ground," Vre'Myr'da said monotonally. "All but a few will be through the dust."

La'Elro didn't even have time to contemplate the insertion before the hatch swung open. "Ko'vash Tau'va, Shas," La'Eldi'tor said, tilting the Devilfish so that the two warriors could get a view of what they were jumping into.

"Copy that," Shas'Vre Myr'da said, edging out to the precipice. The swirling brown fog of the dust storm raged below, completely shrouding any view of the ground or the other transport. The twisting and writhing streams of rock and dirt scratched against the underbelly of the Devilfish, rocking the craft gently about its axis. "Let's get this done."

Vre'Myr'da stepped onto the doorway, releasing the thick black line into the storm. La'Elro followed suit, her pulse strangely calm. *Remember the training*, she repeated once more, then stepped off the side of the hatch, dropping swiftly into the maelstrom below.
Shas'Ui Eoro mentally began counting the rotaa since he had last been back at the Devilfish, but quickly stopped the thoughts once he passed eight. *No use counting when we haven’t gotten back to the transport yet.* He had kept searching almost every dec, knowing that the more time they spent now trying to find the Devilfish would mean less time total in the middle of the storm. Ui’Eoro had even skipped a few sleep cycles to scout around their temporary camps, but these searches turned up no new clues more often than not.

"Sir, I've...ound heavy dep...ssions u...head," the Shas'La said, all the while motioning toward the distance. "I...ooked lik...here we had fi...xercises a fe...otaa ago."

Ui'Eoro nodded in approval. *'Trust the eyes of those who have seen, for the Tau'va is clearer in them,'* he thought, waving La'Bap'gal over closer. "We'll go to the waypointed location and reassess our position."

The two Shas'La nodded. Ui'Eoro had said that phrase more than enough times during this excursion that he barely needed to utter the words, but he was running this completely by the book. There was no reason to be hasty in their return, especially when it could lead them to be tor'kan off their target. The dust was now just a minor annoyance, aside from the visibility issues it caused.

The three Shas huddled close together, then made their way along La'Taal're's return path, taking
occasional breaks to ensure that they were going in the right direction. We're all tired, but there'll be no rest until we're safely inside that Devilfish.
The drop had gone as smoothly as it could have, given the situation. Vre'Myr'da followed La'Elro down a few tor'lek behind, maintaining visual contact the entire way. The distance was enough that when the two Shas were pounded by a gust of wind and earth, there would be no danger of collision. The ropes were weighted enough that they also didn't deviate strongly from the vertical at any time, except in the strongest of winds.

"Ten tor'lek," Vre'Myr'da said. La'Elro stopped, letting the Shas'Vre catch up to her position. "Last two or so will be dead drop. Equipment check."

La'Elro reached over and checked all of the Shas'Vre's armor seals, made sure all of the extra equipment pouches and belts were tight, verified the pulse weapon on his back. "Clear," she said before letting Vre'Myr'da check her own equipment out. *Remember the training. Remember the mission.*

"Clear," he said. "Pause at rope's end, then I'll drop first. Wait for my hail." The Shas'Vre started sliding down the last ends of the rope, the Shas'La close behind, until the two reached the holding mechanism at the end of their fall. The ground below was still shrouded by the storm, but at least they could see some of the dark, more prominent features that they'd need to avoid when they took the plunge.

"'The Shas protect,'" Vre'Myr'da said. He detached from his drop belt, his body quickly sinking down into the brown dust. The sound of the impact was drowned
out by the buffeting winds, but La'Elro knew that the Shas'Vre had landed when the dark shadowy shape halted its downward movement. She watched as the shape moved slowly away from the drop site, then pause.

*Guess that means it's my turn to take the plunge,* she thought, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath of recycled air. La'Elro opened her eyes, keeping them pointed downward, and released her grip on the drop line. At first, the drop felt like nothing more than a high jump, but as her body accelerated downward, her mind turned to realizing exactly how far two tor'lek is.

The fall was over almost as soon as it had started. Her armored bulk impacted the slightly compact dirt, kicking up small chunks of earth into the massive dust storm. Her pulse slowing, she gradually stood upright and grabbed the Pulse Carbine from her back, ready to encounter any dangers they may face.

"La'Eldi'tor, we're skids down. Expect contact in eight raik'ors," Vre'Myr'da said, the monotone report said deliberately slowly to counteract any transmission problems from the dust storm. He reached into one of his side pockets and removed a thin metallic rod topped with a bright blue light.

"Position beacon," he said as he drove the shaft into the ground. A relative waypoint popped up on both of their HUDs, pointing right where the Shas'Vre had slammed the beacon. "No use wandering around this storm without knowing how far we've gone, right?"

La'Elro nodded in agreement. *He still has that sense of humor, even now. Looks like slipping in and out of the training comes from experience.* "What are our search patterns?"

"Start at the beacon. Outward eighty tor'lek, then
return. We'll mark directions before leaving," the Shas'Vre said, again taking his time with the commands. "Call back once contact is made with the Devilfish. If we don't make contact with that distance, we'll double the search radius."

"Copy that," the Shas'La said, her pulse slightly accelerating. Now, we hunt. The two Shas marked their starting positions on the beacon before turning away and walking slowly out, their eyes scanning across the entirety of their forward arc. Each step was one further away from the only part of the storm they knew, and one toward their goal.

Vre'Myr'da cast a stray eye to the time readout on his HUD, being extremely mindful of exactly how long they would need to be in the storm for. Only two raik'ors have passed, he thought while sidestepping around a rock outcrop. Only two raik'ors.
What am I supposed to do now? La'Cova'run thought, looking back at the display. Ui'Eoro is way past the dec-mark, but what am I to do? I can't just send out more of his troops, I can't move the 'Fish, I can't even try to contact him, since I know that would fail anyway.

The Devilfish pilot sat alone in the cockpit, mentally calculating how long the three Shas could feasibly exist in the storm without any support, taking off the time for their current time on the surface. His answer just disheartened him even more, but quickly swept that away from his mind. They'll be back.

A knock echoed through the quiet cockpit, startling La'Cova'run. He stood up and walked to the rear hatch, opening it slowly.

"Sir, have you heard anything from the Shas'Ui?" the young Shas'La said, his arms folded over his chest. The other Shas in the troop compartment looked over, hope and fear equally present in their stares toward the front of the craft. Even La'Yio'va raised his head, the bandages restricting any movement past that.

"Nothing yet," the pilot said calmly, maintaining a strong outward gaze. "Ui'Eoro will be back. By the Tau'va he will."

The words did nothing to the mental fears of the assembled Pathfinders, nothing to calm what they worried would be the greatest tragedy they had personally faced in their lives. La'Cova'run barely
believed the words himself, but he wouldn't let the squad know that.

He turned and re-entered the cockpit, looking over the system outputs once more. It seemed like every system had slipped from blue to yellow, with a few reading in the red. Thankfully, propulsion and communications were two that still showed a faint yellow, being in good enough shape to be used if needed. The pilot strapped his headset back on, hoping to pick up something on the intercom.

Even a burst of static would be welcome now, he thought before calling out to the Shas'Ui. *Just a burst of static. Let me know that you're still out there.*
Vre'Myr'da would have started feeling frustrated at this point if it wasn't for the Tau'va. He and La'Elro had already used up half of their allotted time on the surface trying to locate the missing Devilfish, but neither had come up with any success. To be fair, they had only covered half of their search vectors at that point, but if their next handful of searches didn't return anything, they were in for a long mission.

Static erupted through his headset, almost past his tolerance levels. *Either something's trying to contact me, or the dust is wrecking more havoc on my systems than I had planned for,* he though, raising his Carbine back into its ready position. He quickly scanned the entirety of his surroundings, looking for any sign of where the signal could have come from.

It was then that he noticed three faint shapes approaching him slowly from his right side. Vre'Myr'da's first reaction was to relax, but his training snapped in quickly after. He crouched down near a small rock outcrop, aiming his weapon on the approaching shapes.

"This is Shas'Vre Myr'da. Unidentified persons, do you read?" he called out, knowing that Shas'La Elro would ignore the hail. No response. The Shas'Vre fired his markerlight, hoping the dust wouldn't scramble the message too much for his sensors to read out data on the target. Nothing.

The three shapes practically broke into a run, their
formation quickly breaking to get within the cover of the rock outcrops scattered across this part of the plain. A faint wink of green light filtered through the dust back to Vre'Myr'da, sending chills down his spine. How could they be here?

"This is Shas'Vre Myr'da. Do you read?" he called again, hoping that his fears wouldn't be realized. No message returned. The three opposing shapes didn't move.

For the first time in two tau'cyr, Shas'Vre Myr'da had no solution to this predicament. Fire on the potentially hostile, but still unidentified, warriors currently in a standoff with him, or get as much information as possible before making a decision, even if that choice could endanger his life? He checked the time readout on his HUD one more time, noting the duration tick past twenty raik'ors, only a few past his expected duration. I'll still be down here much longer, especially since we haven't located the 'Fish yet.

His pathfinder training kicked in, and his body started reacting before his mind could command it. His eyes scanned the ground ahead of him, his senses heightened from the adrenalin flow, and mentally calculated the traverse time and spotting distance from a forward camp. Vre'Myr'da snapped the carbine to his back, crouched lower, and started creeping toward a second rock formation further into the small gully.

His quicken heartbeat blocked out most of the other sounds coming from the exterior of his armor; even the battering winds seemed lessened during the short trek across the gully. From this distance, the two warriors' outlines seemed more defined, but he still couldn't determine what they were. The image of the green light sent a second set of chills down his back.
Vre'Myr'da grabbed the carbine off his back, aimed it deftly at the main rock outcropping that the warriors were hiding behind, and opened up his comm channel once more. "This is Shas'Vre Myr'da. Do you read?"
Why would there be other Tau out here?
The thought echoed through La'Elro's mind as she approached the three shapes walking slowly toward her. She had seen the three pathfinders through the dust a short raik'ors before signaling using the standard Fire Caste hand signals to see if they responded, since she couldn't trust the comm systems of either party.

Why would there be a lone Tau out here? Shas'Ui Eoro thought as he and the two Shas slowly approached the lone pathfinder. His fears were greatly alleviated once he saw the familiar hand signals that he and the two 'La with him had been using for the past two decs coming from someone outside of their circle.

Once he got closer, however, his thoughts became more clouded. Those aren't my squad markings, and La'Cova'run doesn't wear pathfinder armor. Where did this Shas come from?

"Greeti...am Shas'L...lro, he...or tea...xtractio...has team," La'Elro said slowly, signaling the entire time as best as she could. We're going to have to dumb down our communications for quite some time.

"Yes. I'm Shas'Ui Eoro of that team. We're looking for the transport ourselves, and can aid in your search," he said, knowing half or more of the message would be clipped by the storm, but hoping that his hand signals would allow it to be interpreted fine. "Is there anyone else on the surface searching?"
"Yes, Shas'Vre is also here, although right now he's roughly half a tor'kan behind me looking in the opposite direction. We've scanned most of the land within a small radius of our locator beacon, but still haven't found the Devilfish."

"We'll, it's definitely not back this way," Ui'Eoro said, trying to keep the conversation moving. "What's the procedure now?"

La'Elro thought about what hand signals would work to convey what was next, as most of them were for basic communication centered on detailing enemy forces or movement. "Continue searching around the perimeter until a time when the Shas'Vre calls it and we evac ourselves out."

That prospect was haunting for all four of the Shas. Would they really leave six of their own trapped in the storm, even if it was for the Tau'va? Would the Shas'Vre have the resolve to order that command. "Then we'd better keep searching," the Shas'Ui said, re-shouldering his weapon. "We'll get the positional data once we return to the beacon, then we'll be able to aid your search."

The four turned around, with La'Elro leading and Ui'Eoro right behind her, and walked quickly back toward the beacon. La'Elro tried repeatedly to hail the Shas'Vre, but her calls failed to elicit a reply. We must both be out of range of the beacon. That, or the storm's degrading our systems much more quickly than we had thought.

If all else fails, she thought as the team crawled over a small cliff face, we'll meet up with the 'Vre back at the beacon soon enough. Either he'll be there waiting for us, or we'll sit around waiting for him.
"This is Shas'Vre Myr'da. Do you read?"

None of the shapes moved, but he wasn't ready to open fire just yet. *Never fire until you know everything about the target, or else much worse things than missing can happen,* he repeated to himself, calming his nerves. He located a small boulder another few tor'lek in front of him that would be enough to shelter his body.

This time, he didn't bother stowing his weapon. The occupied outcrops were only a handful of tor'lek further across the plain, and he couldn't risk the three mysterious shapes firing on him as he relocated. His eyes darted back and forth between the three hiding spots as he stepped out from his own makeshift run'al.

Almost immediately, shots erupted from the two side warriors, impacting on the large rock and causing Vre'Myr'da to duck back behind. *Klkn! I didn't want them to be hostiles, but looks like...*

His thoughts trailed off as he noticed a few singe marks on the rock face. The blackened stone betrayed the marks of pulse technology, at least to his highly trained eyes, and he knew of no other race that used pulse weaponry. *But what are they doing outside of their Devilfish, and how can I contact them without being fired upon again?*

Vre'Myr'da's mind raced to solve the problem as his eyes darted back and forth between the mission duration readout and the terrain of the gully. His eyes
spotted a relatively flat rock within arm's reach of his position. He picked it up and grabbed his field knife from his back pouch, knowing that it would easily scratch into the surface of the relatively soft stone.

Once the short message was written out, he lobbed the stone behind the row of outcrops that the three Tau were hiding behind. *Let it work. For the Tau'va let it work*, he said, counting down the raik'an after the throw before he felt he could peak around his earthen shield to take a look.

Once the sixteen raik'an had passed, Vre'Myr'da stood up slowly, his hands raised near his head and carbine left on the ground. The three other Shas were already perched, weapons aimed, on the terrain, watching to see what appeared from behind the outcrop. Once they saw the giveaway curve of the pathfinder helmet, the three weapons dropped to their sides.

*Thank the Aun*, the Shas'Vre thought as he grabbed his carbine and quickly walked across the broken ground to the other three Shas. "I'm Shas'Vre Myr'da, here for team extraction. Where are the Devilfish and the rest of your team?"

The middle Shas signaled, pointing back behind him, then portraying that a few of their team were currently missing in the storm and had been for the past few decs. *So, their comm systems have almost completely been wiped out by this storm. No wonder my hails didn't go through.*

Vre'Myr'da switched quickly to signaling, hoping that he could get the team and get out of the storm as quickly as possible. "Take me to the transport, I'll drop a beacon, then I'll get the rest of my team and return for your evac," he said while signing, if only to help himself keep his words straight. "How far away are we?"
Twenty-four tor'lek, the response came. The three Shas quickly turned around and briskly walked away from where the standoff had occurred with Vre'Myr'da following close behind. The walk seemed to pass much quicker than he had anticipated, especially once the curved outline of the Devilfish appeared through the swirling dust.

The four Shas entered through the rear access ramp. Once the hatch was sealed, Vre'Myr'da ripped off his helmet, eager to begin communicating with words. "I'm here to evac you guys out. We brought a 'Fish, just because we don't know if this one is still flight-ready. You said that some of the team was lost in the storm."

La'Cova'run spoke, since he was the most senior member of the assembled team. "I have no idea if we're flight-ready either. This dust could've completely ruined our intakes, and I'd rather not risk trying to fly this out. Most of our systems have been off or on passive for the past few kai'rotaa, waiting out this storm. Shas'Ui Eoro and two Shas'La have been missing for the past few decs. They were outside on a live fire exercise, and they've yet to return. We've gotten no hails on our comm systems, but as you know this dust cuts any transmission to shreds."

Vre'Myr'da set his helmet on the bench and sat down next to it, wiping the sweat from his forehead. I'll need to get La'Elro here, at the very least. What are we going to do about those three missing Shas?"I'll need to return to my waypoint to rejoin my Shas'La, but in the meantime I'll cycle for my 'Fish to land and start loading you up. I want to be out of this storm as soon as possible."

The six Shas'La nodded, their spirits greatly lifted by his presence. He picked his helmet back up, then
turned back to face La'Cova'run. "I'll drop the beacon outside. Keep your comm lines open for Shas'La Eldi'tor, as he'll be landing shortly after. Tell him the situation, and I'll be back shortly with hopefully four other Shas."

Vre'Myr'da placed his helmet back on, checked the seals, and cycled the rear ramp to let him back out into the brown maelstrom of the dust storm. "Expected return in four raik'ors. I'll see you shyh'am later!"

He stepped back out into the storm, fumbling through his pouches to locate another beacon to drop down. Once the metallic shaft was firmly in his hands, he activated the power cell and shoved it into the ground a few tor'lek from the transport. That should get La'Eldi'tor's attention, he thought.

Checking the waypoint on his HUD, he noticed that he was much further away from the drop zone than he had thought. His time counter had updated to show the ETA for the approaching Devilfish, the raik'an quickly ticking away.

Well, no time like the present to get some exercise in, he thought, activating the mag–hold on his back for the Pulse Carbine. His walk quickly changed to a full run, his hooves carrying him across the stony ground. Vre'Myr'da's eyes quickly identified every obstacle in front of him, a difficult task considering the storm, as he leapt and avoided small cracks and boulders.

I just hope La'Elro's back there waiting. We need to get out of this storm.
Shas'El Caor'savon paced behind her desk, mentally counting the raik'ors that the extraction team had been inside of the dust storm. She knew that any duration under an dec would be admissible, especially considering the disorienting nature of the storms. Anything past that... she thought before quickly brushing it out of her mind. No, I'm not losing a single one of them from this storm.

A light knock emanated from her door. Who else could be awake this early? she thought glancing at the time. She had been up since issuing the evac order, and she wouldn't sleep until her teams were all accounted for. "Open."

The metallic sheet slid open, revealing Fio'Vre Elan'tsua standing in the hallway, a dataslate held flatly in front of his chest. "Sorry to disturb you, Shas'El, but we have preliminary in situ data on the communication hardening modifications."

El'Caor'savon motioned from him to enter and quickly resumed her pacing. She remembered sending the test communication software download with the evac order, but didn't know that the Fio had installed a back door to get real-time statistics on it. I'll need to make sure that my troops' messages don't turn into some science experiment. "Please, take a seat. What have you found out about the storm?"

Vre'Elan'tsua shifted uncomfortably in his seat, tapping a few icons on his dataslate. "Well, the purpose
of this particular study was to identify the viability of the modifications in an actual dust event, so we don't have any new information on the storm. We do know that the signal strength and viable transmission radius has increased twice-fold."

The Shas'El took the dataslate from the Fio'Vre's outstretched hand. She looked over the numbers and the associated info graphic, extrapolating as much information as possible from what was shown. "Looks like it's simply a temporary fix."

The Fio'Vre adjusted himself again. "Yes, unfortunately. There seems to be something with the dust movement that affects our transmission signals. We have a few field teams looking into it, although as the Tau'va would have it there haven't been any storms in their vicinity. They are, however," he said, before the Shas'El could jump at the chance to argue, "analyzing soil and rock samples to see if anything more can be learned."

El'Caor'savon looked over the information again. The storm's actively degrading our comm systems, no matter what we do to modify them. Even these high-powered transmissions last only a while. How can we defend against that?

"Thank you, Fio'Vre," she said, handing the dataslate back over. "$I'll forward the field report once my team returns."

Vre'Elan'tsua stood back up, saluted, and exited the office, happy to be out from under the Shas'El's stern gaze. I didn't have the heart to give her the rest of the data, he thought, flipping through the next several pages of information. How can I tell her that all of those Shas might not make it out?
La'Elro kept one eye on the ground in front of her hooves and the other on the waypoint marker on her HUD. The distance number slowly ticked down with each step, but sometimes the signal would flicker or blink off for a raik'an or two. The fickleness worried her, but she knew that they would be back at the beacon shortly.

And hopefully Vre'Myr'da's already back at the beacon, waiting, she thought. They had been out of contact for a while, and the separation was starting to worry her. I know that nothing has happened to him, but if something had I would have no way of even knowing. I wouldn't care if it was for the Tau'va; loyalty to a superior comes first to me.

She caught herself, both in thought and after the ground beneath her step suddenly shifted. La'Elro checked that the three retrieved Shas were still right behind her, and started moving again. Loyalty. I've never used that word before, especially in relation to Vre'Myr'da. Is that the mark of a true leader, where the warriors under you can think of nothing worse than going against your wishes? How can they measure that in a Trial?

The Shas'La saw a flicker of blue light through the brown haze, and her spirits both lifted and dropped with the sight. "The Shas'Vre's not back," she said aloud, knowing that even her vocalized thoughts would be safe due to the dust interference.
"We'll need to wait here until Vre'Myr'da returns," she said, signaling to the three Shas behind her. "Once he does, we'll continue searching for your lost Devilfish."

The three Shas nodded in understanding, the two 'La immediately sitting down. Ui'Eoro remained standing, his eyes scanning around the entire perimeter, carbine at the ready, watching for any sign of the returning Shas'Vre. *Let's hope he gets back soon. I need to get my troops out of this storm.*

La'Elro didn't know what else to do. She had followed Vre'Myr'da's orders to the letter, but had received no response from any of her hails. *What is a Shas to do now?*

Absentmindedly, she checked the readouts on the positional beacon, glancing primarily at the power cell health. She knew that the updated comm package drained power at a much quicker rate, and without power they could be lost in this storm for rotaa. Unfortunately, the visual uplink into her HUD didn't give out any information on how far away the Shas'Vre was, a fact that she would have to live with.

La'Elro did, however, notice a blinking download icon, normally reserved for the inclusion of a second beacon somewhere on the grid. *Does this mean that Vre'Myr'da found the transport, or is he stuck somewhere and needs my help?*

The timestamp was only from a raik'ors ago, and La'Elro calculated that, should the 'Vre be returning, she would only have to wait two more before knowing if they should move toward the new beacon or not.

"Two raik'ors," she whispered, glancing over at the three waiting Shas. "Two raik'ors, then I'll have to decide what our next course of action will be."
Shas'Vre Myr'da jumped over a small crevice, his hooves impacting the soft earth upon landing. His heart was pounding from the adrenalin and the excitement of finding the lost Devilfish, so much so that his biomed sensors were constantly chiming a warning.

*I'll slow down once I'm sitting in a Devilfish leaving this storm*, he thought, skirting around a large boulder. *Or once we find those missing warriors*, he added as an afterthought.

How could he and La'Elro find three missing warriors in this dust storm, especially since they would be moving constantly trying to find the Devilfish themselves? He could barely make out his own hoof prints in the soft ground, although he wasn't devoting his full attention to finding those marks. *A good eye could follow them, if need be.*

Vre'Myr'da glanced up at the distance readout. Thankfully, the signal had held stable during this final run, but earlier it had repeated flickered on and off during the search. *Even the Fio are having trouble with this storm. Hopefully those field scientists will have a better idea of how to sort this out.* The Devilfish beacon was still holding strong, which he was grateful for.

He was still a quarter tor'kan away from the original beacon when his comm system erupted. Vre'Myr'da thought that he could make out La'Elro's voice, but he couldn't be sure. *Just make it back to the beacon, then I'll figure things out.*
The Shas'Vre climbed over a small ridge, and he was brought quickly into sight of the glowing blue beacon, surrounded by four shrouded shapes. *If La'Elro found those lost Shas, I'll ask for procreation summons with her.* "This is Vre'Myr'da. Do you read?"

The four shapes quickly moved, and it looked like three of them stood up. "Thi...s La'Elr...ood to he...or voice, Sha...re!"

*Looks like I have some paperwork to do once we get back,* he thought with a smile. "I've found the Devilfish. The waypoint should be available from that beacon. La'Eldi'tor is dropping down as we speak, so we need to get back as soon as we can."

He almost skidded to a halt at the beacon, quickly surveying the three Shas that accompanied La'Elro. "Your buddies were pretty worried about you three," he said, primarily focusing on the Shas'Ui. "I ran into three of them out looking, and that's really the only way I found the 'Fish. You've trained a good team."

The three Shas stood still, and no reply came through the comm system. *Must be the dust,* he quickly remembered. *I was just too excited to start signing.* He repeated a condensed version of the message quickly before grabbing the positional beacon and pulling it from the ground. "We do need to head back now, so grab your gear and line up."

Vre'Myr'da grabbed his carbine from his back and cycled up the markerlight. It relayed the beacon data to the three new Shas one by one, as well as brought up each one's abridged dossier on his HUD and added them to his team. Once the digital transfer was complete, he re-stowed the weapon on his back and turned.

"No time like the present to get some exercise," he said, remembering to sign this time. *And no time like
the present to get out of this storm. We've already been down here for half a dec.
Shas'La Eldi'tor sat alone in the Devilfish, his eyes darting back and forth between the various bright display screens in the otherwise darkened cockpit. All of his systems were in the blue, a welcome sight considering what he would soon put his vehicle through. He went over the procedure again in his head, followed by his severe weather flight training skills.

*Just keep the 'Fish level, and move slowly through the storm,* he thought, visualizing his hand movements all throughout. *Differential wind patterns could knock the transport into a death spiral if I'm not careful, so drop slowly.*

He reopened his eyes, immediately looking again at the display screens. "I should've received a signal from the 'Vre by now," he said, checking the mission duration readout. "They've already been down there for twice the expected duration, and I've gotten nothing from him."

La'Eldi'tor stood up and walked back into the crew compartment, just to stretch out his legs. He did a few pull-ups on the overhead bars—normally used by standing Shas during transport—to calm his nerves.

"He'll send word up, no matter what happens. Even if they can't find the Devilfish and the mission's a failure. He'll send word up."

He reentered the cockpit and sat down, checking over every system again. The Shas'La noticed a small problem with the positional beacon data, as it had
stopped sending telemetry up to the Devilfish.

"What in the Empire does that mean?" he yelled, re-checking all of the communication systems again. "How'd that signal disappear into the Rift?"

La'Eldi'tor suddenly felt extremely alone. He still had a passive comm link back to Demlok'doran, but past that he was alone flying high over the center of a raging dust storm. The two Shas he had come here with, that he had gotten to know better over the past two kai'rotaa, were suddenly gone. Vanished into the storm, just like the lost Devilfish and its crew. A shiver shot through his spine at the thought of the loss of those Shas lives.

No, I can't start thinking like that, he told himself, going over the telemetry data once more. Those two are down there, and I'm not leaving until they're back safely in the hold.

The storm continued swirling below, interfering with every transmission between the surface and the air, including those from the recently established positional beacon.
The prospect of leaving the dust storm for good fueled the exhausted Tau's strides back toward the downed Devilfish. The five Shas ran across the open ground, keeping their heads up for any obstacles presenting themselves through the deep shroud of the swirling debris, as they followed the blue waypoint marker, the distance counting quickly ratcheting down. No one spoke, not even to themselves due to the comm interference from the storm, for the entire duration of the trip.

*I'll be glad once I get some actual rations in me*, Ui'Eoro thought. He had developed quite a dislike of the standard field rations if only for its bland ambiguity in flavor. *More so, I'll just be glad when I don't have to worry about dust getting in my mouth while eating.*

The group crested a small hill and the dark outline of the Devilfish appeared in front of them. They quickly ran down the slope, sliding down slightly with each step into the soft ground. They covered the last few tor'lek quickly, Ui'Eoro activating the rear access ramp to cycle through and let them inside.

Only Vre'Myr'da hesitated outside for a moment. *Where's the other Devilfish?* he thought, attempting to see through the storm to the sky in vain. *La'Eld'i'tor should have received the transmission raik'ors ago, more than enough time to drop through the storm.*
He climbed through the rear hatch and quickly cycled for it to close. Once the seals were secure, he tore off his helmet and was greeted with jubilant cheers from the assembled Shas.

"Thank you, Shas'Vre," La'Cova'run said, saluting the warrior. "What's the final plan for extraction?"

Vre'Myr'da scratched the back of his head, trying to formulate a response in his head before speaking. *What are we supposed to do now, with my Devilfish not down here?* He finally spoke, knowing that the answer wouldn't be what the Shas wanted to hear. "I need to find a way to reestablish contact with the evac Devilfish, since it seems to be unaware that we've located you."

The noise level in the crew compartment quickly receded to nothing more than the filtered drone of the storm outside. Every Shas seemed to be waiting for Vre'Myr'da to speak, looking to him for guidance. "It seems," he said, speaking now to all of the Shas, "that the positional beacon I placed hasn't been picked up by the waiting Devilfish, or else it would have landed by now. Getting that information to the transport is our first and only priority right now. We'll be able to work through this."

*He sure knows how to command,* La'Elro thought, watching from the back of the Devilfish. *If this is how he leads in battle, it's no wonder that he passed his last Trial.* She suddenly felt a deep understanding of the Shas’Vre’s more unconventional leadership style, that the ‘By the Tau’va’ convention drilled into every young Shas could only go so far, that at some point a deep admiration for those in command could mean more than simply listening and following orders, that almost forgetting that a commanding officer is such allows
those under the command will invariably be in better hands because of that closer connection.

All of the Shas’Vre’s actions over the past kai’rotaa suddenly started to make sense. The little jokes and snaps, the minor tussles, all of it made La’Elro look to Vre’Myr’da as an older brother–mentor figure, not simply as a commanding officer. *I guess there’s a lot more than I thought to be learned outside of the training facilities*, she thought with a smile garnered from knowing a little of what made the Shas’Vre such an effective leader. "How do you think we can do that, especially with the storm still raging?"

Vre'Myr'-da stood quiet, think through the question. *You can think this through. Your mission isn't over until we're out of this storm, and this is the last thing you need to worry about until that Devilfish lands and we start moving these Shas over. How can we get into contact with La'Eldi'tor?*

"There should be a flare launcher in the cockpit," he finally said, turning back to La'Cova'run. "We'll need to use that and hope it's good enough."

The pilot walked across the compartment to the cockpit and returned a few raik'an later, the launcher securely held in his left hand. "We only had two flares left, though. What's your plan?"

Vre'Myr'-da grabbed the equipment and sat down on the worn metal floor. "We don't even need the flares," he said, pulling a positional beacon from his back pouch. "We should be able to make a temporary link between the marker outside and the waiting Devilfish if we fire this high enough, letting La'Eldi'tor download the location information."

*At least, it should work in theory*, he thought, activating the beacon. It quickly found a link to the exterior marker relay, showing up on the small exterior
screen. The Shas'Vre grabbed one of the flares and removed the small rocket motor from the rear, carefully avoiding tripping the activation trigger, and set it down next to the positional beacon. "Do you have any high-density adhesive?"
Shas'La Eldi'tor checked the mission duration clock once more, trying to decide what to do. There had been no signal from the ground since the positional beacon winked out, nothing to give him any idea of what was occurring on the surface of the planet far below.

A small icon flashed up on the telemetry screen. A **positional beacon download package! They must've found the downed 'Fish!** He quickly cycled the download, a bright blue icon appearing in the center of the HUD, only a quarter tor'kan away.

"That doesn't seem right," he said, double-checking the download. The beacon was nowhere near the surface, plus it seemed to be climbing higher and higher. He opened up the engines, flying closer to where the icon had first appeared.

A second beacon blipped onto the screen, almost directly below him. **That has to be the Devilfish,** he thought, calculating how far away the original drop zone was. **Even if it isn't, I have to drop down and see for myself, 'Vre's orders**

La'Eldi'tor activated the landing cameras, bringing up a secondary output on the panoramic cockpit screen showing everything below the Devilfish. The brown maelstrom manifested itself, completely hiding the surface from view. **Just eighty-four tor'lek,** he thought, checking the waypoint distance and grabbing the throttle.

The Devilfish sank into the storm, guided by that
lone blue waypoint marker. The winds buffeted the vehicle, shaking it from side to side as the Shas'La struggled to keep it steady. The propulsion status dropped into the yellow after only a few raik'an, but thankfully didn't dip any lower.

*That grounded 'Fish definitely won't be able to fly out,* he thought, realigning his drop over the waypoint. *That means if this 'Fish goes down, we'll be firmly in the hands of the Tau'va for our future.*

La'Eldi'tor checked the main screens, trying to see anything through the haze of the dust storm. The small blue waypoint, coupled with the distance marker, was all he had to go on, all he could base his perception on. The distance slowly ticked lower and lower. *Thirty... Twenty...* he thought, watching the numbers drop.

Below, the outline of the lost Devilfish manifested itself, just a few tor'lek from where the waypoint was bringing him down. *The Shas'Vre sure wanted me to get close,* he thought with a smile, ignoring the proximity alarms as he released the landing gear, bringing the Devilfish alongside the damaged transport.

"Good to see yo...own here!" Vre'Myr'da's voice came through the intercom. "Drop the r...amp and we...tart moving the Sha...ver."

"Copy that, Shas'Vre. Dropping rear access ramp," La'Eldi'tor said, touching a few icons on the screen. Once the seal broke, the sheer sound of the dust storm magnified greatly, now that it didn't have to compete with the pressurized hull of the vehicle. *Glad I didn't have to be down here for long.*

We watched as the Shas'Vre led the eight stranded warriors into the transport, their faces shrouded by worn helmets and dust. Finally, La'Elro stepped through
the rear hatch and cycled it closed, cutting the noise level down considerably.

*Guess that's my cue to talk with the 'Vre,* he thought, removing the headset and resting in on the console. La'Eldi'tor opened the door and was almost immediately after tackled by a few young Shas. Cheers filled the air, so much so that he could barely hear his own thoughts.

"Nice flying there," Vre'Myr'da said once the gaggle of saved warriors let him through. "Glad to see you again."

"Same here," La'Eldi'tor said with a smile. "What's the plan now?"

The Shas'Vre motioned toward a crouched over Shas sitting on one of the rear benches. "Shas'La Yio've just needs some quick medical attention, past standard first aid. We still have the full kit in here somewhere, correct?"

"Yes, let me just go grab it," he said, ducking into the cockpit to retrieve the medical kit. The two walked over, followed by Ui'Eoro, to the injured Shas and knelt down, quickly rummaging through the kit.

"Broken leg," Ui'Eoro whispered. "Took a spill on some broken ground during an exterior exercise. Dust storm must have weakened the cliff face we were traversing."

Vre'Myr'da nodded in understanding before pulling out a foam cast canister from the bottom of the kit. "We'll just need to check the set bones," he said, focusing on La'Yio've, "just so we don't do more harm than good when slapping this cast on. Do you need any sedative?"

The young Shas simply shook his head. The Shas'Vre lightly grabbed onto La'Yio've's left leg, feeling the bones through the skin and muscle trying to locate
the break. "Found it," he said, motioning for La'Eldi'tor to come closer. "Get that can ready."

The snap echoed through the once silent cabin, followed by La'Yio've banging his clenched fist against the interior wall. "You did say no sedative," Vre'Myr'da said with a straight face while La'Eldi'tor unwrapped the dry cloth. The two quickly wrapped the entire lower leg in the fabric, then grabbed the solidifying spray from the medical kit, drenching the entirety of the cast.

"Just hold still for half a raik'ors," Vre'Myr'da said, patting the injured Shas on the shoulder. "It will have solidified by then, but that doesn't mean you can go jumping around just yet. We'll get you to a proper medical facility once we get back to Demlok'doran."

"Thank you," Ui'Eoro said, "but I think I speak for the entirety of my team when I say that we're all sick of this dust. How about we go skids up and get out of here?"

"Couldn't have said it better myself," La'Eldi'tor said, quickly standing up and moving back to the cockpit. The rest of the Shas took their seats on the lowered benches, all of them with wide smiles cut across their worn blue faces. Vre'Myr'da remained standing, holding onto one of the overhead rails.

_We're out of this storm_, he thought as the engines revved awake. _We're out, and everyone's accounted for. This will be one cheerful post-mission report I'll be filing._

The Devilfish lifted away from its damaged twin, slowly rising through the swirling dust storm. The climb was suitably quicker and it soon crested through the storm ceiling and into the faint blue of the morning, the orange sun Y'al'oh just rising over the distant demlok'su canyon system. The transport moved
quickly toward that rising sun, the distance between it and Demlok'doran quickly decreasing with each passing raik'an.

*We've made it out.*
Shas’El Caor’savon sat alone at her desk, reading back over the two field reports her Shas had submitted within the last few rotaa. Vre’Myr’da’s account of the events in the durst storm contained every ounce of backhanded wit he could cram in while still describing the events in extreme detail, while Ui’Eoro’s seemed to place him at fault for every wrong step, every failed action.

Funny though, she thought, flipping between the reports on her glowing dataslate, since those are the qualities that helped them get promoted in the first place.

A soft knock echoed through the office, followed by the almost silent sliding of the opening door. “I have the additional reports you requested, Shas’El,” Ui’Mesa’kar said, stepping through the threshold.

“Good,” the Shas’El said, receiving the two dataslates from the entering Shas. “You might want to stick around here, as I’m sure our Fio friends will no doubt want their things back when we’re done playing.”

All of my Shas are back safe, she reminded herself. Plus, they are still working on the problem, no matter what their report may say, so I can’t be too angry at them. Her eyes quickly scanned the top report, a medical filing following La’Yio’va’s skeletal reconstructive surgery.

“Let Ui’Eoro know that La’Kna’k... La’Yio’va will be
back with his squad within a few rotaa. There shouldn’t be any complications left from the surgery or the physical rehabilitation.”

Almost called him Kna’kak, she thought, mentally chiding herself for the verbal lapse. *A Shas’El should never insult a member of her cadre, even if that member had acted like a ’Saal even after tau’cyr of training.* She handed the medical report back to Ui’Mesa’kar, turning her attention to the preliminary assessment on the lasting signal degradation problem. The Fio field teams had been working closely with the technicians stationed in Demlok’doran to figure out why any transmissions were gradually dampened into the Rift during the dust storms.

“Did you have a chance to read this, Shas’Ui?”

Ui’Mesa’kar stood startled, not expecting the Shas’El to ask him about the report. “I have not read the Fio’s finding, though I did overhear a few of them talking about the conundrum.”

*Well, he’s not lying,* she thought, reading back over the executive summary at the top. “Our Fio have stated that the signal interference comes from the marginally magnetized dust particles within the storm. You’ve been caught in one before, correct? What do you think of that assessment?”

“Well, Shas’El, that just doesn’t make complete sense to me, but at the same time, I haven’t had a chance to look at all of the information at hand.”

*You don’t need to. Any magnetic force would either completely cut out any signal, or the transmissions would go through fine. There can’t be active degradation from swirling regolith, no matter what the Fio are telling me in this report.* “Thank you, Shas’Ui,” El’Caor’ssavon said, handing the second dataslate back to the waiting Shas. “That will be all.”
Ui’Mesa’kar saluted before quickly turning and exiting the office, leaving the Shas’El alone once more behind her desk. She looked down at the field reports once more, reading between the lines of the two officers’ words.

*We’ll figure this out. We’re not going to be taken by surprise when the Necron attack comes.*
GLOSSARY OF TAU TERMS

Personnel (listed in order of Rank)
Shas’El Caor’savon – “Keen–eyed Creator”
Shas'Vre Myr'da – "Dark Blade"
Shas'Ui Eoro – "Guide"
Shas'Ui Mesa'kar – "Correctly Mark"
Shas'La Elro – "To Have a Voice"
Shas'La Eldi'tor – "Land Flyer"
Shas'La Cova'run – "Dismantle the Structure"
Shas'La Yio'va – "Good Listener"
  Kna'kak – "Stupid Sand"
Shas'La Taal're – "Preserving Strength"
Shas'La Bap'gal – "Lost Explorer"

Fio'Vre Elan'tsua – "Extremely Sturdy"

Assorted Terms
kio'tor'va – "Great Land Plants" (Large plain grasses)
ko'io'nai – Grains, Wheat, etc.
t'koreth – Galaxy
Y'he – Tyranids
Special thanks in the creation of this story go to the following members of *AdvancedTauTactica.com*:

- Didi et Gogo
- Doombringer
- Militant.Jester
- Shas’El Tael
- Wolfs16
- Yami Kero

Each member provided either direct help in the writing of the story or inspiration for taking the time to write this entire novella and finish it.