The rock cut into her thigh, pinching a long crease into the synskin that enwrapped her body like a membrane. Beneath the clinging rubberised suit, a trickle of blood seeped out of the pressure wound, but she ignored it. She could feel the delicate chill of the dawn breeze as it breathed over her, caressing each tiny bead of dew and creating minute, silent cascades down her taut muscles. Shifting her weight slightly, to ease the tension in her leg, she pressed her back against the moist stone surface behind her. As she moved, a fragment of rock worked itself loose from the cliff and bounced down towards the ground, sending tiny rains of dust sprinkling into the morning air. Nyjia held her breath, cursing herself inwardly – that was an amateur's mistake. But there was nobody there to notice her error, and she exhaled quietly, letting the tension release from her body.

The dawn brought some welcome heat to her muscles, warming her body and making her privations more bearable. She could feel the energy of the sun beginning to soak into the chemicals of her membranous armour, thawing her frigid limbs and returning suppleness to her carefully set joints, feeding her organs with nutrients. For the sleepless Assassin, the morning was a refreshing respite. She had been jammed into the crevice since the Imperial Guard rode out to confront the enemy six days before, utterly motionless. Waiting.

The Bahzhakhain, the eldar Swordwind army, the Tempest of Blades, had descended onto Orphean Trine seven days before. It had swept across the planet's surface and driven the last remnants of the Imperial population to Pious IV, the colossal hive city that dove down into the depths of the planet core and pierced the clouds at its distant apex. The city had been built at the end of a long, deep ravine, with the sheer rock walls acting as a natural defence on three sides. The south side was the approach through the valley, and it was peppered with giant monoliths of hard rock, left standing like great stalagmites after the terrible storms of Orphean Trine had whipped through the valley and eroded the rest of the channel.

Some of the huge rocks had been carved into statues of the great soldiers who had first brought the light of the Emperor to the planet. A monument to Orphean himself bestrode the valley floor, with a broad, two-handed force sword pointing valiantly into the sky. The explorer had taken the sword from the dead hands of an eldar warrior, one of a small number of aliens that the Imperium had been forced to purge in order to purify the planet for assimilation into the proud Imperium of Man. Etched into the base of the monument were the defiant words of the great founder: Never again will we suffer the pollution of the xenos on Orphean Trine.

Local legends tell of how Orphean had battled with the last eldar on the planet, matching him blow for blow, before running his own blade through the creature's neck and severing his spine. As the alien slumped to the ground, he had gurgled some barely coherent words: I am not the last. Orphean had laughed at the arrogance of the eldar and taken his head… and his sword.

Now it seemed that the eldar had been right. He had not been the last. Many centuries had passed, but the eldar had finally returned to Orphean Trine, this time in tremendous force. The Swordwind army of the Biel-Tan craftworld had blazed down through the atmosphere in a maelstrom of lightning and power, scything through the pathetic resistance offered by the agrarian settlers and ploughing on towards the capital. And now, after six days of war, the Swordwind was thundering through the long valley like a tidal wave, crushing the paltry defensive encampments of the Imperial Guard at the mouth of the ravine, and preparing to crash and break against the walls of Pious IV. Orphean had once laughed at their arrogance, but now the eldar laughed at the weakness and stupidity of the mon-keigh. Nyjia never laughed.

The great statue of Orphean was now cracked and weathered, and Nyjia had squeezed herself into a slim vertical rift in its structure. She twisted her body deeper into the crevice and braced the long barrel of her rifle against the rock, holding a tight angle of depression so that the reticule focussed on the sandy ground next to the statue's base. That was the precise point that the psychic Inquisitor Lord Parthon had indicated a week before from the comfort of his chambers on the top of the Spire of Piety, near the apex of Pious IV, and Nyjia had held her rifle trained on it for the last four days. She was simply waiting, listening to the distant rumble of the inevitable eldar advance and the futile rattle of the Imperial Guard's defence. It wasn't only the eldar who could play games with fate.

The rifle was almost weightless in her hands, adding nothing to her discomfort, as though it was part of her. It was her best friend and truest ally. She called it Shlaereen – an eldar name that meant silent death. Long ago in the Vindicare temple, she had made Shlaereen herself, and she had maintained her ever since – caring for her with the same devotion that she had offered to her body. Together, she and her rifle were entire, and entirely dedicated to the Emperor's will. In return, the Emperor offered her soul salvation, permitting her to bathe in the most sinister predilections of her nature.

The Inquisition had augmented her body and provided technology for her to augment her weapon. Shlaereen contained an eclectic mix of alien parts, including an eldar gravitic accelerator, which removed all recoil from the weapon and rendered it almost silent in operation. Nyjia's master, Lord Parthon, was a radical inquisitor, and he enjoyed the irony of hunting aliens with their own technology. Alone together, motionless for six days, Nyjia felt the presence of these enhancements, and she was certain that the eldar components had given Shlaereen a soul of her own.

As the sun pushed low across the sky, sending a great shaft of light blasting through the valley towards Pious IV, the tips of huge shadows reached for the city walls like the fingers of massive daemons. Squinting her eyes against the sun as her ocular implants glossed into blackness, working to filter out the dazzling light, Nyjia could see the vanguard of the eldar Swordwind cresting the horizon.

A bank of Falcon tanks skimmed over the rough valley floor, silhouetted against the rising sun. Dark, flickering shapes suggested jetbikes and Vyper gun-platforms. Here and there, standing on top of the vehicles, Nyjia could see the distinctive outline of eldar warriors, with the stretched shadows of their elongated helmets fingering the city walls behind her. As they drew closer, the dust cloud that billowed around them started to dissipate, and the greens and whites of the Biel-Tan craftworld became visible. Stuck on the long barrels of the lance arrays and banner shafts, Nyjia could see the heads of the commanding officers of Orphean Trine's Imperial Guardsmen, displayed in a grotesque testament to the eldar's inhuman rage.

Nyjia tensed the muscles in her shoulders, letting them flex and then relax. She inhaled deeply, exercising her patience as though it was also a muscle. Was she really all that was left to defend Pious IV? Parthon had mentioned the Dark Angels – experienced eldar slayers after the Tartarus affair – but there was no sign of them.

A roar in the sky made Nyjia snap her head back, staring up through the top of the crevice in which she was secreted. The tear-shaped crack in the side of the statue was widest in the middle, where Nyjia had climbed in after the Imperial Guard had vanished out along the valley a week earlier, and it narrowed to a fine line at the apex, just above Orphean's forehead. High above her, she could see a cluster of black pods hurtling towards the valley, accelerating down through the stratosphere like meteorites. On the edge of her hearing, she could hear the people on the walls of the hive city let out a cheer of relief. The Adeptus Astartes were on their way.

The drop-pods crashed down into the floor of the valley on all sides of Orphean's statue, punching deep craters out of the sandy ground and shattering the other rock protrusions like glass ornaments. The impacts rocked the valley, sending avalanches cascading down the sheer walls of the ravine, and forcing Nyjia to tense her legs against each side of the fissure in which she was hidden, struggling to keep her balance and to maintain her firing line.

Three squadrons of Dark Angels Space Marines spilled out of the pods, the bright morning sunlight bursting stars off their immaculate, spectral green power armour as they wracked their weapons in readiness. With a few hand signals, the captain sent his Marines storming across the valley floor, falling into formation behind a number of the monoliths, where they worked to establish emplacements for their heavier weapons.

Meanwhile, the eldar advance had paused midway down the valley. The Falcons and Vypers had stopped before reaching the field of monoliths, allowing the jetbikes to zip through between them and rip over the desert that separated them from the Dark Angels, leaving the bulk of their forces in reserve, as though toying with the Imperium's finest. One of the bikes pulled ahead of the others, bearing a rider with a great plume running down its long helmet. The jetbike shot through the monoliths, banking and swerving at incredible speed and with impossible ease, filling the air with showers of shuriken from its nose-mounted catapults.

The Dark Angels returned fire, tracking the speeding forms with their bolters, strafing fire through the sand in their wake. A rattle of shells punched along the flank of a bike, rupturing its stabilisers and sending it spiralling on its axis, smashing into one of the monoliths and exploding into a fireball. Out of the sun, sudden blasts of fire erupted from the Falcons and Vypers, crashing into the monoliths behind which the Space Marines held cover.

Nyjia watched the battle unfold. The eldar ordnance flashed across the valley floor, punching into the monoliths and shattering them into vicious shards, annihilating the already sparse cover afforded to the Dark Angels, leaving them clear targets for the speeding jetbikes. The Dark Angels may have arrived just in time for a last-ditch defence of the city, but Nyjia reflected that the battle was over already. She looked lovingly along the slender barrel of Shlaereen, checking her line of sight down to the base of the statue, and she settled in for the wait. If only the Adeptus Astartes were as well prepared as the Vindicare.

A high pitched whine made the Dark Angels captain turn and drop as the jetbike soared over his head. The captain rolled onto his back and raised his bolt pistol, firing off a chain of shells into the rear of the speeding eldar, climbing back to his feet without breaking the rhythm of his fire.

The bike spluttered and jerked, spitting smoke from its engines before losing balance and diving down into the sand, ploughing a runnel into the desert. The eldar warrior flipped off the back, turning an elegant, twisting somersault, landing into a crouch facing back towards the Marine. The alien drew a long, double-handed sword from a holster on its back and started to run towards the Dark Angel, the plume on its helmet fluttering in the rush of air.

Casting his bolter aside, the captain pulled his chainsword free of its fixings on his leg, feeling its power splutter into life as he held it in both hands in front of him. The rest of his squad had already fallen, and he was the last Dark Angel standing in defence of Pious IV. The desert was strewn with the ruined bodies of Space Marines and the smoking remains of eldar jetbikes, interspersed around the shattered remnants of monoliths.

Far above the battlefield, Nyjia could see the heavy black silhouette of a Thunderhawk gunship plunging down out of orbit. She looked back down towards the Dark Angels captain, and knew that he would not last long enough to see the arrival of his reinforcements. Reluctantly lifting the barrel of Shlaereen and twisting her body in the heart of the statue, Nyjia tested the aim against the figure of the charging eldar exarch. But even without checking, Nyjia knew that the shot was out of range. Just as she would know whether the blades fused into her fingertips would reach the neck of a heretic, so she knew whether her bullet would reach the head of a distant alien. And the exarch was just out of reach. She resigned herself to wait, rolling her shoulders and exhaling slowly, returning Shlaereen's reticule to the target point.

The exarch sprang into the air, flying through the last few metres separating it from the Dark Angel. Its sword flashed into a blur of motion, scooping and spinning in ritualised patterns before turning into a vertical arc. The captain stepped in towards the eldar, breaking its timing and stooping inside the cut, raising his own whirring blade in a horizontal parry.

The two swords clashed in an explosion of power, with the teeth of the chainsword grinding and sparking against the shimmering alien material of the eldar blade. But the exarch pushed off the collision, using its power to flip into another somersault without even touching its feet to the ground. The Dark Angel spun on his heel, bringing up his sword into a guard just in time to meet the parallaxed horizontal sweep of the eldar force-weapon.

As the blades clashed once again, the captain braced his muscles and the servos in his power armour, struggling to repel the inhuman power of the eldar. But the exarch was ineffably light on its feet; its legs bicycled out to the side, as though running up an invisible wall, pivoting around the clashing swords, and landing a punishing kick against the side of the Dark Angel's head. The captain stumbled under the sudden impact, dropping his guard for a moment. As he did so, the exarch withdrew its force sword from the clash, dipped its tip, and then thrust it forward like a spear, skewering the Marine through his neck, straight through the hairline seal at the base of his helmet.

As the Dark Angel slumped to the ground and the eldar exarch brayed its victory into the rising sun, Nyjia could just about discern the collective sigh of despair that arose from the walls of Pious IV behind her. She pressed herself deeper in the crevice, narrowing her shoulders slightly in order to move further back into the heart of the great stone, away from the keen eyes of the eldar.

Echoing her silent movements, the Swordwind of the Biel-Tan, held in reserve on the edge of the field of monoliths, slipped into motion and advanced down the valley. The Falcon tanks slid effortlessly over the debris and corpses that were strewn over the killing zone, hardly even disturbing the sand beneath them as their anti-gravitic

engines pulsed with mysterious energies. The remaining jetbikes from the vanguard peeled around in giant arcs, bringing themselves to rest in flanking positions alongside the triumphant exarch. Soon, the entire width of the valley was blocked by a single, slender line of eldar vehicles and warriors, with the exarch standing gloriously in the centre, the red sun rising above its head.

A wind-whispered silence breathed through the valley, and Nyjia held her breath. Then a piercing whine started to build out of the wind, growing steadily and rapidly into the roar of engines. Without moving her body, Nyjia cast her eyes up through the slit in the top of the statue and saw the Thunderhawk charging down out of the sky, thundering towards the brief clearing between the eldar line and the walls of Pious IV. Sheets of fire erupted from the eldar position, peppering the green armour of the Space Marine gunship, which returned fire with the splutter of heavy bolters and javelins of lasfire. About one hundred metres from the ground, the Thunderhawk's retros kicked in, blasting a huge cloud of sand into the air and obscuring its own landing.

Even over the continuing roar of the engines, Nyjia's perfect ears could pick out the clunk and hiss of the hatch opening, and then the incredibly heavy footfalls of something terrible descending into the desert of Orphean Trine. As more and more footsteps sounded against the metal ramp, the engines were injected with a touch more power and the Thunderhawk rose back into the air, its weapons batteries flaring with power, spraying the eldar line with a vicious assault. Then, as the dust began to settle beneath it, giant forms started to emerge from the sand-filled fog.

The Swordwind army was poised, motionless, waiting for their next foe to be revealed. And Nyjia could feel the tension on the walls of the besieged city, as the people struggled to understand what hope they might have left now: after a week of war their Imperial Guardsmen had been slaughtered and even the fabled Adeptus Astartes had been defeated.

As the dust cleared, the eldar and the people of Pious IV were treated to a glorious vision: a full Terminator squadron stormed across the desert towards the alien invaders, supported by the lumbering forms of three massive Dreadnoughts, their weapons blazing and their intent resolute. And overhead, hovering as best it could in the eddying winds of the valley, the Thunderhawk roared with power, punching its fire into the line of xenos creatures. From the city walls beyond, Nyjia could just about make out the cheers of the people once again. She exhaled slowly and rolled her neck, settling in to watch the battle, and to wait a little longer for her turn to come.

The twin-linked shuriken catapults on the emerald-green Falcons hissed and whined as they spewed hails of projectiles into the faces of the advancing Dark Angels Terminators. Meanwhile, their heavier weapons angled up into the sky to confront the Thunderhawk: starcannons convulsed with power, bright lances spat javelins of

energy, and missiles spiralled, roaring through the air before punching into the thick armour of the deep green gunship.

The Thunderhawk reeled under the onslaught, pitching and yawing as though adrift on the most violent of seas. Its own weapons were a constant blaze of fire, as the gun-servitors struggled to compensate for the erratic motion of the ship itself. Hellfire rounds cut down through the air, exploding into vicious shrapnel as they smashed against the wraithbone armour of the Falcons and the eldar warriors.

Meanwhile, three giant, green war walkers stomped out from behind the eldar line, breaking into a run as they cleared their own forces, scattering lasfire, lance javelins, and plumes of flame as they pounded across the desert to meet the oncoming Dreadnoughts.

The Dark Angels Terminators began to outpace their heavier cousins, and they vaulted into the midst of the eldar line, crashing chainfists into green armour, brandishing great thunder hammers, and slicing with chainswords, all the while loosing constant tirades from their storm bolters.

The lumbering Dreadnoughts lashed fire against the war walkers, splintering their elegant legs with blasts from parallel-tracking autocannons, before stamping giant feet down on their scrambling pilots as they struggled to clamber free of the wreckage. As the war walkers exploded beneath them, the Dreadnoughts turned their attention to the Falcons, leaving the Terminators to plough through the eldar warriors. But it was already too late.

The Thunderhawk convulsed hugely, staggered by a well-orchestrated volley from three Falcons at once. The rockets and lance fire punched home simultaneously, rupturing the gunship’s armour and detonating its engine core. The dark green ship erupted into flames and plunged down out of the sky, exploding into a massive fireball as it crashed into the sand, sending concentric concussions rippling through the desert towards the battle.

With the Thunderhawk downed, the Falcons lurched into motion, sliding forward of the attack line and dispersing around the valley floor, depriving the Dreadnoughts of static targets. All the time, their gun turrets swivelled and their fire tracked the laborious motion of the Dark Angels Dreadnoughts – until two of them exploded into infernos of rage.

The Terminators were pinned, surrounded by superior numbers of lighter and faster eldar warriors. Despite cutting down dozens of the alien creatures, the Dark Angels were on borrowed time.

Suddenly, the Falcons broke off their attack on the last Dreadnought, and the eldar

exarch leapt clear of the melee with the Terminators, sprinting across the desert towards the lumbering machine-warrior. The exarch flipped and somersaulted around the stream of shells that flashed out of the Dreadnought, tumbling and dancing until it reached the great machine's feet, unscathed. It vaulted into the air, flipping and twisting, before coming down on the roof of the ancient war-engine. Spinning its huge sword into an ostentatious flourish, the eldar drove its glowing blade straight down through the armoured plates, right up to the hilt. A great hiss jetted out of the machine, and then its legs gave way as it crashed to the ground.

Nyjia felt a slight tension build in her shoulder blade as the Dark Angels Terminators were finally destroyed. The valley floor was a bloodied mess of Guardsmen and Space Marines, interspersed with the ruins of Dreadnoughts, Terminators and even a downed Thunderhawk. Speckled in amongst the corpses of the Imperium's finest were the bodies of eldar warriors and the smoking remains of some jetbikes, but the Swordwind was unbroken, and, after a week of impatience, the exarch stood once again in the centre of its offensive line, waiting to take the city. Nyjia flexed her arms delicately – she had been waiting too.

The afternoon passed slowly, as the eldar moved through the killing field and collected their dead. They were in no hurry to sack the defenceless city. Nyjia watched the aliens carefully remove the spirit-stones from each of their fallen brethren, and then pile the bodies into a great pyre at the base of the huge statue of Orphean. Each time a warrior approached to sling a corpse onto the growing pile, she tracked their movements with Shlaereen, imperceptibly. But none of them looked up.

By the time night fell, the pyre was complete, obscuring the defiant text etched into the base of the statue. And the Swordwind fell into silence, preparing a temporary camp in which to await the first rays of the morning sun. Settling in for her seventh motionless, icy night, Nyjia found herself ensconced in the heart of the eldar camp.

Keeping her eyes trained on the camp below her, she ran her hand along the barrel of her rifle, blindly working her fingers across its slick, icy surface, checking it for abrasions or defects. She knew every last fraction of it, as though it were part of her, and she could perform the required ritual purifications in perfect darkness if she needed to. Making the checks whilst braced into a rock fissure above a camp of eldar warriors was nothing.

The first glow from the morning sun broke the horizon, and with it came a flurry of activity in the eldar camp. It was as though the light brought them back to life, thought Nyjia, smiling inwardly at the irony. The warmth flooded into her muscles once more.

Waiting on the clear sand below the statue of Orphean was the exarch's retinue, resplendent in the emerald greens of the Biel-Tan, each on one knee with their heads

bowed. As their war leader strode across the camp towards them, they raised their heads to face it and clasped their hands to their chests in gestures of loyalty. The climax of their eight-day effort was at hand.

The exarch stood before them and raised its blade into the air, a gloriously cynical mirror of the statue at its back, and the Swordwind began to beat their weapons against the ground, sending out thunderous waves of sound that rippled through the desert, signalling their intent to the people of Pious IV. A female seer stepped forward and touched her fingers to the funeral pyre, bursting it into flames.

Nyjia shifted her weight onto her right leg, pressing her left against the rock-face to brace her position, as the growing flames lapped up towards her feet. With a tiny motion, she caressed her rifle into life and Shlaereen hissed a potent whisper into the morning air.

The exarch’s head exploded into a rain of shattered fragments. The magnificent emerald warrior slumped to its knees in the sand, its blade falling from its grip and crashing into the desert. For a moment, its body teetered on the edge of balance, swaying in the morning breeze, before it fell forward into the dust with the faintly smoking mandiblasters all that was left of its head.

‘Never again will we suffer the pollution of the xenos on Orphean Trine,’ whispered Nyjia, silent and motionless in Orphean’s heart, as the Swordwind fell into disarray.