

Beyond the Startide Nexus

By Dirk Wehner

'No... no, that can't be right. Could you play it again, please?'

The bridge of the T'au warship *Glimmerstar* was only dimly lit. Most of the crew were off duty, and only two T'au huddled around a holographic projector discretely built into a white panel. One of them was O'yeldi'nar, known to his subordinates as Silverwing. The other T'au was his communications officer, Por'ui'vas'ka. She glanced at her commander for a moment and nodded, working the input panels of the communication station to restart the message they had just retrieved from a battered, lonely interstellar drone.

Once more, Commander Shadowsun appeared as a transparent hologram, seemingly directing her words to the two watching T'au as she spoke to a messenger drone. She seemed tired and her voice lacked its usual confidence.

'This is O'Shaserra speaking. I hope this message arrives in time for you to be warned. In time for you to act. We successfully traversed the Startide Nexus and established contact with our lost brothers and sisters of the Fourth Sphere. As suspected, they had suffered a failure of their AL-38 Slipstream modules but... we don't understand exactly what happened yet. For your reference, I have attached the recordings of their surveillance drones. Most of the material was far too corrupted to gain useful information. The segments that were not... well, see for yourselves.'

As O'yeldi'nar and Ui'vas'ka watched on, the hologram changed to show images from the inside of a T'au ship. Despite having already seen the whole message, O'yeldi'nar swallowed hard and averted his eyes for a moment. He did not desire to see the torn and ravaged corpses of the settlers again, the splattered blood on the walls, the terror in their dead eyes...

'These brave colonists entered the wormhole of the Startide Nexus in search of new worlds to spread the teachings of the Greater Good,' Shadowsun's voice continued as the hologram switched back to her, 'but they found only death. The few survivors... they have changed. As soon as they laid eyes upon our unfamiliar auxiliary troops, they reacted with open animosity. There is no trace of their own. Investigations are still ongoing, but none of the Fourth Sphere survivors are willing to speak of the events before our arrival.'

Shadowsun paused for a moment and listened to some indiscernible words from outside the field of view of the hologram. She nodded before she went on.

'I have to make this short. Despite the traumatic events our brothers and sisters of the Fourth Sphere fleets have suffered through, as soon as we reunited we began the Expansion of the Fifth Sphere in earnest. Soon we established new colonies on worlds we wrested from the grip of Be'gel, Gue'la and Y'he. However, each time we met the Gue'la in combat, the survivors of the Fourth Sphere committed atrocities far beyond every necessity of war. It was... problematic. Unfortunately, further interrogations into the cause of these troubling actions had to wait. We have recently come under attack by a new foe. Our enemy seems to be of Gue'la nature, but nothing like we have encountered before.' The face of the famous T'au Commander looked haunted for a moment. 'They call themselves the Death Guard, and we have learned that they do so rightfully.'

The hologram now showed a group of warriors, clad in heavy armour and advancing through thick fog. They looked not unlike the Gue'ron'sha – the Space Marines – but they seemed bloated and repulsive. As O'yeldi'nar and Ui'vas'ka watched, they opened fire with their primitive bolters, gunning down a group of Gue'vesa. Every booming shot they fired somehow sounded... wet. Inexorably, the warriors advanced, crunching stones and corpses underneath their mutated feet.

'The Imperium might shun the teachings of the Greater Good, and they might be primitive and barbaric,' Shadowsun continued, 'but these Humans are not part of the Imperium. They are worse. In the congenital greed for power that plagues all their kind, they formed a terrible alliance.'

The hologram switched to show a revolting mound of putrid flesh with a grinning face and splintered horns. Immediately, the quality of the picture dropped noticeably. The creature swung a rusty blade and cut a Crisis Battlesuit in half. Another Shas'ui attacked with his burst cannons. The blubbing skin of the monstrous figure caved in, only to reveal a horde of smaller beasts, cackling and spilling forth to bury the T'au underneath their mass. The Shas'ui screamed, but his voice did not come from the speakers. It seemed to be resounding everywhere on the *Glimmerstar's* bridge at once. The lights flickered and the hologram abruptly vanished.

The scream seemed to linger for a moment.

O'yeldi'nar and Ui'vas'ka looked at each other and said nothing. A similar thing had happened the first time they had watched the message, but the screams of the dying were somehow different this time. It almost seemed as if they were... closer. Neither of them understood, and neither of them dared to try.

Moments later, the hologram came back to life as if nothing had happened. It now showed a starkly reddish nebula between flickering stars.

When O'yeldi'nar looked up, he could see a similar, off-putting nebula outside the ion shielded and reinforced cupola of the *Glimmerstar's* bridge. Similar, yet far away from where the message had been recorded. It was the Startide Nexus – Commander Silverwing and his fleet were part of the heavily armed T'au garrison on this side of it, the Zone of Silence. The message had come from the other side. With all of the information he had about the Nexus, O'yeldi'nar wondered how the messenger drone had even survived the dangerous crossing.

The hologram now showed a T'au fleet coming into view. By the look of it, the ships had been through several engagements, showing scorch marks and improvised repairs.

'These Gue'la cannot be reasoned or bargained with.' Shadowsun's voice returned. 'Even less so than the rest of their kin. In the same way the Gue'la of the Imperium adhere to their Emperor, these monstrous aliens have turned to the savage worship of a being they call Nurg'hel. It seems they fell victim to a host of maladies whilst simultaneously developing a strange resistance against them, becoming dangerous vectors which must be stopped at all costs.'

'Nurg'hel,' whispered Ui'vas'ka. Again the bridge light of the *Glimmerstar* flickered ominously. O'yeldi'nar tried to ignore it.

'In the past three vek'tar, our troops have met this dangerous foe in numerous engagements,' Shadowsun continued in the hologram. 'The warriors of the Death Guard have attacked us on multiple front lines. They are extremely resilient. We are outnumbered. We are outgunned.'

O'yeldi'nar shook his head in silence as he watched the message. Impossible. This seemed like a desperate

acknowledgement of a superior foe. *I hope this message arrives in time for you to be warned...* these were the words Shadowsun had begun with. A warning.

'Thus,' Commander Shadowsun spoke on, 'I have come to a decision. We cannot stop the Death Guard this side of the Startide Nexus. After dozens of battles, our fleets are too damaged. Our strength has depleted to a point that we cannot halt this incursion any longer, if we still want to secure the expansion of the Nem'yar Atoll. We are now forced to choose, and we choose the latter. We are trusting in you, our comrades beyond the Nexus, to counteract the Death Guard threat.'

With these words, the hologram changed to once again show an outside view. In front of the deep, galactic wound of the Startide Nexus, the fleet of T'au warships were approaching an armada of crude vessels. Even by Human standards, these ships seemed primitive and outdated to O'yeldi'nar, but that wasn't the most disquieting thing about them. Far worse were the malignant, fleshy growths that covered the ships in a wholly perverted and unnatural fashion. Porous flesh boils suppurated pus-like matter into the void. Disgustingly bloated eyeballs the size of Orca dropships blinked lazily at the oncoming T'au fleet, and enormous tentacles swayed like seaweed. The most terrifying thing of all though, was the sheer size of the fleet, which outnumbered the T'au by far.

'As I record this message,' Shadowsun said, 'we are closing in for a final engagement with the enemy's main fleet.' The hologram returned to Shadowsun as she paused and checked a series of screens and data. 'Projections are grim, but we shall do as much damage as we can before withdrawing. I will help you in this way, but I cannot allow my forces to deplete beyond a point where I risk my own campaign. Even now, I fear I could risk too much, but it is for the Greater Good. I showed you what we face. What you will have to face. It might be against the teachings of Puretide for us to intervene one last time, but it is the least that we—'

Suddenly, the hologram flickered and Shadowsun looked at something outside of the picture. 'Damage report.'

'Shield generators compromised,' an artificial voice droned in the background.

'We have lost *Black Squall* and *Ivory*,' another voice reported from elsewhere.

Shadowsun closed her eyes for a split second, before re-addressing the drone.

'I have even less time than I anticipated,' she said, with more urgency than before. 'We are certain that the Death Guard aim to cross the Startide Nexus. We will try to stall them as long as we can, but we cannot stop them.'

The hologram flickered again as Shadowsun's ship was hit. O'yeldi'nar wondered if the Commander had survived the engagement, or if he was witnessing her final words.

'I can only hope this drone arrives at the Zone of Silence intact,' Shadowsun went on, 'and that we can hold the enemy at bay long enough for you to prepare yourselves for their coming.'

'*Tidestrike* and *Zephyr Bond* report boarding parties,' someone from outside the field of view said. 'Moon's *Heart* reports several hits with some sort of... *Moon's*

Heart, please repeat... some sort of mucus-ridden energy beam. Corrosion damage on multiple decks.'

Shadowsun nodded in acknowledgement. 'Moon's *Heart*, disengage and retreat. All available crew, prepare countermeasures on *Tidestrike* and *Zephyr Bond*. All Kor'el, maintain attack pattern.'

The picture shook once more as the *Clarity Blade*, Shadowsun's own flagship, took a heavy hit, and the Commander reeled for a second before she could steady herself.

'All disposable energy to the front shield generators!' Shadowsun commanded. 'And watch out for that... that unidentifiable object on our flank.'

She glanced at the messenger drone for the last time. The tiredness had vanished from her eyes, replaced by the determination of a true T'au Commander.

'End recording,' she said. 'All ships, prepare for Kauyon manoeuvre and-'

The hologram abruptly cut to nothing.



Aboard the *Glimmerstar*, O'yeldi'nar and Ui'vas'ka looked at each other, then up at the void outside their warship. It was empty, apart from their own fleet and the heavily armed space stations of the T'au Empire, guarding this side of the Startide Nexus.

'When was this message recorded?' O'yeldi'nar asked.

Ui'vas'ka indicated to the time stamp. 'There is no way of mistaking it, Commander.'

O'yeldi'nar shook his head. 'This cannot be right. If it was correct then the enemy fleet would have arrived by now.'

'Maybe Shadowsun defeated the Gue'la after all?' Ui'vas'ka suggested.

'There is simply no way that they could have stopped a fleet of that size. Stalled, yes. Defeated? Not even Shadowsun could do it.' O'yeldi'nar looked warily up at the stars, as if anticipating the appearance of a virulent fleet at any given second. 'Consider the sheer extent of the Startide Nexus. She simply

hasn't enough ships to stop every enemy vessel from entering.'

'We have recently detected growing distortions in the Nexus, Commander. Maybe the enemy fleet was destroyed on its way here,' Ui'vas'ka offered, 'in the same way as the Fourth Sphere Expansion fleet. Or maybe the alliance of the Gue'la and their associates has ended and this... this Nur'ghel has attacked them.'

'Too uncertain,' the Commander said, curtly. 'What if there was some kind of temporal distortion? What if the enemy fleet knows a way out of the Nexus that we don't?'

Ui'vas'ka couldn't answer his questions and stayed silent.

'We have to account for Shadowsun's warning. We have to be prepared. Fleets do not simply vanish,' O'yeldi'nar said.

Together, they stared out into the void, which remained unsettlingly empty.

