

Pontus meets the Tau

By Mike R

Colour Sergeant Pontus took a quick 360 degree visual scan of the countryside as his squad chimera lurched to a halt. The XII Praetorian Guards had been on this planet just 3 days, detached here from the main armada in response to a panic-stricken astropathic message which ceased in mid-transmission. Consequently, although they knew something had destroyed the local colony, they didn't know what or who was responsible. Even after 3 days reconnaissance, there were no clues. They'd found no bodies and no indication of what weapons had been used against the colonists.

Pontus, together with a small detachment of Ratling scouts and 2 chimera-borne squads, had been sent to reconnoitre 20 miles to the north of the regimental landing site, as the search area was being widened day by day.

His chimera had halted a short distance from a ruined farm building. Pontus looked to his left and waved his Ratling scout squad forward. Sergeant Constantine acknowledged and they slipped into a sandbagged defensive position in front of the farmhouse, emerging a moment later on the far side of the entrenchment.

Pontus took another look around. "It's quiet, sergeant" he thought to himself, responding immediately with the traditional response "too quiet, son."

He nearly fell off the chimera in surprise when the other chimera's heavy bolter opened up, shattering the piece. He dived back into the squad compartment and grabbed his vox-caster, snapping out one word "report!"

Sergeant Milvio, leading the second squad, answered the call, shouting to make himself heard over the din. "Tau! It's a Tau devilfish! We'll take a shot with the missile launcher then go for cover. " "I don't know if it's carrying yet," he continued, referring to the Devilfish's role as a troop carrier.

They had obviously caught the Tau by surprise, as there was no return fire yet. Pontus alerted his squad and chimera crew and looked

through the top hatch again just in time to see a missile leave the chimera opposite and streak past the farmhouse. There was a small explosion followed, satisfyingly, by a much larger one and a black cloud of greasy smoke erupted behind the farmhouse. "Report?" Pontus snapped again into the vox caster. "Vehicle destroyed," reported Milvio as his chimera opened up with all its weapons, "but it's unloaded a squad of pathfinders."

Pontus pushed the trooper toting the squad's grenade launcher out of the back hatch, instructing him to fire at anything that moved, then picked up the voxcaster again as Constantine reported in.

"I can see Kroot – up to a dozen, with a Krootox – and behind them fire warriors, indeterminate number but more than one squad" he announced. "They're all behind the far wall of the farmhouse but the Kroot are moving into the ruins. We'll see if we can slow them down." Pontus grabbed the chimera commander's shoulder. "Pull forward until you can see something to shoot at, then open up," he commanded. The commander scrambled into the turret and the chimera lurched forwards. After only about 20 yards, it braked sharply, throwing the troopers forwards, and they heard the turret-mounted heavy stubber open fire, followed shortly by the vehicle's multilaser and heavy bolter and the squad's grenade launcher. Pontus saw a flurry of blood and feathers from within the farmhouse as at least one Kroot failed to make it to cover. "Chicken tonight," he murmured, recalling a traditional folksong.

Despite all the munitions heading towards the Tau and their allies, there was no answering fire. Pontus realised that, with the possible exception of the Krootox, they must have small arms only. With luck, then, the heavily armed chimeras and the Ratling snipers might be able to deal with this situation without his infantry becoming engaged. He peered out of a viewport at the other chimera, where Milvio was laying down a heavy fire pattern at the Pathfinders out of sight behind the farmhouse. An occasional return shot ricocheted off the vehicle's front armour but they appeared to be in little danger. The fire slackened off, then the chimera moved slowly forward to the corner of the farmhouse and engaged a different target. More feathers flew and Pontus realised that the kroot were now receiving fire from 3 different directions.

With a start, he also realised that if all his troops were firing at the kroot, no-one was paying much attention to the fire warriors that Constantine had reported seeing. Cursing his lack of attention, Pontus

tugged on the chimera commander's trousers; the commander ducked his head back inside the turret with a grin on his face "this shouldn't take too long," he predicted cheerfully. "Take a look behind the building and see if you can see anything," Pontus replied, "this is too easy." The commander popped his head out of the turret, swore, and swung the heavy stubber to the right. "Tau fire warriors, 10 yards from the corner of the building. All guns engage" he called to his crew." There was a momentary silence whilst the bolter and multilaser tracked round, then the row began again. Pontus reported the situation to the other two units, neither of whom could see the fire warriors. So, he thought, we still don't know how many there are.

There was a tremendous clang, the chimera shook and everything went black for a few seconds. Pontus recovered to hear the vehicle driver frantically revving the engines. "We're stuck," he announced, "they've hit something and the brakes are jammed." "Sitting ducks," Pontus swore. He'd been in this situation before, stuck inside an immobilised vehicle, listening helplessly to munitions explode against the hull, and had sworn never to get trapped again. "Pop the hatch," he shouted, "we're going out." From his visual scans, he remembered a battered wall behind and to the right of the chimera (probably part of the farmhouse defences) and he led the squad there, distributing them along the wall and using the chimera as additional cover. He placed the grenade and missile launchers on the right of the squad where they could engage the Tau at long range. The chimera continued firing, its commander obviously confident in the strength of his front armour. Now away from the vehicle, Pontus used his microbead comms equipment to call up Milvio. He reported the immobilised chimera and the fire warriors then instructed Milvio to be prepared to disengage and take news of the Tau back to the main camp, should his position be overrun.

Sergeant Constantine, flanked by his sniper colleagues, fired and shifted position. As he settled down for another shot, he noticed a disturbance on the far wall of the farmhouse. He swung his rifle round, used the sniper scope for a closer view and could scarcely credit what he saw. A band of Kroot were pushing, pulling and belabouring the Krootox up some stairs (which were bowing under its weight, he noticed) to a remnant of the first floor. Constantine was about to call his comrades' attention to this curiosity when he realised its seriousness. With the extra height, the Krootox' heavy weapon would be able to fire down on either his rattling squad or Pontus' chimera. Swearing quietly under his breath, Constantine pulled his rifle close into his shoulder, sighted on the animal and tried to recall the

anatomy training he'd had the year before. Where was the Krootox heart? Should he go for a headshot instead or was the animal's skull too thick? Hoping he was right, he lined up just behind the head and fired. The animal screamed and bucked, knocking one kroot off the platform onto the ground several metres below. However, its handler managed to quiet it and the kroot on its back swung the heavy weapon round to face Constantine. There was a sharp crack to his left as another of his squad fired. He'd obviously remembered his training, Constantine thought in relief, as the krootox jerked, shuddered and then toppled forwards off the platform, crushing its handler and gunner as it hit the ground. This shook the remaining kroot, who gathered up their guns and slithered out of the farmhouse, running as fast as they could.

Both chimera now engaged the fire warriors. Milvio kept his squad inside the vehicle, but had his missile launcher firing out of the top hatches to supplement the chimera's formidable firepower. It only took a matter of minutes before the fire warriors, having taken heavy casualties, also took to their heels.

Pontus took situation reports, then despatched Milvio back to report to HQ and call in an engineer for the damaged rhino. Having posted his squad in defensive positions around the ruins, he found a comfortable stone to sit on, passed a flask of amasec to Sergeant Constantine and settle back to listen to the Ratling's reminiscences of the last time he'd faced the Tau.