# HOUSE IKARU
## INCURSION CAMPAIGN

*The hum of sophisticated tech was the only sound down here. Deep within the halls of Osu Sobiru, a place that few living souls ever laid eyes upon. It was here that the Central Processor was built and housed. This mammoth construction, said to have been created by Lord Mazudo himself, was the proverbial heart and soul of House Ikaru. Ever since Lord Yokosuka's disappearance and Lord Mazudo's death, the Central Processor had overseen every facet of the corporation. Buyouts, marketing strategies, SIM development and expansions flowed through every connection and every wire that made up the structure. Every detail carefully calculated and planned with cold, machine-like efficiency. The time for the next great venture had arrived. The time for expansion into new, dangerous markets. The time for the colonization of the ruins of Old Europe.*

*The Central Processor had determined after the long silence of the Great Trade War that House Ikaru's next takeover would be against one of the Aetherium's most powerful forces: The Axiom. For many long months and years the Central Processor observed and planned, as only a machine could. Every detail of the zealous government was studied. After running countless simulations the attack was planned. The target: The Tower, Axiom's central military HQ. If it could be destroyed, or better yet captured, then the rest of Axiom's control would weaken.*

*While complete destruction of the Axiom was not guaranteed, and could take many months or even years to completely scrub out of Old Europe, a victory at the Tower would solidify Ikaru's presence there and open up a whole new market ripe for conquest. The plan was set, and the forces had been dispatched.*

'Sir, some peculiar readings in sector 3.' Vost announced.

From across the room came a stern reply, 'What is it?'

Vost turned back to his console. He couldn't tell for sure. Some sort of fluctuation. Perhaps just a minor glitch in the system, it happened from time to time after all. But *he* had noticed it.

That's why he was here. He was one of the best in all of the Axiom's ranks plucked from the brink to use gifts and skills to monitor the entire installation. And Vost had a feeling, that whatever it was, it wasn't meant to be noticed, and that made him all the more worried. 'I can't tell for certain sir. It could be nothing, but its... unusual.'
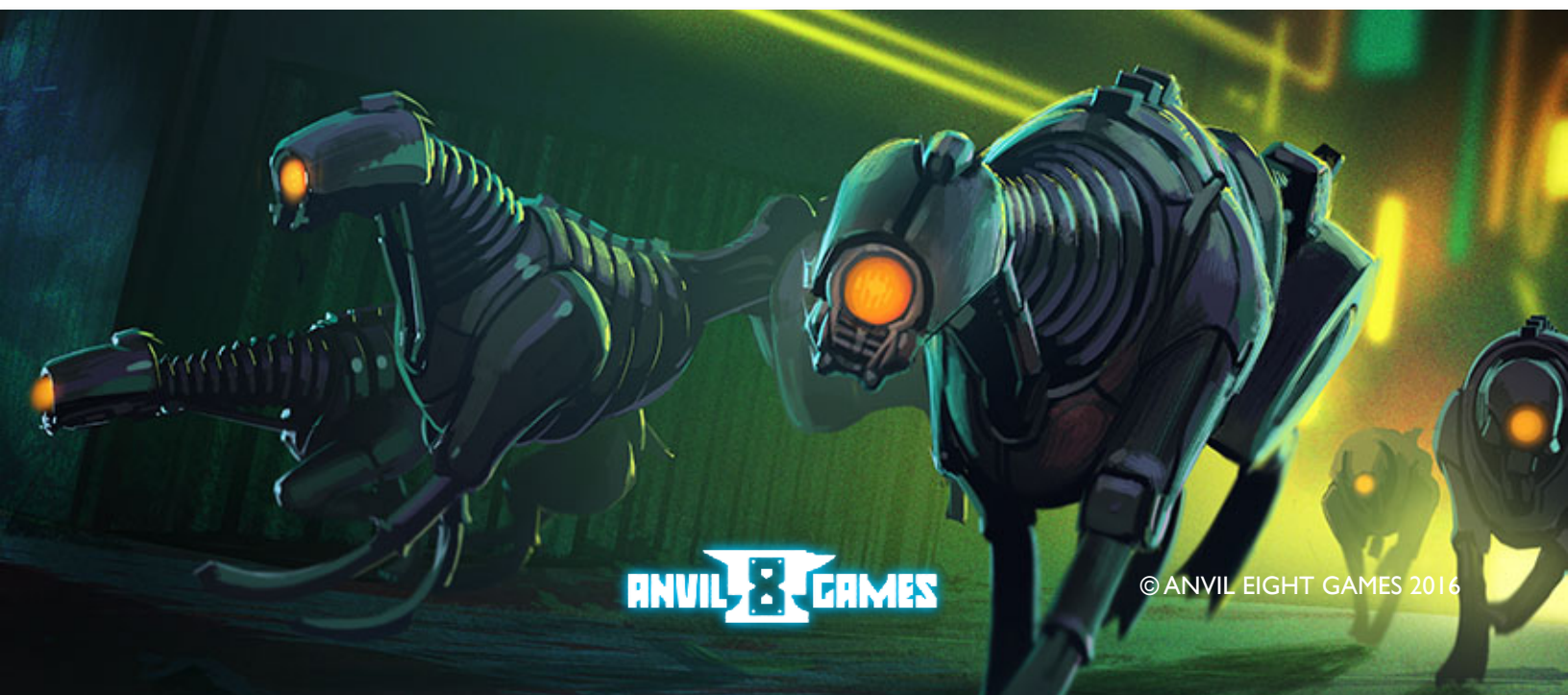
Standing up from his chair, Prime Commandant Issac Spyder marched across the room. Looking over Vost's shoulder he peered at the screen himself. While he himself could not discern the reading, he shared the feeling of unease that his captain felt. 'Send Alpha & Omega units 6 and 13 to investigate and run a scan.'

*The beginnings of the attack were subtle, simple even, by machine standards at least. Infiltrate the outskirts of the base, both internally and externally. Ketsoraki teams slinked through the darkness and the Aether - bypassing alarms, eliminating sentries, and moving closer to their objectives. Relay points all throughout the outer grounds of the Tower would act as doors to other parts of the compound. Once opened, the saboteurs could disable the outer security systems, allowing both the digital and real world attacks to fully commence.*

Alpha & Omega 6 had reached the area of the fluctuation. Alpha 6 prowled up and down the walkway, searching for any signs of something amiss. Omega 6 scanned the premises. Real world grounds seemed normal. Nothing out of place. It was in the blink of less than a second that everything changed. Omega 6 caught something on its sensors. Before it could relay the information, Alpha 6 was offline. Omega 6 followed soon after.

'Sir...' Vost couldn't even finish his thought before the Commandant cut him off.

'I see it.' Said Spyder.

Vost's fingers were a flurry of motion, typing in commands, running scans, and repositioning squads in a matter of moments. He knew he had to act quickly. The Commandant already was.
'They're going for the outer mainframe. Initiate Aether defenses. Send in the wetwork teams.'

Spyder's orders were firm and clipped. He really didn't need to say them, Vost knew what to do, but the general in him took over and he said them all the same. 'I'm going in there.'
Vost saluted. 'Yes sir, under control sir.'

As Vost set his mind to the task ahead, Spyder was already out the door and on the way to his personal SIM chamber. Several strategies and paths were already forming in his mind. Once he was connected, that would become dozens. While he had no idea what he was up against yet, Spyder knew in his gut that this was something far greater than it appeared. Anything trying to break into the Tower, and had the capabilities of getting even this far, was not something to be taken lightly. The Axiom reacted quickly. Far more quickly than the Central Processor had anticipated. But it was of no concern. The mind of a man could not hope to battle against the core of the machine. Orders were dispatched and new instructions sent out. Almost immediately attacks were sprung all throughout the outer mainframe. Once it had been infiltrated and cracked open, the way to the Tower's security control would be open.

As Spyder linked into the Aetherium, the situation only worsened. He was impressed by the speed at which the attack was unfolding. His opponent had obviously planned this for some time – the spiral attacks were happening too fast for it to be otherwise. By the time he was fully connected, several relay points were already compromised. Luckily he could see the results of Vost's efforts here on the inside. While the enemy had the upper hand, Axiom forces were responding with exactly the type of efficiency he expected from his troops. Once Spyder himself entered the fray the tide began to turn. Malicious code was cut off, hacks interrupted, and even two infiltrators were eliminated. Once he saw them with his own eyes it all became clear. House Ikaru had returned.

*The Central Processor change tactics effortlessly. Most of the attacks were kept in place, giving the illusion of a protracted fight over an already lost objective. Meanwhile, the main tendrils of the invaders closed in. As soon as the Central Processor calculated that the mainframe would not be taken, it ordered its Avatars to proceed. They in turn ordered the programs under their control to commence with a full frontal attack. Infiltration had been stopped, but the fight was far from over. The Axiom forces would not be prepared for the change of events.*

*As Ikaru programs converged on the Tower itself, the original infiltration teams eventually switched gears. What at first appeared to be just another attempt to circumvent the security systems of the base, turned out to be much worse. With Axiom distracted and believing they had halted the attack, House Ikaru began to run interference. Communications were severed. Outside help was removed from the equation and Spyder's forces soon found themselves completely surrounded and cut off. They were alone, and they would have to win this fight by themselves.*

Spyder fell for the ploy, as did the entire Axiom force. He swore at himself. Perhaps it was arrogance or perhaps his opponent was really that good. This was House Ikaru after all. They were one of the only corporation.

Spyder fell for the ploy, as did the entire Axiom force. He swore at himself. Perhaps it was arrogance or perhaps his opponent was really that good. This was House Ikaru after all. They were one of the only corporations to emerge from the Great Trade War at all, and stronger! By the time Spyder recognized the feign, it was too late. He knew exactly what Ikaru was doing. His communications to the rest of the Axiom were down. He couldn't call in for any reinforcements. He couldn't relay what was happening. He couldn't warn his pompous peers that the Tower, and possibly all of Axiom aetherial space was in danger.

'So be it.' He muttered to himself. 'We will have to do this the old fashioned way.' He smiled slightly. It had been awhile since he had faced an opponent this cunning.

'Vost, do you read me?' Spyder barked.

'Yes sir. Wetwork teams are beginning to secure the relay points. We are gaining back lost ground. The enemy seems to be staggering.'

'Negative Captain. It's a distraction. Communications are offline.' The commandant said flatly.

Vost ran a few checks. Impossible. So simple and obvious yet perfectly executed. He should have seen it himself. 'Roger that sir. Orders?'

'We are on our own Captain. We'll have to hold the day ourselves. Reposition our troops, complete defensive protocols. Secure all entrances and make sure the security control is on lockdown. Divert what you can to the data archives in case anything slips through, but focus on the outer perimeter first. Standard fall back procedures if it comes to that. We are surrounded, but if these corporate dogs want a fight, then they shall have it.'

With each command, Spyder's plan gained more traction and Vost's spirits were lifted. The man was an incredible leader. No signs of doubt in his voice, only cold logic and decisive orders. Almost like a machine. How he could react to the Ikaru attack so quickly, Vost could only imagine, but if anyone could halt this invasion, it was the commandant.

*The next phase of the assault was much more direct. With the relay points lost and Ikaru's infiltration attempts thwarted, the Central Processor centered on another objective: the security control room. This room was the lifeblood of the entire facility. If it could be breached and captured then the invaders could gain complete control of the base. While collateral damage was expected, it was deemed to be at acceptable levels within the margin of error. Even if the Tower was nothing more than a smoldering ruin, the data archives would surely be undamaged and ripe for plundering. With a new set of mission parameters in place, the machines engaged the outnumbered defenders.*

*The Central Processor threw everything it had at the Tower. Its Avatars led the assaults on three different fronts. The attack took a heavy toll on both sides. Wherever the Central Processor tried to exploit a weakness, Spyder countered. When defenses were nearly overrun, Axiom forces retreated in good order, only to fall back to another defensible position. House Ikaru Slowly gained ground, and hall by hall and room by room the Tower began to fall under their control.*

*Despite Spyder's inhuman efforts he could not personally intervene in every fight that was breaking out. His troops were doing a fine job, but they were running out of positions to fall back too. Worse, something was causing extreme distortions throughout the entire server. Whenever Spyder or Vost tried to pin it down, it was gone, leaving pure chaos in its wake. And now it was nearly at the security control room.*

'Sir, whatever that thing is, it's nearly there.' Vost tried not to reveal the worry in his voice.

'Roger that Captain. I'll deal with it myself.' Spyder's tone left no guess as to the outcome of the coming fight. 'Be ready to order the counter attack on my mark. Start with sector 4 first. Follow up with Arlo company and Desdin company on the north side. Have Pacifier units 1 through 4 hold the center, and reserve Alpha and Omega squads for flanking countermeasures. And make sure Markus is in position. He knows what to do.'

Vost blinked, staring at the screen in disbelief. He didn't realize it himself at first, but now, after hearing those orders it all made perfect sense. The whole fight was an elaborate ploy on the commandant's part. Every remaining unit was in precisely the right position. It was like the man had set up dominos in just the right order. If executed properly, the attack could be stopped.

'Roger that sir. Unbelievable. This was all part of the plan?'

'A very costly plan, but yes, a plan nonetheless. Let's not waste this opportunity. We've only got one chance to win this fight.' Despite the odds the commandant sounded strangely calm. Then again, nothing seemed to unnerve the man.

'Yes sir.' Vost checked another screen. 'Markus is on the move. I have 14 confirmed deletions'

'3 short of the record?' Spyder asked plainly.

'2 sir, I believe you're forgetting the bomber,' Vost reminded him.

Vost was greeted only by a grunt through the speaker. He knew the commandant was annoyed to be reminded of that incident, but both men secretly enjoyed the inside joke.

*The prize was nearly in hand. Ikaru forces had 70% of the base under their control. The Central Processor was pleased. It had ordered Entropy to the front, the spikes and distortions throughout the Tower marking its whereabouts. It was closing in on the security control room. Once there the rest of the base would be overrun. The Axiom forces had held up surprisingly well, but nothing was able to halt Entropy's approach. The chaos swirling around it forced back all attempts to stop it. Victory was nearly assured.*

Longshot Markus moved swiftly. While he could never fathom the full extent of Spyder's plans, he fully understood his part to play. He was just another cog in the machine, but a very important cog. Ever since taking out that bomber his skills had been called upon several times by the commandant personally. Markus wasn't sure if it was trust or a begrudging respect, but in the end, he supposed it didn't really matter. They worked well together, and he was just another tool in the commandant's arsenal.

He reached his vantage point. He scanned the area, clear sight of the security control room and the battle below. The black and orange that marked out his fellow soldiers scurried below, exchanging fire with the encroaching machines. Two tall robots, swinging fighting staves clashed with a squad of Praetorians. One bashed a Praetorian's shield, knocking him to the ground. As soon as his ally was clear, Markus took the shot. A second later the machine was on its back, a smoking hole where its single eye was. The other Praetorians clumped together, locking their shields. With a heave they forced the remaining machine against a wall. As it crashed into the metal and slid down another shot rang out. Markus peered through his rifle's scope. Another smoking crater, this time in the target's chest, gave him all the information he needed. *Hmm, 16,* he thought to himself.

*Entropy entered the final entranceway leading towards the security control room. Resistance had grown heavier the closer it got to its objective, but the defenses also grew more desperate. While casualties had been great on both sides, nothing could truly stand in Entropy's way. Every obstacle was only delaying the inevitable. Distortions swirl among the server, with Entropy at its core. When enemies locked on to it their sensors flared and their connections faltered. Feedback exploded back towards its attackers, and those that were not deleted outright were easy targets for the rest of Entropy's troops.*

*The last group of Praetorians stepped forward to block its path. It extended its Integrator arm at the oncoming foes. Tendrils of wires, cables, and ports burst forth as the claw opened wide. The defenders soon found themselves assaulted by the bizarre weapon, but instead of ending them outright, it crippled them. They found their connections to the Aetherium interrupted and slowed. As they lagged and glitched to painful halt, a Type-16 lumbered forward. It's results were far less subtle. In a span of a few seconds the guards were gone, fading back and de-rezzing out of existence. Entropy looked forward towards the security control room, but before it could complete its mission another defender stepped forward.*

Commandant Spyder had never seen such a bizarre and horrifying sight anywhere within the Aetherium before. He wasn't precisely sure what that thing had done to his troops, but it didn't take an Avatar to know that it was an effective weapon.

'On me, Markus,' he ordered. A click buzzed across his retina-link as acknowledgement.

Even before Spyder had gotten this close to this strange machine, his head throbbed. Whatever it was, it was distorting everything in the vicinity. His sensors were giving out impossible readings, and communications to even his nearby troops were sporadic at best. As battle swirled around them Spyder leaped forwards. Barking orders to his remaining troops to take down the Omni program, the commandant made his way towards the thing he assumed was leading the assault. He let go several shots with his sidearm, but he couldn't lock on. Even though his opponent barely seemed to move, as if it was never there when he pulled the trigger.

Behind him a Venari squad traded fire with the Type-16, while an Alpha & Omega unit tried to harass it from opposite flanks. While their shots found their mark, its defensive systems kicked in, letting loose swarm of reconstructive nanobots. Within seconds they covered the holes of damage and began to repair them. The Type-16 stomped forward, scooping up one Venari in its Tri-Claw. As the solider was crushed in an explosion of sparks, Alpha 2 leap up, clamping down on the titans wrist. The Type-16 took a glance at the pitiful watchdog as it dangled from its arm, then smashed it into the ground several times. Markus' rifle rang out as a shot struck the robot in the shoulder staggering it back.

*The Central Processor calculated its options. While the primary objective was just a few feet away, the commander of the base had finally revealed himself. A quick diagnostic scan revealed that this was indeed the Prime Commandant himself. Such an opportunity was rare, and might not present itself anytime soon. If he was to be eliminated or captured, then the rest of the Tower would fall to House Ikaru. That was certain. A quick burst of instructions ordered Entropy to neutralize Spyder immediately.*

Entropy stared blankly at the commandant. Raising its Integrator at Spyder another mass of tendrils speed forth. Mid shot the commandant's sidearm click to a halt. He swore and smacked it against his thigh. When the device still did not respond he rushed forwards, swinging his Judgment Gavel at Entropy. It didn't do much to avoid the blow. As the head of the weapon cracked into Entropy's side the commandant let out a howl of pain. Entropy's feedback loops fired up, sending pulses through Spyder's mind. He staggered back, stunned at such a strange defensive measure. As he gathered himself Entropy aimed its' Integrator at the Type-16. It had just finished off the last of the Venari, sending him through a wall and into the cold depths of a quantum noise break. With the Venari's dying screams in the background, the Type-16 turned and fired its Gravity Beamer at the helpless commandant. A moment later Spyder found himself on the ground, staring up at the towering cyborg.

Vost still had not idea what they were dealing with. But during the few moments that the Ikaru Avatar had appeared he had run just about every type of scan he could. Now his assumptions were confirmed. This thing was leading the attack, so to speak, and its strange weapon was hindering its foes and boosting its allies. It seemed to be leeching energy into the Type-16, making it stronger, faster, and more accurate. Without thinking Vost linked into Markus' vox.
'Markus take down that thing with the arm! It's amplifying the Omni!'

Markus peered through his scope. He had tried to target Entropy several times since it appeared, but every time he found his aim blurred and his reactions slowed. He brought his sights onto the strange creature again. It seemed to be buzzing into and out of focus. He swayed his rifle to rest on the Type-16. He could see Spyder in front of it, looking up and preparing to give his life to the Axiom he so loyally served. He fired, striking his target in the back. The shot barely had any effect. More of those damn nanobots swarmed to fix the damage.

'DAMMIT MARKUS, THE OTHER ONE! TAKE IT DOWN OR THE COMMANDANT IS FINISHED' Vost's panic was as palpable as his anger.

Time slowed for Spdyer. He could see the last of his troops destroyed by the Type-16. He found himself unable to raise his weapon or resist the behemoths attacks. He could barely hear Vost shouting at Markus over the vox. Then, an idea sprang to mind.

'Vost, emergency override Zeus protocol. Markus! FIRE!' he shouted.

The transfer of energy was instantaneous. Markus felt power surges through every fiber of his mind. It wasn't a rare occurrence, but it was nearly overwhelming for a user of his skill. His Avatar pumped reserve power into his connections, focusing his thoughts and guiding his aim. Entropy was no longer a blur; it was as if he wasn't moving at all. With a blend of instincts and the guiding hand of Spyder his crosshairs came to rest upon Entropy's head. A final shot rang out.

If a machine could know anger, then the Central Processor would have been fuming. Despite all of its calculations and studies, all of the preparation and resources spent, the attack on the Tower was almost a catastrophic failure. The base still stood, and it was still in Axiom hands. The data archives had not been breached, and Prime Commandant Spyder was still alive. The loss of troops to both sides had been great, but now House Ikaru had to pull back and regroup. Without a second thought, the Central Processor ordered a full retreat. It had already begun to analyze the data it had gathered from the battle, already began to plot its next move. It would be sometime before House Ikaru could mount another massive invasion such as this, but time was a commodity that machines have in abundance.

Commandant Spyder made his way through the wreckage of the battle. His head still buzzed from the fading resonations that had accompanied Entropy, but with the thing dispatched, the static began to retreat, along with the rest of the attackers. The Axiom forces were too depleted to mount any sort of chase, but Spyder knew the day had been won, but at a high cost. He stopped and looked down at Markus' fading image. Despite his best efforts, Spyder was unable to prevent the feedback loop from consuming Markus as he fired. The loop sent a discharge of energy right back at Markus, amplified by the damage his shot had inflicted. Judging by the explosion that followed the hit on Entropy, there was no doubt that the feedback had obliterated Markus, not only here in the Aetherium, but back in the real world as well.

'Vost, get the cleanup crews and codebreakers to work at once. We might still have time to glean valuable information about House Ikaru and their code. The next time these machines come back, we'll give them a taste of their own medicine.' Spyder's order was flat.
'Right away sir, already underway.' Came the reply.

Spyder turned back towards the security control room. He stopped and looked over his shoulder one last time. '17, old friend. That's a new record.'