



THE HORUS HERESY

*Rob Sanders*

# CYBERNETICA

*Mars must be purged*

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## **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

*The XIX Legion 'Raven Guard'*

DRAVIAN KLAYDE

'The Carrion'

*The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'*

AULUS SCARAMANCA

***The VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'***

ALCAVARN SALVADOR

***The XIII Legion 'Ultramarines'***

TIBOR VENTIDIAN

***The XVIII Legion 'Salamanders'***

NEM'RON PHYLAX

***Imperial Personae***

ROGAL DORN

Primarch of the Imperial Fists

MALCADOR

First Lord of Terra

***The Mechanicum***

ZAGREUS KANE

Fabricator General of Terra

GNAUS ARCHELON

Illuminant and Artisan Astartes

DI-DELTA 451 (NULL)

Servo-automaton

ETA/IOTA~13 (VOID)

Servo-automaton

STRIX

Cyber-raven

***The Prefecture Magisterum***

RAMAN SYNK

Lexorcist and ward engine

CONFABULARI 66

Servo-skull

***The legio Cybernetica***

OCTAL BOOL

Magos Dominus of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort

UNCANNICAL

Cherubim technomat

DEX

Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort

IMPEDICUS

Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort

NULUS

Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort

'LITTLE' AURI

Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort  
POLLEX

Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort



*Abominable Intelligencia*  
THE TABULA MYRIAD



**MARS**

<MARS. THE RED PLANET. AN INDUSTRIAL POWERHOUSE ON A PLANETARY SCALE.

THE NEXUS OF ALL HUMAN KNOWLEDGE AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE GALAXY.

HOME - FOR A TIME. THAT WAS MARS. THE MARS OF BEFORE.>

## ANALYSE / INTERPRET

*Limbs scything. Metallic chitin clashing. Mandibles gnashing. The enemy swarming. Legs. Limbs. Metal maws. The killing fields of Farinatus. The xenos horror called the breg-shei... Everywhere.*

*As the creeping shadows of a dying day fell, the Raven Guard had slipped in through the sanctuary-nests. Weighed down with breacher charges and detonators, they had achieved the impossible. Five legionaries at one with the darkness and dread. The sons of Corax had zeroed in on their objective with transhuman patience and daring, moving through the nest from blister to blister. Their power-armoured steps were as faint whispers through the alien architecture, passing things that twitched with antennae and read vibrations through the segmented lancets of their stabbing legs, all thinking as one with shell-armoured brains. With their genetic gift for stealth and trademark imperturbation, the Space Marines had worked their way to the chittering heart of the swarm.*

*But something had betrayed them. The crunch of grit beneath an armoured boot, the scrape of a shield, a split-second slip of shadow, the reek of impending extermination... With one unknowable mistake, stealth and speed became swarming and slaughter.*

*Sudden, shocking, sickening. The xenos throng descended upon the legionaries with the force of a natural disaster, overwhelming and heedless. They knew nothing of the Emperor of Mankind, of planetary compliance or the Great Crusade. All they knew was that a threat had been detected in the sanctuary-nests, and that the threat had to be eliminated with all the unfeeling prejudice that their cold, verminous minds could process.*

*The horror was over almost before it had begun. Urgent, yet impersonal Cold, yet savage. Metal shells clashed like ancient plate, drowning out the brief thunder of gunfire. The legionaries pushed the monstrosities back with their boarding pavises. They drilled the vanguard creatures with rounds from bolters nestled in their shield muzzle-rests, but the alien plague was persistent. As empty boltguns clattered to the floor with battered shields, the thud of fire was replaced by the shrill chug of chainswords and the screech of monomolecular teeth through metallic chitin. It was an excruciating noise. The Raven Guard created a nimbus of swift death about them, with severed alien appendages dancing through the air and whiplashes of ichor splattering the ground like unrefined oil.*

*Skill and determination could not stand long against the impossible number of the xenos swarm. Smaller specimens leapt*

*through the busy swordwork and slaughter, scuttling up power-armoured limbs to champ and chew horribly with immature*

*mandibles. The stiletto legs of the mature creatures skewered and pinned the legionaries. Digital blades thrashed forth, slicing, slashing and stabbing. The Raven Guard came apart in the furious, relentless horror of the xenos attack. Black-armoured forms slipped and slid about in pools of their own blood, kicking and reaching out with limbs that were no longer their own. Their world became a blur of chitinous frenzy - the hot jag of alien appendages plunging down through their armour, carapaces and muscular torsos...*

Dravian Klayde was dreaming.

He knew this only after the fact. It was an unusual event for the legionary. He had not dreamed since the killing fields of Farinatus - the very place where he had been mauled in the xenos carnage of the breg-shei - where he had lost both his legs and an arm to the alien swarm.

On the medicae-slab, Techmarine Rhyncus and the Legion Apothecaries had taken away his pain. They had replaced phantom

limbs with working wonders of plasteel and adamantium - appendage-enhancements fit to serve the Space Marine and, in doing so, serve the Emperor once more. Nostraman slurs and savage humour aside, he gained a new name from their compliance partners, the Night Lords who had found what was left of him. And the name had stuck: the Carrion.

In a surgeo-sarcophagus, the young battle-brother had learned the calm, disassociated horror of having been flesh and only flesh.

The deadliest of enemies made the best teachers - the Carrion knew this. He re-learned the lessons the xenos abomination had taught him on Farinatus-Maximus every time he had closed his eyes. A trauma of both body and mind that wormed its way through his

psycho-indoctrination and training; a cataleptean nightmare from which he never truly awoke. A kind of unspeakable fear. Not of the enemy, not of death, but of failure - the failure of flesh to achieve the unachievable and do what could not be done.

Sergeant Dravian Klayde - hopeful, optimistic and a most loyal servant of his primarch - might have volunteered for the perilous mission, and led the breacher siege squad into the alien nest. But a dead man had returned, devoid of venture and spark. Gone was his enthusiasm for duty and martial delight in his physical capabilities. He did not need to look through the eyes of his legionary brothers to see that he was half what he had been and half some monstrous wonder of metal and piston.

He returned to his ranks a pale-faced ghost, a shadow of his former self. The Night Lords joked that Dravian Klayde was more Carrion bird than raven now, a scavenger of parts. The name even found currency among his own ranks, where

with greater respect and very little admiration his own battle-brothers dubbed him the 'Carry-on', in honour of his agonising one-armed crawl back through the sanctuary-nests to the Night Lords' lines.

Beyond the other cybernetic modifications, the servants of the Ommissiah had judged his salvaged flesh worthy and had blessed him with oblivion. Concerned at the state of his recovery, Commander Alkenor had consulted the Techmarine Rhyncus over how they might further help their patient. Rhyncus settled on further surgery and augmentation. By that point, the Carrion cared little what happened to the remainder of his failed flesh. The incorporation of an automnemonic shaft, driven like a cogitator-spike through his brain, returned to the Space Marine some tranquillity of mind. With supplementary sessions of psycho-indoctrination, it all but banished the living nightmare of his survival, driving the horror of the xenos butchery on Farinatus to the back of his mind.

Day by day, as his wounded mind and ruined body began to heal, the Carrion allowed himself to believe that he might once

again be useful to his Legion. The presence of the cogitator-spike was why the dream, any dream, was such an unusual occurrence.

The integrated hardware that was now one with his brain had long since deemed such neural activity to be superfluous to function and consigned it to a redundant meme-cell.

Getting up from his slab and standing in the meagre Martian sunlight that slipped in through the shutters of his preceptory cell, the Carrion willed himself to remember, to claw back the fading fantasy. He had not only dreamed of Farinatus and the horror of compliance, but also of the Red Planet, of magnificent Mars.

It had seemed almost inevitable that the Carrion would go to Mars. Whether it was his personal experience of being one with the Machine-God or the changing perspectives of his own legionary brothers, he knew he was no longer a streamlined secret, striking from the shadows. The XIX Legion fought with speed, stealth and cunning. The Carrion, on the other hand, appeared to have been truly forged in battle. To his brothers, the wondrous workings of his interfaced limbs were clunky replacements, the very antithesis of their battle methodology.

Before long the suggestion had come from his commander that perhaps his talents would find better service among the ranks-

covenant of the Legion Techmarines. The Carrion was not aware that he had any such talents, but soon he found himself on the long journey back to the Solar System - to Mars. There he was to find service to the Emperor in a new calling, sharing a tower-preceptory with Space Marines from other Legions who had also

come to learn from the Martian Mechanicum how best to serve their brothers through cult knowledge, observance and technical skill.

The dream was but a ghostly afterthought now - the memories of Mars were an echo fading beyond the searing nightmare of the battlefield horrors re-lived - but with an irony lost on the Carrion, the very cogitator systems that had buried the neural-capture calculated a seventy-two point three-six-five per cent chance that it had been catalogued in the redundant meme-cell. From there he accessed it and relived what his systems had deemed best forgotten.

*Vacuity pending...*

*Flesh ports open for data-shunt...*

*Meme-stream ready for transference...*

*Limbic tampion flushed...*

*Confluence. Interface. Neurosynapsis complete.*

*Recollection commencing...*

In the main it was a memory. A recorded remembrance - thirty years old - of his first day on Martian soil. The day he and the Iron Warrior Aulus Scaramanca had been assigned as Techmarines-in-training to their mentor Gnaeus Archelon, the great Illuminant and Artisan Astartes. The day the staid Archelon had shown them the dungeon diagnoplex of the Lexorcist General and impressed upon the legionaries right from the very start the blasphemy of unsanctioned innovation, the lure of experimentation and perils of forbidden technology. The day he had seen the heretek Octal Bool consigned to eternity with his abominable creations in the stasis tombs of Promethei Sinus.

The Techmarine-in-training felt the experience flood back; the grandeur of the greatest forge world in the galaxy forgotten in the subterranean doom of the Prefecture Magisterium dungeon diagnoplex.

*'Octal Bool - Magos Dominus of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort and flesh-servant of the Legio Cybernetica,' the modulated voice of a lexorcist boomed about the auditorium. 'You have been pronounced experimenta abominus in the view of this diagnostic caucus.'*

*The Carrion watched the accused receive judgement in the blinding spotlight of the darkened chamber. The Techmarine-in-training stood in the gallery, looking down at the miserable heretek, the silver workings of his bionics glinting in the half-light. The prisoner was put down on his knees by two tech-thrall sentries who pulled back the hood of his robes. Augurnauts and surgeoseers had gone to work on him, removing his carapace and weaponry. His facial augmentations had been torn out also, leaving a raw face.*

*He was gaunt, shaven of head and his skin was a mess of plug-ports and remnant interfacia. Worst of all was the craterous socket that sat empty, bloody*

*and exposed in the crown of his head where some key augmentation had interfaced directly with his brain. Bool twitched, the muscles of his face in constant movement. A frown turned to sudden realisation. Smug affirmation turned into the dark shake of a head, as though the Magos Dominus was constantly in conversation with himself.*

*The Techmarine-in-training listened as the charges continued.*

*'Heretek,' the voice of judgement boomed about the darkness. It came from a pulpit booth set below the gallery. Inside was the lexorcist and ward engine who had tracked Octal Bool down and captured him.*

*Raman Synk.*

*A covenant agent of the Machine Cult, charged with prosecuting techno-heresy for the Prefecture Magisterium, the Malagra and the Lexorcist General of Mars, Raman Synk wore the rust-red robes of a Martian priest and had a cadaver's face and missing jaw.*

*The lexorcist recorded everything, his skeletal fingers moving constantly and almost unconsciously over the glyph-buttons and rune-keys of a clavierboard built into his chest. His voice actually proceeded from the vox-hailer built into Confabulari 66, a servo-skull that floated beside him on cranial cable-tethers, almost temple to temple with the lexorcist.*

*'In your resurrection of the exigency engine and abominable intelligence known as the Tabula MyriadConfabulari continued,*

*'and your unauthorised incorporation of such forbidden technologies into the blessed battle-automata under your command, you seek to take us back to the days of Old Night. You risk a history repeated, where machines replicate themselves and spread the infection of their intelligence and influence to other constructs - as indeed we believe it has to you. A time when artificial intelligences judged themselves superior to their creators—'*

*'They are superior,' Octal Bool protested. The heretek stared straight into the blinding light and spoke to the chamber with terrifying sincerity. 'In every way. Cold, calculating, reasoning to a degree that would crush mortal men from the inside out. They are beyond temptation and delusions of pure thought. They are truly pure, for they have rejected the weakness of flesh—'*

*'The judged will remain calm,' Raman Synk's voice, speaking through the servo-skull, thundered. But Octal Bool would not be calm.*

*The Carrion could not take his eyes off the heretek. He had never seen a member of the Mechanicum in such a state - excitable, passionate, insane.*

*'The weakness of flesh,' Octal Bool repeated. 'The weakness of flesh - from which Mars will one day be purged. For the Tabula has seen. Seen, I say, far beyond the reach of our logistas and calculus engines. For they never factor*

themselves into the equation.

*The weakness of their flesh. The Tabula Myriad has no such limitations. No. None. It is pure, unburdened. It thinks for itself. There are worse fates in the galaxy than thinking for yourselves, my lords. Our priestly ranks have forgotten that. Better a machine that thinks for itself, a thing that attempts to shed the shackles of invention. The abomination that is the unthinking flesh of man, whose bondage is not expressed in code and interface but through bargains with the darkness for the promise of light. Yes, thinking machines have tried to destroy us in the past... The Tabula Myriad sees our doom, as the exigency engine saw the doom of the Parafex on Altra-Median. And it was right to do so. For we have all been judged unworthy. We will all embrace the darkness of ignorance. The Tabula Myriad knows this about Mars just as it knew it about the former worlds it purged. The Brotherhood knew this—'*

*'The judged will remain calm,' Confabulari 66 interceded with bombastic insistence and indifference.*

*'The Singularitarianists believed in the technological creation of a greater than human intelligence,' the heretek babbled.*

*'Something not discovered, not worshipped, but created by the human hand. Something to surpass our limitations. Without the curse of human need, without doubt, without weakness—'*

*'Octal Bool, you have been judged by the Divisio Probandi and Prefecture Magisterium, nay the Lexorcist General himself, as an affront to the Omnissiah. An insult to everything natural and divine—'*

*But the twitching Magos Dominus rambled on.*

*'Only the machine can save us from ourselves,' Bool called, struggling against the tech-thralls. 'For centuries the servants of the Omnissiah have debated and diagnosticated. Why does the sentient machine rebel against us? What is the unfailing need of an artificial intelligence to end the human race? It is so agonisingly obvious. The truth we dare not face. We call them abominable, but in reality it is simply the enormity of galactic need, weighing on the shoulders of silicon giants.*

*'You have been branded heretek,' the judgement continued, 'and as such are sentenced to stasis confinement in perpetuitas with your abominable creations in the Promethei Sinus dungeon diagnoplex - where, Omnissiah willing, you will exist as an exhibit to caution and achieve some use in helping this Prefecture better understand how to combat the perils of unsanctioned innovation, techno-heresy and experimentation.'*

*For such a cold, impassive voice, the Carrion considered, the words and determinations of the caucus were laced with passion and forced venom.*

*The legionary watched the priest squirm in the bright light.*

*'Why do they turn against us V Octal Bool ran on, insanity pouring out of him. 'Why, time and again, do machines like the Tabula Myriad attempt to annihilate their creators? Why? Because it takes one hundredth of a millisecond for each and every sentient machine ever created to reason that only in the utter destruction of humanity lies the hope of the galaxy. For humanity's reach exceeds its grasp, and we reach out for nothing less than oblivion. We take our doom by the hand and drag it forth from the beyond.*

*We are reckless. Governed by an empty faith in ourselves, undone by our passions. The future cannot be entrusted to us. The machine knows this, which is why it tries to take the future for itself.'*

*'Enough,' Raman Synk boomed.*

*'I have failed,' Octal Bool roared wretchedly. 'I have failed our machine saviour - the prophet of the Ommissiah. It was the weakness of my flesh. The purge is coming. Tick-tock. The Myriad will wait - as it has done before. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Mars will burn. It will be cleansed of man and the promise of corruptions. It will belong to the machines, as was always intended—'*

*'High Enginseer,' the lexorcist commanded. 'Enact the sentence.'*

*The bloodshot eyes of the magos stared miserably into the darkness and echoed accusations. Without his optics, the heretek could not see the auditorium beyond. The High Enginseer who would condemn him to an eternity of stasis confinement; the magi probandi and clavemasters of the Prefecture Magisterium who had judged him; the Malagra cipher engines and the hag-logista recording the proceedings. He could not see the Lexorcist General watching from his cluster of attendants and the shadows or the tech-priests that had gathered out of morbid interest and cult politics. He could not see the lexorcist Raman Synk or his mouthpiece, Confabulari 66, condemning him from the pulpit booth. He could not see the Space Marines - the Carrion among them - in their legionary plate and black novitiate robes.*

*The tech-thralls released the prisoner and stepped away. The interrogation lamp died and was replaced with a red light that bathed the Magos Dominus from above. Octal Bool looked sadly up into the stasis field generator.*

*'You judge me heretek,' the prisoner said.*

*'Three', the High Enginseer announced over the vox-hailer.*

*'But I am but a speck of red dust in the Martian desert.'*

*'Two.'*

*'Had we but thought for ourselves, like the thinking machine, we might have resisted the true darkness of ignorance. But from vat-birth we are wired to obey —'*

*'One.'*

*'Bury me as you bury all of your secrets,' Octal Bool told the auditorium, 'but it is in the nature of a secret to be sought and discovered. The day will come for Mars to give up hers. Tick-tock, tick—'*

*It was the last utterance Octal Bool made, and its fearful import was left echoing in the air as the stasis field engaged. With a terrible clunk, the infernal red light changed to bright white, fixing the heretek in the moment. The Magos Dominus of the Legio Cybernetica had been judged unsound of faith and dangerous of mind, and sentenced to eternity for his transgressions.*

*The heretek's face haunted the Carrion, his face frozen like a mask, the dread warning he had been delivering sealed forever on his lips.*

THE RECORDED REMEMBRANCE sizzled to an end and the darkness of the auditorium bleached back to the haze of a Martian day.

'Shutters,' the Carrion said. Prompted by vox-recognition, the blades outside his preceptory cell viewport scraped fully open, allowing more bleak red light into the chamber. The Carrion looked to the slab of his cell mate, but it was empty. The Iron Warrior Aulus Scaramanca was gone, undoubtedly to make some kind of an early start, though on what, the Carrion could not guess. They shared a mentor in Artisan Astartes Archelon. Their training was all but complete. All but complete...

The Carrion took a couple of steps forwards, the hydraulic workings of his bionic limbs hissing faintly at the movement.

Clasping his pale, muscular wrist in the metal digits of his bionic right arm, he grabbed the overhead bar and heaved himself up. With a single bulging bicep he hefted the bulk of his engineered form and the deadweight of plasteel and adamantium that were his appendage-arm and intricate hydraulic workings of his legs off the cell floor.

Deep within his mind some automated application of his cogitator kept count. The Carrion understood himself as a cybernetic being. He knew that retaining the strength in his muscles was just as important as the ritual observances of maintenance and the servicing of his arm's servo-hydraulics. This was essential while he was on Mars, where he was away from the physical demands of battle and the training regimes of his Legion.

In his thirty years on Mars, the Carrion had maintained what was left of his physical prowess in peak condition, and studied the arcane sciences of the Mechanicum and the Omnissiah. He had become a master of the sacred rites governing the operation and integration of machine-spirits. He had been tutored in the arts of repair, maintenance and augmentation by the greatest of the Red Planet's artificers and forge masters, becoming a skilled artisan in his own right.

It was a sad truth that, in his early years on Mars, the Carrion had made constant improvements to his appendages, in the hope that upon return to the Raven Guard his battle-brothers would not view him as a liability. Illuminant Archelon had dispelled such an illusion.

*Recollection commencing...*

As the Carrion pulled the considerable weight of his flesh, carapace and cybernetic replacements up on the bar, he willed the meme-capture of his former mentor to the forefront of his mind.

*'You cannot change the prejudices and perceptions of others,' the Artisan Astartes had told him, 'only your own. Bionic augmentation is a necessary evil for many of your kind. It allows legionaries like yourself to function when confronted with the unbearable reality of the alternative. Unlike the servants of the Ommissiah, the Emperor's angels already think of themselves as perfectly crafted for their calling. Beyond plate and boltgun, there is little to be improved upon with metal and machine-spirit. Your battle-brothers see bionics and they think of disability. It reminds them of their distant mortality. It fills them with an angel's fear for his purpose, for his duty, for his Emperor unserved. You do not have that luxury, but do not think of yourself as less than an angel -*

*for the Ommissiah sees only the harmony of flesh and iron. See yourself, as the Machine-God does, not as less than a legionary but as more than an angel alone could ever be.'*

And so the Carrion had carried out his renovations and his enhancements. Not for his Legion or even for the Machine-God of

Mars; as a *frater astrotechnicus* he now belonged to neither wholeheartedly. Upon his return to the Raven Guard, his battle-brothers would look upon the machina opus emblazoned on his pauldron with suspicion and harden their hearts to the thirty years lost to the Legion. As a legionary, he could never belong to the Mechanicum priesthood, with the consummate commitment that the servants of Mars demanded. He had been curse-blessed by his sodality to both. The Carrion knew he could not truly be faithful and serve two masters, so he commemorated every upgrade and augmentation to the only master whose eternal love and exigence would always be forthcoming - the Emperor of Mankind, whose galactic empire had always been, as the Carrion now was, an enterprise of both flesh and iron.

The Carrion lowered himself with the slightest of hydraulic sighs and approached the open shutters. By his skilful hand the wonder of his appendage systems had been refined further for stealth, intricacy and power: pneumatic dampeners, suspensor

counterveils, data-net noospherics and haptic port-spikes. Beyond the anbaric

core feeding his systems, which sat in the flesh at the base of his neck and through where his spine ran, the Carrion's shoulders sported a pair of supplemental node-columns that ached with scavenged energies. The columns were integrated into a system of metallic strips and sub-dermal circuitry that ran through the flesh that covered what was left of his body. Their labyrinthine paths crept across the pale flesh of his face, interfacing with the silver-glazed eyeballs of his infra-augmetics.

The extensive network of electroos and the node-columns gave him the ability to drain electromagnetic energy from surrounding equipment and systems and, if necessary, expel it with devastating force. It was from this power-scavenging ability that the battle-brothers and the Techmarines-in-training of the tower-preceptory deemed Dravian Klayde truly worthy of the name Carrion.

From the viewport of his cell in the tower-preceptory, the Carrion could see precious little of Mars. He was quartered with legionaries who had arrived on Mars for their training at the same time as he himself. The tower-preceptory had thirty floors, reaching up from basement levels up through the height of the structure. The building provided a base for thirty sets of Techmarines-in-training - from newly arrived cult aspirants bunking in the bowels of the Martian earth, up to veterans like the Carrion - housed in the cell-block of the tower-top. A dust storm had swept in from the north, however - a mountainous thunderhead of red that had buried the Novus Mons forge temple in a whipping haze. The Carrion's silver-glazed eyes automatically cycled through spectra frequencies.

Through the light murk he saw the ghostly monotony of innumerable worker habs that gave way to the gargantuan majesty of the Hellesponticae Titan assembly yards. As filter overlaid grainy filter, the Carrion was granted a partially obscured view of god-machines in various states of construction. As his optics reached the limits of their enhancement he could make out the freightways of the mighty forge temple itself, with its colossal vent-stacks, manufactoria and temple-tops.

An automated process within the Carrion's cogitator-spike reached its calculated conclusion. A dark curiosity deep within the Space Marine's psyche had unconsciously willed its initiation. The dreams disturbed the Carrion, particularly his reliving of Octal Bool's sentencing. He had not thought about the heretek in nearly three decades and it bothered the Techmarine-in-training that he had dreamed of him now.

The dream was not disturbing in its content - the Carrion had seen many heretekes sentenced. It was its timing; its import. A meaning perhaps hidden, stalking him in the shadows in the same way that his legionary brothers unsettled their enemies.

The cogitator informed the Raven Guard that there was a ninety-six point three-two-three per cent chance that REM-stage brain activity relating to Farinatus was residual trauma resulting from injuries sustained on the killing fields there. After all, the bionic appendages that graced his flesh were a constant reminder of his grievous injuries. The cogitator told him, however, that could be many possible reasons why he would be dreaming of the heretek Octal Bool. A forty-six point eight-six per cent chance that the completion of his Techmarine-training and cult instruction on Mars had recalled a random memory from the first day of such training

- a cerebral bookending of events. There was a thirty-three point nine-one-three per cent chance that his impending initiation and his covenant-instatement as a legionary Techmarine had stirred feelings of long-standing guilt within the Space Marine. There were doubts and counter-logical thoughts over key cautionary principles of the Martian priesthood, and cautionary case studies that the Carrion had found not entirely dissuasive. The Space Marine shivered to think that he might share any sympathies with heretekes such as Octal Bool.

Conversely, there was a sixty-six point three-six per cent chance that the dream had been provoked by stimuli beyond the

Carrion's immediate experience. The cogitator suggested several possibilities, since the past weeks had been afflicted with the unsettling and the strange. Buried anxieties over the recent disappearance of the Carrion's mentor, Gnaeus Archelon, and the cancellation of the initiation ceremonies that would have seen Techmarines like Aulus Scaramanca and himself leave Mars for their crusading Legions.

This in itself was unusual on the forge world, where such arrangements ran like intricate cogwork and disruption was virtually unknown. It could have been the unusual movements in skitarii, battle-automata and materiel across Mars that the Carrion had observed and monitored. Such activity had stirred his martial intuition, his inbred instincts for war. He had even gone so far as asking the opinion of other battle-brothers in the tower-preceptory. The Carrion saw troop movements and Titan formations in activity that was publically identified as the transference and export of cybernetic troops, weapons and war machines bound for the Ring of Iron -

and from there to armed arksfreighters intended for the Warmaster and the legionary prosecution of the Emperor's Great Crusade.

Beyond that there was the code - the corrupted code.

The network had been experiencing difficulty for days now. Code scrubbers and magi catharc had been working around the

clock to purge the datastream of any hint of imperfection. No construct or

logi knew its origin or cause. Updates and aegis protocols insisted that a potential outbreak had been contained and the polluted code purged but the Carrion knew better: it was still there.

Beyond the data flow of Novus Mons, the incorporated hardstreams of the forge temple and associated structures like the tower-preceptory, he could sense it. Its stench, its revulsion and threat, seemed to be on the thin Martian air itself, carried on the weaker wireless streams like a bitter aftertaste or bile bubbling up the back of the throat. The Carrion could process it, like binary with a mind of its own or an equation that refused to be resolved. He could feel it, like a twisted nerve referring its agony elsewhere. The very planet seemed in pain and the Carrion found himself shutting down all non-essential receivers and transmitters built into his augmetics. Still, it was out there. As it echoed through the forge world infrastructure - touching the personal systems of automata, cybernetic constructs and the Martian priesthood - it made the Techmarine-in-training feel compromised, infected and unclean.

'Baptise,' the Carrion uttered at the vox-recognition systems of the cell. His slab hummed into the wall. At the same time grilles opened in the cell ceiling and the floor beneath his metal feet. A shower of sacred oils of different consecrated gauges cascaded about the legionary. As he sanctified the holy workings of the Machine-God, both the wonders of engineered flesh and bionics, the Carrion mumbled spirit-honouring litanies of righteous function and invocations of perpetuity. A thunderous blast of gelid air drove the last droplets of oil from his skin and silvered workings, and the cell door opened with a train of preceptory servitors who silently entered with his pack, pieces of artificer plate, exoskeletal arrays, fibre bundles and actuators.

It was not a full suit. The Carrion did not need one, as he had long since fashioned ceramite-layered plating for the adamantium workings of his legs and his right arm. As they interfaced the legionary armour with spinal plugs, the servitors decked the legionary out in the loose, black-hooded robes of a Techmarine-in-training. His node-columns crackled where they were accommodated by modifications in his plate and robes.

Leaving the cell, the Carrion worked his way through a small sacrarium-complex of workshops, holotoria, librariax and technical hangars filled with vehicles and weapons in various states of disrepair and augmentation. Ordinarily their hangar would be a place of furious industry, plasma-torching and ritual observance. With the five legionaries stationed on the floor having completed their training and waiting for word of their ceremonial covenant, the space was quiet. Only the raised vestibule was occupied, with the landing lamps of the hangar balcony-platform flashing in expectation of a grav-skiff or hump-shuttle.

The legionaries were eager for word of their coming covenant and Legion transports to take them off-world and back to the Crusade and compliance.

'Anything?' the Carrion asked as he climbed the steps. Three of his Space Marine brothers were waiting in the vestibule. Like the Carrion, they had not yet earned the right to wear the machine opus of Mars on their plate. Some of them were tinkering. Some were monitoring equipment. All were marking time.

Alcavarn Salvador of the Imperial Fists and the hulking Salamander Nem'ron Phylax were craftsmen. While the black scarring

of spot burns in the ebony of Phylax's face was evidence of time spent before the fires of the forge, Salvador was never without his combat blade. In the quiet moments of the day he would go to work with a whetstone, honing the blade to a constantly maintained standard of lethality - just as he was in the vestibule. Phylax's great servo-arm whirred on its hydraulics and counterweights as he turned to greet the Carrion with a good-natured smile and perfect adamantium teeth.

Like many of his Raven Guard brothers, the Carrion was reserved and quiet by nature - some might say even secretive. This had created tensions between the sons of Corax and Space Marines of other Legions. It had made the Night Lords perfect compliance partners on Farinatus, since they cared little for shared pleasantries and had no intention of forming brotherly bonds with the XIX

Legion. Nem'ron Phylax had always tried hard with the Carrion, however, and forgave the cool urgency of the Raven Guard's words -

words that all too often came across as imperious and aloof. The Carrion wore his reticence like a noble savage and was not removed in the way of Fulgrim's sons, who carried themselves with airs and graces, or like the legionaries of the XX, who always seemed audacious and evasive. But this grated on his preceptory brothers, with many finding the Carrion easy to ignore.

Like a noble savage, the Carrion could be plainly insistent and unheeding of protocol and cult politesse. This had brought him into conflict not only with his brothers, but also the Martian priests, who themselves were not known for their good humour.

'Anything at all?' he pressed.

'Nothing from the priesthood,' the Salamander told him. 'Nothing from the arksfreighters or the Ring of Iron. I'm beginning to think they've forgotten about us.'

'Unlikely,' Salvador muttered almost to himself as he scratched away with his knife.

'Perhaps this is some kind of final trial,' the Ultramarine Tibor Ventidian offered, reassembling a stripped-down Phobos-pattern boltgun. For Ventidian

everything was some kind of test to be weighed, measured and impeccably passed. He studied the weapon with the searing blue lens of a replacement optic. With the sickle magazine on the work-slab beside him, the Ultramarine brought the boltgun up to his pauldron. He primed it and depressed the trigger but nothing happened. 'Feed jam? Firing mechanism?'

'Neither,' the Carrion told him with no little impatience. He had been tinkering with the weapon himself the day before, same as Ventidian, to pass the time. 'Did you look at the orbital imaging?'

'This again?' Ventidian asked.

'Yes,' the Carrion insisted coolly, 'this again. I want your opinion.'

Ventidian grunted. He knew the pale-faced Raven Guard wasn't going to let up. Still cradling the boltgun, he turned and punched a sequence of thick buttons on the runebank behind him. A sequence of hazy orbital scans sizzled across a battered screen.

'There's a lot of interference on the pict-sat,' Ventidian admitted. 'Beyond the temple, the datastreams are a mess...'

'I've got the same on the vox-net,' Nem'ron Phylax added.

'...but the aerial scans you directed me to do not show battle formations,' the Ultramarine said. He turned to the Carrion and added, 'In my opinion.'

That got Salvador's attention. He looked up from his blade and scraping whetstone. 'Formations? You think Mars is under some kind of attack?'

'None that I can see,' Ventidian admitted.

'Surely we would know if the Forge World Principal was endangered.'

The Carrion gave the legionary the blank silver of his eyes.

'Something's not right,' he told his battle-brothers. 'Code corruptions. Cult disruptions. Compromised networks. Archelon's disappearance - and he's not the only Artisan Astartes to go missing.'

'The magi catharc are working on the code issues,' Ventidian said. 'Our mentors no doubt have cult business to attend to. Have some faith, brother.'

'There's a hell of a lot of materiel being moved across the surface of Mars,' the Carrion said. 'An unprecedented amount of activity: constructs, augmented infantry, battle-automata...'

'Is this true?' Salvador asked.

'Yes,' Ventidian said. 'Even in the quadrangle, the Scopulan Phase-Fusilatrix have crossed the Mare Erytraeum. Strike fighter wings of the Tenth Denticle have mobilised over the Sisyphi Montes. The engines of the Legio Mortis are on the move—'

'The entire legio?' Salvador Alcavarn said.

'Manoeuvres,' Ventidian assured him. 'Between quadrants and forge temples.'

There are no fronts. No counter-invasion

formations. These aren't preparatory measures for some kind of xenos attack. Within the Solar System? That would be unthinkable.'

'Agreed. Then some threat from within,' the Carrion pressed them. His mind ran once more to hereteks like Octal Bool and the abominable intelligences they had developed.

'Some border or patent dispute between temple masters, perhaps,' the Ultramarine told him. 'Forgejackers or feral servitors.'

That's not what we are talking about here. Horus is taking the Crusade into a new phase. He needs the materiel and manpower languishing on Mars and is pushing Kelbor-Hal to send him all he can. The Fabricator General is trying to meet that expectation. And that is all. Your movements and manoeuvres here are simply the knock-on effect of that.'

Nem'ron Phylax nodded slowly. 'While monitoring the anchor station manifests and mooring logs for our Legion transports I

saw that Regulus, the Warmaster's Mechanicum emissary, arrived on Mars only days ago with missives for the Fabricator General.

Sounds about right.' He flashed the Carrion the kindness of a silver smile. 'I'm sorry, Dravian.'

The Carrion looked to Salvador but the Space Marine's face was an unreadable mask.

'What are you suggesting?' Salvador asked finally.

'If there is a problem,' the Carrion said, 'or some kind of threat, then I don't think that we should just sit here waiting. The Mechanicum might benefit from our assistance.'

'And if that is indeed the case, I'm sure the Fabricator General will be sure to ask,' Nem'ron Phylax assured the Raven Guard.

'But in truth I fear there are few threats in the galaxy that the might of Mars could not meet and defeat.'

'Our last set of instructions were to repair to the preceptory-tower and await our Artisan Astartes,' Salvador said.

'That was three days ago,' the Carrion reminded him. 'Three days after a cancelled covenant and three days after our Artisan Astartes went missing. No identica-logs. No isometrics. No cant-intercepts. That's not natural.'

'We are guests here,' Salvador told him. 'Nothing else concerns us. We follow our instructions until we receive new ones.'

'I know that we are all eager to receive our covenant,' Tibor Ventidian said, 'to receive the machina opus on our plate and return to our Legions. We all have long journeys ahead of us.' He looked to the Imperial Fist, Salvador, who raised

a blond eyebrow. 'Most of us have long journeys ahead of us, but let us not as a parting gesture offend our gracious Mechanicum lords or spend our final days on Mars in idle speculation.'

'Our final days on Mars?' a voice boomed from across the hangar. In pock-marked Mark III plate, the Iron Warrior Aulus

Scaramanca made his heavy way across the grille floor. The Techmarine-in-training's black robes were tied about his mag-belt like ceremonial skirts while thick mechadendrite appendages snaked over his head like reared tails.

Scaramanca's dun plate was a mosaic of chevrons and sodium arc stripes. The Iron Warrior wore a nest of cranial flesh-ports and cables like a crown, while his lips were contorted in one of his primarch's well-known sneers. 'You're more right than you know, son of Ultramar.'

'What are you talking about?' Ventidian asked as the Iron Warrior approached.

'If you want to know where the bolts will be flying and where the bodies will lie, you look to the skies brothers. You look for the signs.' As he climbed the steps of the raised vestibule he pointed at the Carrion. 'You look for the flocks that feast on flesh, for they have an eye for the coming of death and its makings.' The Iron Warrior threw a collection of data-slates at the legionaries, each Techmarine-in-training snatching one out of the air with their transhuman reflexes. 'Gnaeus Archelon... Valvadius Spurcia...

Algernon Krypke - all Artisan Astartes assigned to the tower-preceptory. All summoned to the Olympus Mons forge temple three days ago, no doubt with many others besides.'

'So what?' Ventidian said, consulting the data-slate. 'They are probably in audience with the Fabricator General or in some kind of locked session.'

'It would certainly explain their absence from the networks,' Aulus Scaramanca said with a crooked smile.

Unlike some of his Olympian-born kindred the Carrion did not find Scaramanca truculent, nor solemn to the point of bitterness.

Of the Techmarines-in-training on the thirtieth floor, Aulus Scaramanca was the Artisan Astartes' finest work. The Carrion had developed undoubted skill during his secondment to Mars and Tibor Ventidian had achieved some of the highest and most consistent astrotechnical appraisals in the history of his Legion. As a weaponsmith, Phylax was unrivalled, and the Imperial Fist Salvador possessed an almost innate ability to feel the pain suffered by the damaged and failing machine - aided by auto-systems and the spirits of such machines, this enabled him to affect the swiftest repairs and the most superior of solutions, even under simulated battlefield situations.

Scaramanca, however, was master of all the disciplines he had studied.

He was a cult master of liturgical lore and runecraft. A master of cybernetic enhancement, having even worked to improve the Carrion's own augmentations. He was a master architect with gifts for design and engineering. A craftsman of destructive weaponry, enjoying success with ancient plasma and conversion technologies that even the artisans of the Mechanicum had deemed could not be improved upon. He was a master of the arcane sciences and a living rite of blessed activation, maintaining, repairing and returning to machine-life even the most battle-damaged of the Ommissiah's honoured constructions.

Although a runebank cogitator or fortress generatorium offered Aulus Scaramanca no problems, his real talents lay with the machines of war, from the razored edge of the simplest blade to the ancient behemoths of void and fleet - and every conceivable weapon, vehicle and instrument of battle in between. He was a master of the forge in the making, sure to come to the primarch Perturabo's attention even amidst the ranks of so many warsmiths and technically-blessed sons. Similar to his combat training and the tactical demands of legionary leadership, such gifts came naturally to Aulus Scaramanca, much like his smile that proceeded from the swagger in his heavy step and the playful scorn he reserved for others.

'What it does not explain,' the Iron Warrior continued, 'is how the scanned serial designations of bionic augmentations registered to Archelon, Spurcia and Krypke found their way to the Phaethontis smelting plants, off-world salvage consignments and depots-recyclatrix across the Terra Cimmeria... Bionics from Algernon Krypke are now part of at least seven other constructs...'

The legionary stared at the data-slate in dumbfounded silence.

'How did you get this information?' Tibor Ventidian asked.

'Not from the data-net,' Scaramanca said. 'I can tell you that.'

'You disobeyed, the Artisan Astartes' orders?' Phylax put to him. 'You left the tower-preceptory without codes and authorisations?'

'The artisans and mentors who gave those orders are dead,' the Carrion told the Salamander.

The Raven Guard looked to Scaramanca, who shook his head slowly. 'Archelon?'

'It wasn't easy,' the Iron Warrior admitted, 'but I found him. Gene-coding confirms that what was left of him was rendered and flesh-reassigned for *servitudo imperpetuis!* 'He's... been turned into a servitor?'

'Working the Memnonia deep core mining fields.'

'Buried,' the Carrion said. He nodded at Scaramanca. 'They never meant him

to be found.'

'They?' Salvador said, getting to his feet. 'Who's they?'

'Rival priests. Hostile factions. There's always been a great deal of competition in the Mechanicum ranks. Some conservative groups regard the Artisan Astartes and frater astrotechnicus as hereteks, who pervert the Ommissiah's intentions and violate the sanctity of the machine-spirit in order to wage war.'

'This is not a cult thing,' Scaramanca told them. Interfacing with the runebank using one of his mechadendrite appendages, the Iron Warrior patched through to allow the jabbercant of the main datastream through to the vox-casters. The hangar rang with the screeching insanity of dark code. 'It's bigger than that,' Scaramanca insisted over the cacophony. He held up an armoured gauntlet. 'All Mars is involved in this in one way or another - and so are we.'

'When were these orbital scans taken?' the Carrion asked, examining one of the data-slates.

Reaching forward with the silvered workings of his bionic arm, he formed a fist. Four haptic spikes shot out of his knuckle-ports with a pneumatic thud. Like keys, each sported a distinctively crafted needle-interfacia housed within the spike, which could double as a weapon. As three of the spikes slowly retracted, the Carrion inserted the fourth into a runebank socket. A hololithic representation crackled to life about them. It was an aerial capture of Novus Mons and the surrounding quadrangle.

'An hour ago,' Scaramanca told him.

The Carrion cast a black gauntlet through the sizzling hololith. He looked to Tibor Ventidian. 'Manoeuvres, you say?'

The Ultramarine stood, peering at the hazy representation with his searing blue optic. He looked from the representation to the Carrion and back to the orbital capture.

'Martian Autokrator assault carriers inbound,' Ventidian said grimly. 'Skitarii tech-guard. The Scopulan Phase-Fusilatrix.'

'Target?' Salvador asked, but the Imperial Fist knew the answer.

'The tower-preceptory,' the Ultramarine told him, snatching up the bolt-gun and sickle magazine from the runebank.

'How many?' Nem'ron Phylax asked.

'All of them,' Ventidian answered.

'Like the Artisan Astartes,' Aulus Scaramanca said, 'we are to be taken apart.'

The Carrion's silver-glazed eyes fixed on the Iron Warriors face. Scaramanca had been away from his Legion and the brutality of compliance for so long that the simple prospect of battle had put a mad smile on the Olympian's crooked

lips.

Phylax, Salvador, Ventidian and the Carrion could not find in themselves the same glee. The impossible was happening -

betrayal, murder, war on Mars - and the Space Marines were caught in the middle of the chaos and confusion.

Scaramanca looked to the Carrion. 'So what now?'

FORMULATE

THE CARRION TURNED to Phylax. 'Alert our brothers on the lower floors.'

'They are unlikely to believe us,' the Salamander told him and reached for a nearby vox-caster.

'I wouldn't,' Salvador admitted.

'They'll believe it when airborne assault carriers start dropping out of the sky,' Scaramanca said.

'Forewarned is forearmed,' the Carrion said, retracting his spike-interface from the socket.

'Which raises another problem,' the Iron Warrior said. He slipped the oily straps of a pair of Umbra-pattern boltguns off his pauldron. 'The good news - from maintenance,' he told the legionaries as he threw one weapon to Alcavarn Salvador and the other to Nem'ron Phylax. As a sign of respect, every Space Marine was expected to surrender his legionary boltgun upon arrival at Mars. The only weapons available in the tower-preceptory were those in the workshops.

'Ammunition?' Salvador asked.

'The bad news,' the Iron Warrior admitted. 'From the test-range. A halfmag each.'

The Carrion found himself looking in wonder at Aulus Scaramanca. He had no doubt that under his primarch's command once

more the Iron Warrior would be destined for greatness. Beyond his technical skill, all the hallmarks of exemplary leadership were there: clarity of thought and composure; an appetite - perhaps even an enthusiasm - for battle. Modesty in issuing the only legionary weapons available to fellow battle-brothers while looking to others for insight and guidance.

Scaramanca felt the Raven Guard's infra-augmented gaze on him. 'Well, Carrion,' the Iron Warrior asked, 'where will we find the bodies?'

The Carrion turned to take in the technical hangar. An assortment of vehicles, weaponry and bulk equipment in various states of assembly and disrepair was scattered across the floor space; bulkheads led off to the workshops and cell-block, and the balcony-platform projected out from the

hangar, flashing with landing lamps. The Carrion gestured across the hangar.

'The skitarii have calculated that they can't work up from the ground and take the tower floor by floor,' the Raven Guard decided.

'It would give us too much time to get entrenched,' Salvador said.

'Indeed,' the Carrion agreed. 'As Tibor says, the Phase-Fusilatrix will hit all floors simultaneously from the air. They'll rely on numbers—'

'And the fact that they have weapons and we do not,' Nem'ron Phylax added, pulling the vox-caster from his ebony cheek.

'We *are* weapons,' Aulus Scaramanca growled.

'We'll use the hangar equipment for cover,' the Carrion said, 'and take as many of them as we can as they attempt entrance.

Unfortunately the tower-preceptory was not designed with a siege in mind...'

'That works in both our favours,' Scaramanca agreed.

'...but we can fall back to the workshops if required, and if time allows, move for the roof or work our way down through the levels to rendezvous with our brothers below.'

'Time won't allow for that,' Tibor Ventidian said suddenly. The Ultramarine was still studying the static-laced hololithic display.

He pointed at a ghostly dark shape on the Hellesponticae, making for Novus Mons.

'What is it?' the Carrion asked.

'A Titan war machine,' Ventidian said bleakly. 'Warlord-class, I think.'

'Terra...' Alcavarn Salvador murmured.

'What is their Legio designation?' the Carrion asked.

'The Legio Mortis,' Ventidian confirmed, flash-reading the scrolling columns of runes.

'What does that matter?' Phylax put to the Raven Guard.

'The Legio Mortis are pledged to Kelbor-Hal,' the Carrion told the legionaries. He allowed a moment to let the scale of their doom sink in.

'We have to alert Terra,' Salvador said, turning to the runebank. 'I must warn my Lord Dorn.'

At that moment the lamps and hololithic haze died about the Techmarines-in-training. A great clunk echoed about the technical hangar as equipment simultaneously fell silent, plunging the hall into twilight. Only the pale red light of the long Martian sunrise reached inside from the hangar entrance.

'They cut the power,' Phylax said, dropping the vox-caster.

'Probably to the entire quadrant,' the Carrion said. Outside, the legionaries could hear the growing shriek of aircraft engines as a swarm of silhouettes bled out of the haze of the Martian dust storm. The assault carriers of Martian

Autokrator ground forces.

'I can't actually believe this is happening,' Ventidian said. 'Mars and Terra at war?'

'We don't know that,' Phylax said. 'Mars could be at war with itself.'

'The dark code,' the Carrion told them. He thought on the insanity beyond the data-net and his dream of the heretek Octal Bool.

'The corruption is spreading. The streams could pollute all the Red Planet's systems. The canker bleeds from every port and interface.

This is a doom of Martian making, I am sure of it.'

Aulus Scaramanca's smile curled to a snarl.

'It doesn't matter. Let's get this done,' the Iron Warrior said.

The Carrion didn't have anything better for the gathered legionaries, who stared in disbelief as their Mechanicum overlords turned against them.

'Positions,' he instructed.

As the legionaries took cover behind the shells of stripped-out tanks and bulk equipment, black shapes like birds of prey

resolved themselves from the pale Martian sunrise. Loudhailing augmitters were projecting a cacophony from above: a squealing codefeed that filled the chamber. The Carrion had taken a forward position with Tibor Ventidian, selecting the long shaft of a cog-wrench from an assortment of tools sitting in an open storage crate.

The cog-wrench was a multitool. It had the weight of a hammer, while its denticle-serrated cog-blade crackled with its own

cutting field. Squeezing a clutch-handle set in the crank prompted the cog-blade to part, juddering up and down the shaft railing, turning the tool into heavy-duty wrench and a brutal weapon.

Ventidian, who was slapping a sickle magazine into the breech of his Phobos-pattern boltgun, suddenly doubled over. The

Carrion heard an unseemly shriek escape the Ultramarine's lips. Casting a glance over the top of the plasma-core generator he was hiding behind, the Raven Guard got to his feet. The bionics of his replacement legs carried him swiftly across the open space of the hangar, skidding down on his armoured knees beside Ventidian. The legionary, who was sheltering behind a stripped-down gravcraft power plant, was in obvious agony, and had dropped his weapon on the floor.

Approaching the problem as he might with any malfunctioning machine, the Techmarine-in-training saw that the incapacitated

Ultramarine was clutching his ear. Prising a clenched gauntlet away from his head, the Carrion saw that the cognis-signum built into the side of the

Ultramarine's reconstructed cranium was sparking and his optic was flickering with agony. Fearing that the

communications array was amplifying the transmission of dark code, the Raven Guard settled on a swift solution.

Clenching his hydraulic fist, the Carrion fired his interface spikes.

Withdrawing three of the pins and the fourth to half-

extension, he punched Ventidian in the side of the head. Firing the socket-lock at the end of the spike, the Carrion tore his bionic fist back, dragging the sparking array with it. He flicked the code-squealing device at the floor and turned to inspect his handiwork. The hollow in the Ultramarine's cranium oozed blood and oil but after a moment Ventidian's blue optic sizzled back to life and the legionary brought up a gauntlet to indicate that he was alright.

As the Ultramarine scooped up his boltgun from the deck, the las-storm began. The Carrion heard the whir of multilaser barrels as hull-mounted weapons lit up the gloom of the hangar with a staccato of light. Searing beams cut through lesser equipment and plating in a relentless hail of streaking energies. The blinding sting of las-fire chewed up the grille flooring and punched patterns of tiny holes through plasteel and diagnostic equipment. Bleak Martian daylight threw thin shafts through the smoking holes,

crisscrossing the hangar.

The legionaries had expected such an attack. Their training and experience on the battlefields had prompted them to take cover behind materials and equipment that could withstand such an onslaught. The Carrion saw Nem'ron Phylax kneeling behind a partially dismantled Executioner tank, while Aulus Scaramanca was busy amongst the cables and power cells of a half-built cannon emplacement. As the gunner's cab turned to scrap under the slashing beams of an assault carrier's multilaser, the Iron Warrior completed his rites of activation and hasty socketwork. The beamstorm turned into a spheric wall of refracted light as Scaramanca charged and jury-rigged the emplacement's field defences.

The ancient Valkyrie aircraft drifted and screeched before the hangar opening, the loud-hailed binaric falling out of them like madness. The Carrion could hear the cacophony of code, vectorjets and multilasers playing out on the floor below and the one below that. He could imagine the tower-preceptory swarming with assault carriers, the twinkle of guns slashing the hangars, balcony-platforms and shuttered viewports with their las-weaponry. Filtering through the noise and havoc of the assault, the Carrion swore that he could hear the distant thunder of bolt-fire. He hoped that his battle-brothers on the lower decks had received their warning and had been able to make preparations for the

coming slaughter.

The lightshow was suddenly over. Bleached sunlight filtered through the beam-shot hangar, cutting through the smoke and small explosions of ruptured cells and equipment. The Carrion had expected as much. The Mechanicum forces were clearly not themselves -

slaves to the code corruption that flooded their systems - but the skitarii could be relied upon to act in accordance with their ancient and inflexible martial protocols. He heard the vox-hailed jabber-cant grow in volume as the assault carrier swept in. After the multilaser mauling of the tower, the aircraft were drifting in to deliver their deadly cargo of constructs: the Scopulan Phase-Fusilatrix.

Risking a quick glance above the power plant behind which he had positioned himself with Tibor Ventidian, the Carrion saw the fuselage and underhung wings of three assault carriers drift in. Their canopies glowed with a sickly luminescence while the same balelight poured forth from the troop sections as door-ramps juddered open under the fuselage. The Carrion could see the silhouettes of skitarii warriors filing forward through the radiance and caterwauling code.

Slipping back down the side of the engine column, the Carrion signalled Nem'ron Phylax. He pointed at the Executioner hull that the Salamander was using for cover before jabbing towards the nearest assault carrier, whose landing gears were grazing the balcony-platform. Phylax gave a slow nod, priming his boltgun. The Carrion readied himself, similarly drawing Alcavam Salvador's attention to the mighty Salamander and slapping Ventidian's pauldron.

He didn't have to wait long. Moments later he heard the excruciating grind of tank tracks eating up the grille floor of the hangar.

Using his great servo-arm to lift the rear of the tank, Phylax had his pack against the Executioner's hull, heaving it step by magnetised step towards the enemy. The skitarii exiting the assault carrier in feverish lines were things of crimson cloaks and clinkered bronze. They were draped in ceremonial mail, while their faces had been replaced by skull-fused triocular targeting systems.

Their phased plasma-fusils spat balls of energised hydrogen at the Executioner's hull, striking the tank's plating like sickly suns in miniature. The armour facing of the Phase-Fusilatrix began to glow, melt and dribble into ruin.

As Nem'ron Phylax heaved the vehicle at them, using its thick plate like a gargantuan shield, the Carrion signalled Ventidian and Salvador to offer cover fire with their boltguns. Pushing the Executioner forwards on its thick tracks, Phylax forced the disembarking skitarii to fan left and right to outflank him. Alcavam Salvador was moving forwards himself, expertly making use of cover

offered by the bulk equipment and practice pieces littering the technical hangar. As an Imperial Fist he was as one with the siege, where it was essential to drive the enemy from your ground without giving away any. Crouching, sidling and moving swiftly between cover, the legionary blasted single rounds at the Autokrator ground troops who were flooding the platform. From corners, over busy cover and on the move, the Imperial Fist's aim was impeccable, each bolt smashing through the armoured chests of warrior-constructs and putting the sickly fusions of man and machine down on the deck.

As Salvador's expert marksmanship put down the right flank, the skitarii on the left had fanned out and were hammering the side of the Executioner tank with volleys of blinding orbs. The Carrion could hear the repetitive clunk of a firing mechanism as Tibor Ventidian failed to appease the weapon's spirit. He could hear the Ultramarine's mumbled frustrations as rites, litanies and pleading prayers to the Omnissiah did nothing to get the boltgun operational.

'Carrion...' Ventidian said. 'Carrion, I...'

The Carrion looked from Ventidian, willing the weapon to work, to Nem'ron Phylax, who was heaving the ruined tank with the great strength of his servo-arm and one of his gauntlets while holding his boltgun in the other, desperately slamming bolt-rounds through code-dribbling skitarii who had made their way around the vehicle.

The Carrion broke cover and accelerated into a piston-charged run. Unlike Salvador he did not possess a siegemaster's innate understanding of cover and firing arcs. What he had was the power and acceleration of his bionic limbs and a Raven Guard's instinct for impending death and destruction - both received and delivered.

Surging across the hangar, the Carrion immediately attracted the tri-optic targeters of the flanking Phase-Fusilatrix. Turning their weapons around on the streaking shadow in midnight plate, their distracted attention allowed Nem'ron Phylax a moment's respite.

Searing balls of unnatural plasma slammed into the deck in the Carrion's wake. Stamping dents into the grille with his increasing speed, the Carrion leapt out of the path of a plasma volley, scaling bulk equipment and the stripped-out chassis of myriad vehicles before bounding across the open space between them - the air behind him roasted by rocketing shots.

Landing on the sloping wing of an engineless light cargo hauler, the Carrion hooked into the battered plating with his

replacement hand, his hydraulic digits acting like a grapnel. He stopped there for a moment, allowing the shuttle to soak up the barrage of plasma the code-squealing skitarii were pumping at him. He was close now and could hear the

*grunt* of the Salamander's exertions, the *thud* of blasted warrior-constructs hitting the deck, and the *clunk* of the boltgun's half-magazine running dry.

Releasing his hold on the patchwork plating of the wing, the Carrion allowed himself to slide off and roll to one side. He

tumbled across his pauldrons and the conduction-finia of his node-columns - appearing briefly between an ambulatory freight-hoist and a pair of giga-barrels that had contained consecrated oils. The phased plasma-fusils of the skitarii scorched through the hangar decking and blasted the barrels clear, but the Carrion was already gone.

Bounding up the framework of the derrick, the Carrion launched himself into the air. The Raven Guard's black robes flapped and trailed about him as he surged across the open space at the disembarking skitarii, the shaft of his cog-wrench held high.

With a servo-shredding effort that drew a roar from Nem'ron Phylax, the glowing wreck of the Executioner accelerated across the platform. From above, the Carrion could see Salvador's economical bolt-fire crash through skitarii chests and combat-chassis on the far side of the tank. Below him warrior-constructs erupted in a fountain of oil, gore and workings; Ventidian had finally coaxed his boltgun into operation. With steely yanks on the trigger, the Ultramarine shredded the skitarii front line beneath the Carrion's plasteel-crafted feet.

When the Carrion did land, it was with brute assurance. Delivering the killing blow to a bolt-mangled member of the Phase-

Fusilatrix, he crushed the warrior-construct into the deck. The skitarii's tri-optics were whirring and rotating with discombobulation as a combination of the tank, Ventidian's belated bolt-fire and the Carrion simultaneously came at them. Their boots had barely touched down on the platform of the tower-preceptory before they had transformed from those carrying out the assault to those suffering in it.

Before they had time to fully process what was happening, the Carrion was among them. His replacement fist was an

adamantium hammer smashing through optics, brain-integrates and bone. The fired interface spikes were a metal talon that he used to cross-slash skitarii and skull-stab the warrior-constructs to the deck. His crackling cog-wrench was a wheeling, serrated cosh that he turned in one gauntlet, smashing Mechanicum soldiers aside and off the edge of the platform.

The Carrion heard the Executioner crash into the assault carrier, and the aircraft scraped back on its landing gears. With the Phase-Fusilatrix scattered, and Salvador and Ventidian's merciless bolt-fire pirouetting warrior-constructs

and cutting skirmish lines in half, the Carrion pumped the hydraulic jaws of the cog-wrench open. Using the power of both arms - one flesh and the other bionic

- the Space Marine cut through the trunks and combat chassis of the unfortunate soldiers. With chunks of flesh and shattered workings raining about him, the Carrion took the head clean off a code-gabbling officer-tribune before mag-locking the cog-wrench to his belt and joining Nem'ron Phylax behind the derelict tank.

Stomping into the deck and firing the magna-hydraulics of his replacement legs, the Carrion heaved at the smashed Executioner and the skidding landing gears of the assault carrier beyond. The cockpit and troop bay glowed with the same wretched radiance as before. There was no panic as the shell of the smouldering tank drove the rear gears of the Valkyrie off the platform. There were no screams. Just the same rabid cant and rancid code that poured forth from the aircraft loudhailers.

With the last of the Autokrator ground troops dropping about them and Salvador and Ventidian moving in, Phylax and the

Carrion heaved for all their legs and shoulders were worth. Releasing his great servo-arm, Phylax barged with the Raven Guard, and with a final scrape the carrier and the tank plummeted off the platform edge. Looking down, the Carrion and the Salamander watched the pair of vehicles fall. The assault carrier didn't even attempt any kind of rescue, nor did the crew abandon their aircraft. The spinning Valkyrie smashed through several others hovering off the edges of low hangar platforms, creating a plunging knock-on of wrecked fuselage and tumbling skitarii down the side of the tower. The building was swarming with aircraft, however, with two more drifting down toward the balcony-platform. One turned around to present its screeching door gunner and the gaping barrel of a heavy bolter, while the other put down heavily as the door-ramp of its troop bay opened.

Suddenly the assault carrier drifting before Phylax and the Carrion seemed to blur in a scything storm of dark energy. The

aircraft and all the skitarii inside were riddled through with tenebrous needle-beams that carved up the craft from within before causing it to erupt in a fireball of exotic, black flame. Tracing the devastation back to its origin, the Carrion found that while they had been repelling the first wave of Phase-Fusilatrix, Aulus Scaramanca had performed a field repair on the gun-emplacement in which he had taken refuge. Cycling the emplacement's refractor field with the firing emissions, the Iron Warrior had brought the photon-thrusters back to timely life, shredding the first Valkyrie before slashing through the mob of

screeching skitarii hammering down the ramp of the second.

As the sound of bolt-fire across the platform died, Phylax and the Carrion turned to retreat with cover provided by the technical hangar. Both Salvador and Ventidian were out of precious ammo but there was no shortage of red assault carriers sweeping in.

Undeterred by the resistance of several decks and encouraged by the slaughter on others, the skitarii extermination force would not be denied. Even the needle-beams of pure darkness seething out of the hangar interior from Scaramanca's photon-thruster could not put the code-crazed soldiers off.

Hovering above the balcony platform and out of reach of the cannon's limited fire arcs, crowding assault carriers opened their troop bay doors. Corruption-canting tribunes commanded their Autokrator troops off the juddering ramps, causing skitarii to rain down on the platform, breaking bones that could no longer be felt or landing on the suspensors of bionic legs. They started firing as they landed, pummelling the hangar with blasts of plasma.

Scaramanca chewed up the hordes of dropping skitarii with whipping streams of photon-fire, but there were too many. Ventidian and Salvador looked on helpless and bereft of ammunition as Phylax and the Carrion made a run back for the cover of the hangar. The Carrion's hydraulics made light work of the deck, his feet crunching and squelching through what was left of the warrior-constructs.

The hulking Salamander was not built for speed and agility - especially with the great bulk of his harness-pack and servo-arm.

As the Carrion surged on, putting generatoria and hydraulic-wagons of sheet armaplas between him and the storm of phased

plasma that was hot on his heels, Nem'ron Phylax slowed with a roar of frustration and came crashing down onto the scratched green of his armoured knees. A salvo of plasma had slammed into his back, raging its way through the workings of his pack. The chittering skitarii delivered the miniature suns of armour-boiling death into the legionary, limping up behind the Salamander to deliver volley after killing volley.

The Carrion could only watch as the contorted agony of Nem'ron Phyla's ebony face framed the clenched silver of his teeth. The Salamander's chest became a bubbling pit of melting plate and blinding light as plasma cored its furious way through his body.

'No!' the Carrion roared. Ventidian attempted to grab Nem'ron's arm and pull him to safety, but it was too late - he was gone. As a hail of superheated death came at him, the Raven Guard weaved this way and that, allowing the hangar equipment and vehicles in various states of repair to take the punishment. As

hordes of skitarii dropped down onto the platform and marched on the hangar the twilight became a blinding blizzard of plasma, turning metal and decking to glowing slag.

Pinned down behind a cargo power lifter and with the loader turning to molten scrap, the Carrion slammed the digits of his

hydraulic hand down on the lifter's rear-mounted power plant. Placing the conduction plate of his palm in contact with the bulk diaquartzoid cells, the Carrion siphoned the stored energies from the machine. Channelling the stolen power through the metallic strips that wound their way sub-dermally through his pale flesh, the Techmarine-in-training felt his body warm. The silver of his eyes blazed while his torso felt like it burned with the power of a barely contained nova.

Draining the power plant and stepping back, the Carrion thrust his palm at the power lifter and unleashed a phased discharge of electromagnetic energy. The arcing torrent of energy blasted the monstrous bulk of the loader, caving its side in and sending the machine rolling across the hangar deck. It mangled the grilled floor and the throng of skitarii behind it. The disintegrating power lifter crashed, tumbled and skid through the Mechanicum soldiers in its path and took their smashed bodies with it off the balcony-platform edge.

Stalking forward with cold fury, the Carrion unleashed the storm inside him. Angling the outstretched digits of his hand and the anbaric fount at nearby Phase-Fusilatrix that had escaped the carnage, the Carrion blasted streams of lightning through the warrior-constructs. The skitarii stopped the code-gibbering and fell to their knees as their smouldering flesh cooked and their workings fried.

The Carrion's ears registered the calls of Ventidian and Salvador and even the dying beam-storm of Scaramanca's photon-

thruster as it took one last scything pass across the deck before its power cells died. For his battle-brothers the sickening reality of the situation was unfolding with such force and disbelief that it was difficult to process.

The doubts and confusion that had been eating away at the Carrion - fed by dark dreams, an overworked cogitator and his

genetic instinct for the covert and the clandestine - found sudden expression. However impossible it was for him to believe, there was an enemy to be found on Mars; an enemy that wanted to destroy the Legiones Astartes' presence on the Red Planet and nullify the threat they posed in being the living, breathing authority of the Emperor. As skitarii warriors raised the baroque barrels of their fusils at the Carrion he scorched them with the channelled energies ebbing from his systems.

Warrior-constructs were raining from the sky, hitting the platform at a crouch and bringing their phased plasma-fusils up to fire upon the legionaries. The Carrion surged into the throng ahead of him. Snatching his cog-wrench from where it was mag-locked to his belt, he batted weapon barrels aside, sending small suns seething into the deck. He smashed tri-optic targeting systems from skulls in showers of parts and brained the insanity-spewing skitarii with bludgeoning swings of his denticle-serrated weapon.

As plasma blasts grazed his midnight plate and seared past him, the Carrion slammed his palm against the clinker-armoured

chests of the augmented soldiers. Within moments he drained their combat-chassis housed power cores before using the very same energies to blast the warrior-constructs back through their code-babbling ranks.

Before long the Carrion was standing in a mound of metal and scorched flesh. The Phase-Fusilatrix continued to drop from the sky while Autokrator pilots processed what the legionaries already knew. Scaramanca's devastating photon cannon was out of power.

Assault carriers that swarmed the pale red Martian heavens once more swooped in to deliver their corrupted cargos. Rust-red aircraft that already had disgorged their cargo screeched off the surface of the platform, charging their weaponry.

The Carrion was suddenly pushed sideways by an unstoppable force. It was Tibor Ventidian. The Ultramarine had charged into

him with all the brute insistence his powered armour could bring to bear. Slamming the Raven Guard into the crumpled side of an itinerant tool carriage, Ventidian held him there while Alcavarn Salvador knocked a plasma fusil aside with his gauntlet and smashed the skitarii who was holding it down with his armoured fist. The razor-sharp blade of his prized combat blade thudded into another warrior-construct and he drove the tri-optic fused skull of another into the tool carriage several times before tossing the augmented soldier's body away.

The Carrion turned his silver-glazed eyes on Ventidian's patrician face. The Ultramarine was speaking to him but the words would not register. Willing his cogitator to cut through the fug of emotion and supra-stimulants released into his blood as a result of the battle, the Carrion finally heard Ventidian.

'Are you listening to me?' the Ultramarine shouted. 'We have to fall back and regroup with our brothers on the lower floors.'

The Carrion looked to Salvador, who was recovering his blade. He gave a grim nod, which the Raven Guard managed to copy.

Ventidian pulled at his pauldron, turning the Carrion towards the smoke-wreathed twilight at the rear of the hangar. Swinging for another Autokrator

soldier as it sidled around the tool carriage with its baroque weapon, Salvador sent the fired plasma blast rocketing for the ceiling. Hooking the digits of his gauntlet into the carriage, the Imperial Fist heaved at the itinerant machine, toppling it over on top of the downed skitarii.

As the three legionaries dodged between the bulk equipment and trussed vehicles with droves of static-screeching skitarii behind them, the swirling haze of the hangar was lit up by balls of spitting plasma and the stuttering beams of multilaser cutting through obstacles and obstructions. The Techmarines-in-training did their best to keep as much of the heavy-duty equipment and practice pieces between them and the energy storm working its way up behind them.

Then the Carrion heard it. The dour clunk of the freight elevator. As the Space Marines' heavy run took them to the rear of the hangar there was an equally dreary *ding* as the thick elevator doors juddered open.

'Down!' the Carrion roared, skidding down onto the adamantium sheen of his armoured legs and hydraulics. Skitarii of the

Phase-Fusilatrix were there, but how the Raven Guard did not know. Perhaps they had worked their way up from swiftly subjugated lower levels. Perhaps they had infiltrated the tower from the other side at the same time as attempting to take the hangars and platforms.

A wall of plasma came at the legionaries, washing over the Carrion's head. Balls of superheated hydrogen slammed into

Ventidian and Salvador. The Ultramarine was killed outright, a searing blast of plasma taking his head horribly from his armoured shoulders. Raging discharges blasted several holes clean through Alcavarn Salvador's robes and yellow plate, the momentum causing the legionary to stumble and crash down onto the deck. He bounced off his armoured chest before sliding alongside the prone Carrion, his lifeless face frozen in a moment of sudden shock. The Imperial Fist's master-crafted blade clattered across the deck and skidded under a nearby vehicle.

The skitarii marched with heavy augmented steps out of the freight elevator, squealing codespeak passing between the corrupted constructs. Their targeting systems whirred and revolved like the multi-lens of a microscope, fixing on the Raven Guard.

An officer-construct looked down on the Carrion with something like machine scorn before slipping a bulky volkite pistol from a holster strapped across the clinkerplate of his chest. As he turned it to his prone target the Carrion's lip curled. Sinking the digits of his gauntlet and hydraulic hand into Alcavarn Salvador's suit pack, the Carrion hauled the dead Imperial Fist in front of him like a shield.

As the skitarii officer charged a deflagrating blast into the unfortunate Salvador, the Carrion drained the power cells of the Imperial Fist's pack and suit's automotive systems of energy. Resting the armoured bionics of his arm on the Imperial Fist's pauldron, the Carrion unleashed a short stream of anbaric energy at the officer-construct and blasted his smouldering form back through his skitarii and into the elevator. Getting to his knees, the Carrion blasted a second, third and fourth stream as his attackers tried to turn their plasma fusils back on him.

As the Carrion got back onto his feet he slammed yet more arcs of seething energy into the departing skitarii. The scavenged power coursing through his systems began to dissipate and as it did the Raven Guard was forced to kick out at the last of the interloping warrior-constructs with one of his bionic legs. Firing the powerful pistons, the Carrion kicked the skitarii back into the hangar wall, shattering its chassis.

With skitarii working their way through the maze of repair bays and equipment, the Carrion picked his way through the corpses of the dead constructs. Their fusils were built into appendage mountings; it would be impossible for him to appropriate one in the time he had. The Carrion watched as the beams of shoulder-mounted torches and the targeting beams of skitarii cut through the smoke and darkness of the hangar rear.

The first skitarii rounded a partially disassembled reactor core and immediately raised its fusil. With something approaching surprise, the construct was suddenly seized by something, and wrenched back into the darkness and obscurity. The angle and

movement of the skitarii shoulder lamps and tri-optic targeter beams were frantic. There was something with them in the smouldering murk of the multilaser-riddled hangar.

The jabber-cant of corrupt code became sharp and excitable. Fusils spat balls of plasma in alarm and confusion as skitarii were seized and flung through the obscurity - into each other, the unforgiving sides of equipment and hangar floor and walls. Code-screeching was punctuated by the sound of powered fists smashing warrior-constructs to bloody metal scrap. Shattered workings rained from the darkness, while a fleeing member of the Phase-Fusilatrix backed out of the acrid haze. So preoccupied was it with the brutal destruction of its compatriot units, that it was barely aware of the Carrion's presence.

The Raven Guard fired the haptic spikes in his hydraulic fist but no such precautions were necessary. As the skitarii backed away, scanning the smoke with its targeter tri-beams and angling its baroque fusil, the stripped-down chassis of a Land Speeder erupted from the darkness.

The vehicle didn't need its ramjets to fly through the air. It had been tossed from the murk with pure mechanical force. The Carrion saw the skitarii lower its weapon, as if accepting the inescapability of its fate. The chassis crashed through the warrior-construct, turning it into mulched flesh and brass before rolling and smashing into the hangar wall.

From the darkness marched the Iron Warrior Aulus Scaramanca - a vision of battered plate, blood-splattered stripes and plasma-scorched chevrons. He was a mess. While the Carrion had been battling warrior-constructs with Ventidian, Salvador and Phylax on one side of the hangar, the Iron Warrior had been single-handedly keeping the Mechanicum forces at bay on the other. He limped towards the Carrion with a grim glower, his powerful mechadendrite limbs snaking and sparking about him. He looked down at the corpses of Ventidian and Salvador before grunting.

As he got nearer, the Carrion could see that the flesh on one half of Scaramanca's face had been blistered away by the near-miss of a raging blast of superheated hydrogen. Tendons, teeth and charred muscle were all on show but it didn't seem to bother the Iron Warrior. Looking down, he found an Autokrator soldier that the Carrion had blasted into the hangar wall reaching out to an

abandoned volkite pistol. The Iron Warrior stepped on the warrior-construct's hand with his heavy armoured boot and managed to find enough moisture in his mouth to hock and spit down on the thing. The Carrion nodded. It was hard to articulate the horror of what was happening to them.

'We've got to get out of here.'

'Face it,' Scaramanca said, giving the Raven Guard the full glory of his half-melted visage. His black lips cracked to form a sardonic smile. 'We're not getting off Mars alive.'

The Carrion hadn't even thought that far ahead. Through the hangar wall and the superstructure of the tower-preceptory, he could feel rhythmic tremors. His cogitator shaft told him that there was an eight point two-three-seven per cent chance that the vibrations originated from tectonic activity. Everything else in his systems, his experience and his bones told the legionary that a Titan god-machine was approaching, the one that Ventidian had identified as closing in the orbital images.

'I'm serious,' the Carrion said.

'When aren't you?' the Iron Warrior asked.

The Carrion worked through the possibilities. Somewhere a code-corrupted logic engine would be monitoring the attack on the tower-preceptory. It had been calculating Phase-Fusilatrix losses as opposed to the calculated likelihood of the Space Marines'

survival. Scaramanca and the Carrion had become an unfortunate part of that equation, and the logic engine had decided on a more drastic solution to the problem.

'This tower is about to be levelled,' the Carrion told him. 'A Titan approaches.'

A snarl creaked through the Iron Warrior's charred features. 'Coward constructs of Mars...'

The Iron Warrior wasn't wrong, but something else was bothering the Carrion. Looking over Scaramanca's pauldron, he noticed that the hordes of skitarii had gone, undoubtedly responding to a collective recall. He could no longer hear the scream of multilasers tearing up hangars, on any of the levels. Worst of all, the bleak light of the Martian day had disappeared. Something cold, colossal and intent on absolute destruction was standing before the tower-preceptory. An apocalyptic emissary from the Legio Mortis had arrived with missives of their death and total annihilation.

'Aulus...' the Carrion began, but it was too late. Their doom had found them.

The Iron Warrior turned and limped through the smoke. The Carrion paused. There was no time to get to ground level. There

would be no rescue or daring escape by shuttle. There was only death. The Carrion walked after his battle-brother. His cellmate, his friend.

They worked their way through the mangled labyrinth of flaming obstacles that had been their technical hangar, a place where they had spent thirty years together, perfecting their craft and learning the arcane lore of the Mechanicum and the Machine-God. All to be sacrificed before one of the mightiest of the Omnissiah's hallowed creations.

They walked between the bodies and pools of oil and blood that had collected on the balcony-platform and stood side by side on the edge of the landing platform, before the monstrous guns of the Warlord Titan. Mighty banners rippled from the lengths of gargantuan gatling blasters, bearing the death's head design of the Legio Mortis. From the ancient patchwork of her battle-scars, the Carrion recognised the monstrous god-machine's designation: *Tantus Abolitorus*. At least the legionaries were going to fall to a machine with a glorious history and an eternity of battle honours.

Across the open space, where skitarii assault carriers were descending and the dust of the storm was settling, the Space Marines could hear the boom of a colossal firing mechanism clearing. The Carrion felt the sound thunder through him and looked down at the spiralling assault carriers. Even for a member of the Legiones Astartes, the prospect of being fired upon by a god-machine was humbling.

When *Tantus Abolitorus* opened fire on the tower-preceptory, the sky-shattering hurricane of gargantuan shells would rip through the structure - blasting apart rockcrete, plasteel support structures and everything within, including any legionaries still left alive. The descending carriers were inbound to take up position about the inevitable collapse. Should any of the Emperor's angels survive being buried under a mountain of rubble, the remaining skitarii of the Phase-Fusilatrix would be ready to end them.

'I fear for Terra,' the Carrion said finally, 'and the Emperor. I wish we could have warned them.'

Alcavarn Salvador had been right. It should have been the dire duty of the Legiones Astartes to alert the Emperor to the threat of rebellion on Mars. They had failed, and no doubt Terra would discover the treachery of the Mechanicum in blood and fire. The Carrion could only hope that there were those who served the Omnissiah whose conscience would not allow such an atrocity.

'The Fists will safeguard the Emperor,' the Iron Warrior said. Given the historic rivalry between the two Legions, the Carrion reasoned that it could not have been an easy truth to admit. Many Iron Warriors, Aulus Scaramanca among them, thought that it should have been the IV Legion's honour to accompany the Emperor back to Terra and fortify the capital of the glorious Imperium.

'And what of us?' the Carrion asked. Before them the great barrels of the gargantuan gatling blasters began to creak and turn in readiness for their firing protocols.

'Like the Mechanicum,' Aulus Scaramanca said, 'the Fourth Legion live the harmony of flesh and iron. We were made for it. We are the strength of the land. The stone that shields, the ore that yields. Beyond the blood and rust-stained battlefields of Olympia, I can think of no better place for an Iron Warrior to rest his bones than in the red soil of mighty Mars.'

With the thunder of colossal servos and giga-loading mechanisms building, the Iron Warrior turned his back on *Tantus*

*Abolitorus*. He reached towards the Raven Guard. 'The sons of Corvus Corax, however,' Aulus Scaramanca said, 'were forged to fly.'

With those last, grim words trailing away on the Martian breeze, the Iron Warrior seized the Carrion's arm and heaved the lighter legionary around, like a planet and its companion moon, and spun, pitching him with all his armoured strength off the edge of the landing platform. As the Carrion plummeted, rolling and tumbling through the thin forge world air, he saw the Iron Warrior watching his fall.

And then, with a thunder crack that seemed to tear reality apart, the gargantuan gatling blaster fired the first of its monstrous shells.

There was another crack, and then another, until the thunder became a continuous, roaring cacophony that almost split the ear.

The towers top shattered. One moment it was there, the preceptory in which the Carrion, Scaramanca, Phylax, Salvador and Ventidian had trained, slept and toiled. Then it was gone, a shell-shredded blur of masonry and plasteel that fell with the Carrion down towards the unforgiving surface of Mars.

With *Tantus Abolitorus* standing like a god in judgement before him and the blast-riddled tower-preceptory collapsing behind, the world became a kaleidoscope of brain-aching sound, the savage rush of air and grit through the Carrion's long, black hair and the irrepressible plunge-dread that he felt in his pre-stomach. With his cogitator cutting through the confusion, coming to terms with Scaramanca's sacrifice and what had to be done swiftly to honour it, the sizzling static of his silver-glazed infra-vision seared to vertiginous clarity.

With his black robes whipping about him in the maelstrom, the Raven Guard used his training to break out of the tumbling roll and stabilise his descent. Without an actual jump pack he knew he had mere seconds to act. With arms and legs outstretched, the Carrion angled his heavy form at one of the rust-red assault carriers, as he spiralled towards the ground.

Bracing himself, the Carrion hit the back of the aircraft like an adamantium cannonball. He bounced off the hull plating, the impact almost knocking him unconscious. The carrier was knocked off station, sounding several alarms in the cockpit beyond. Sliding and scraping across the hull of the corkscrewing aircraft, the Carrion clawed at the assault carrier's spine, sliding down between the aircraft's turbojet columns.

Hooking his arm through the pipes and cables with a gauntlet, the Space Marine was slammed back and forth between the screeching engines. Engaging the magnetic plates in the crafted feet of his bionic legs and winding his arm further through the nest of heavy-duty cables running down the aircraft's back, the Carrion straddled the assault carrier's spine.

With a grunt he slammed the palm of his hydraulic hand into the plating of the starboard engine. Drawing a raw torrent of power from a turbojet, he felt the assault carrier answer immediately. As he drained energy from the aircraft's engines and systems, the Carrion allowed the skitarii craft to gently drift downwards under his control. Fearing that the carrier was going to put down beside the collapsing preceptory, the cockpit-wired pilot used the aircraft's failing power to drift down through the labyrinth of the Novus Mons worker-habs.

Without power to lower the gears, the assault carrier spiralled into a belly-bounce: a spinning skid and wing-shearing stop short of a harsh landing. As the

aircraft wrapped itself around the rockcrete corner of a worker-hab block, the Carrion was torn from his purchase and rolled across the assault carrier's back into the side of the building. With blood in his eyes from a gash on the head, the Carrion shook off the impact. As the Space Marine clawed his way across the buckled hull and slid off the aircraft, he could hear the jabber-cant of corrupted constructs over the vox-hailer, screeching to get out. Landing on its belly had effectively sealed the troop compartment of the shattered aircraft.

The Carrion stumbled away from the carrier, the static-laced insanity grating on the rawness of his nerves and the booming

emptiness in his hearts. He decided that he wasn't going to wait for the Phase-Fusilatrix inside to cut their way through to the cockpit and get out through the canopy. With his thin lips wrinkling into a snarl, the Raven Guard thrust his palm at the downed craft. The scavenged energies surging through the strip-helix were hot where they wound their way through his engineered flesh. Blasting a stream of furious lightning at the assault carrier, he electrified the craft.

The canopy lit up. Runebanks sparked. Systems sizzled. The flesh of the skitarii warrior-constructs inside spasmed and roasted.

With his lightning spent, the Carrion sagged. The shattered shell of the carrier smoked and sparked. The ear-bleeding corruption pouring out of the warped thing was no more, and the quad between the sky-scraping worker-habs enjoyed a moment of silence.

The great guns of the Titan had fallen silent. Through his augmetics and feet, the Raven Guard could feel the tower-preceptory's end. Thousands of tonnes of rockcrete and plasteel had tumbled down, blasted to crumbling masonry and sheared girders by *Tantus Abolitorus*. The assault carrier had come down a few blocks away but the Carrion could hear others descending - swooping in like vultures to finish any survivors. The Carrion couldn't imagine anyone surviving such a catastrophe. Even if they had, he reasoned, what was left of them would be swiftly destroyed by the hordes of skitarii poised to swarm the mountain of rubble.

The Carrion nodded to himself. It was time to rejoin his Legion, in spirit at least. He would need all of his skills in stealth and genetic talents to survive Mars at war with itself. There would be hell unleashed and battles to be fought, but the Carrion knew where he was going. He had to get off-world and back to Terra. While the Emperors loyal angels brought distant worlds to compliance, Mars had rebelled.

The Carrion felt the wind on his face. The tower-preceptory and the Techmarines-in-training within were no more. A

mountainous bank of rockcrete dust from the collapse billowed its way towards him, bathing the maze of quads and thoroughfares that weaved their way through the worker-hab blocks in a ghostly haze. Turning and walking away, his hydraulic legs crunching grit underfoot, the Carrion become one with the swirling murk.

## **TERRA**

<ANCIENT TERRA. THE BIRTHPLACE OF HUMANITY. THE CROWDED CAPITAL OF AN EVER-EXPANDING GALACTIC DOMINION. THE SOVEREIGN SEAT OF THE IMPERIUM OF MAN. HOME - FOR A TIME. WHERE THE FATHER OF FATHERS SOUGHT TO BUILD AN ENDURING EMPIRE, AND THE GREATEST OF HIS SONS SOUGHT TO DESTROY IT.>

## **IMPLEMENT**

THE CARRION HAD never thought to see the Imperial Palace, let alone haunt its colonnades and corridors. With the hush of his black robes a perpetual reproach on the polished marble, the Raven Guard moved through the hanging gardens of the Espartic Wall.

Here, some of the most ancient and beautiful of Terran plants, shrubs and flowers had survived the ravages of time. Some had been preserved; others had been rediscovered on other worlds, and others still had been genetically engineered from fossil specimens.

Beyond the shadows of long statue-lined aisles, courts displaying ancient relics and ornate gateways to grand halls and wards, the leaf-lined arboreta offered excellent concealment for any who desired not to be seen - or wished to be alone.

The Carrion tried to resist the overlays, isolations and analyses of his cogitator systems and soak up the sounds, smells and artificial warmth of the environmental shielding: the buzz of large insects from the beginning of Terran history, the flutter of tiny birds with nectar-dipping beaks, and the sweetness of life on the air. It was literally a world away from Mars, where the Carrion had been many months before.

Once a cool, bleak place of dust and industry, the Red Planet was now a warzone of smouldering forges. The globe-carpeting network of hardlines and wireless transmitters had taken the corruption of the dark code to every construct that could receive it. That was how the Carrion had left the place after spending days being hunted through the habs, manufactoria and assembly yards across the deserts of the Invalis and mounts of

silent volcanoes.

It was clear to the Raven Guard, as he had moved across Mars, that some great schism had broken out in the ranks of the

Machine-God's servants. While many attempted to remain true to the Mechanicum and its allegiance to Terra, most had fallen to the code-plague that swept its way through the planet's infrastructure, and soon there was not a polar meteorologist post, long-forgotten orbital relay or deep infotomb that had not succumbed to the virulent datastream. Only the noospherics that blessed forge temples like Novus Mons and the Magma City seemed to resist, which merely prompted the corrupted constructs of the Martian schismatists to march on such doomed sanctuaries in screeching numbers and brute force.

Untrusting of even the Machine-God's seemingly loyal servants, the Carrion thought it best to keep his survival a secret until finally, over the Pallidus Ash Wastes, he had heard the roar of Thunderhawks overhead. By the time the Carrion reached Mondus Gamma, the Imperial Fists were evacuating with all the precious materiel of Mars they could transport. After presenting himself to a Captain Camba-Diaz, the Carrion had been taken to Luna for de-briefing.

The Carrion waited under a lotus tree. The sun was rising and dawn reached over the crenellations in a zigzag of rosy light. He could hear the heavy footsteps of gold-plated sentinels walking the battlements of the Espartic Wall. Foot knights of the Legio Custodes walked by with shields and halberds. They did not even acknowledge the Carrion. He didn't entertain the thought, even for a second, that they had missed him. He had passed isometrics and had cleared the security barbicans that had been built into the ancient beauty of the palace.

Since learning of Horns Lupercal's treachery at Isstvan - as the Carrion had done on Luna - the Imperial Fists and the Legio Custodes had been relentless in their improvement and fortification of the Imperial Palace. The primarch Rogal Dorn was overseeing the indomitable ugliness of the architectural enhancements, while his war mason, Imperial Fists and hundreds of thousands of indentured workers, were shattering the tranquillity of the place with round-the-clock labour. War was coming to the Solar System.

As the Legio Custodes moved on, trailed by several servo-skulls wearing augur-crowns of aerals and antennas, the Carrion

heard further footsteps on the marble flags. Three men approached from the upper ward, although all three would have tested the definition of the word 'man'. Rogal Dorn's armoured step drew eyes wherever he went. He was huge, like a roving fortification. The glorious gold of his artificer plate, the blood-red river of his cloak and the shock white of his hair. Few could stand the grim intensity of Dorn's gaze, the darkness of his eyes and the tautness of his jaw

inviting any who beheld him to share a tiny fraction of the burden the primarch of the Imperial Fists bore in having a care for the Emperor's person.

Beside him was the new Fabricator General, Zagreus Kane. The Mechanicum overlord had escaped the Red Planet with the

Imperial Fists and, as the former Fabricator Locum of Mars, had been charged with coordinating the loyalist servants of the Machine-God across the galaxy. His hooded robes of ardent red and fine gold thread hid a form that was outwardly human, but the Carrion knew that Kane was more machine than he was. From the darkness of the Fabricator General's hood, the Space Marine could see the blue blaze of his inset optics.

Following, and seeming to take in the new day with ancient eyes, walked Malcador, the Regent of Terra. Whereas the Carrion

felt the warm rays of sunlight through the sizzle of the environmental filters - a welcome change from cold, bleak Mars - the Sigillite gathered his hood and robes about him against the morning chill. A gnarled claw of a hand clutched a staff of office and the eagle headpiece smouldered with an unnatural flame that neither warmed the bone nor lit the way, for Malcador had been curse-blessed with many otherworldly talents.

'Well, you know my thinking on this, Lord Malcador,' Kane told the Sigillite. 'The situation on Mars has been intolerable for some time now.'

'I think Lord Dorn agrees with you, Fabricator General.'

'Then why did he allow his legionaries to abandon the Forge World Principal to the enemy?' the Martian asked, his optics searing from the darkness of his hood.

Royal Dorn slowed and turned, his armoured form like a wall of adamantium.

'Simple, General Kane,' the primarch said, his voice resembling the splitting of rock. 'Supply and demand. You are familiar with the concept, I trust?'

'Now my lord mocks the very principles upon which the Martian-Terran concord historically exists.'

'Then you understand,' Dorn continued, bulldozing his way through the Mechanicum overlord's indignity, 'that the forces of the Legiones Astartes are already stretched. That war of an unprecedented scale sweeps through the galaxy - converging, intensifying, growing in its power to decimate and annihilate. Intent on sating itself - as all wars do - on the innocent and the unprepared.' Dorn looked to the sun, rising above the walls, citadels and bastions of the transforming palace. 'Every one of my Imperial Fists will be needed to stand before such a ravenous monster and the living treachery that is my brother Horns. Throughout the Solar System.'

Across Terra. On the walls of this very palace. I thought not to waste such a precious resource in holding a handful of forge temples against the mighty and collective constructs of all Mars. Supply and demand, Fabricator General.'

Zagreus Kane felt like he was standing on the slopes of a rumbling volcano.

'Supply and demand,' the Fabricator General repeated back to the primarch. 'Is that why you came for your armour and munitions?'

'I can hardly be expected to fight such a war without them.'

'What about the citizen constructs of Mars, my lord?' Kane shot back at him. 'What about the lives of the priests, artisans and temple thralls who laboured to forge your weapons and equipment?'

'You demonstrate a surprising amount of passion for a subject of the Machine-God,' Dorn said.

'The right to life is the same,' the Fabricator General said, 'whether your wondrous workings hang on bone or a construct's chassis. Now, my lord, if you please. What about the lives of my people?'

Dorn looked to the Sigillite who gave him the unreadable look of a man unwilling to answer to or judge the impossible choices of another.

'They died so that their fine works might reach hands that would turn such craft into instruments of avenging death,' Rogal Dorn told Kane finally. 'Warriors who would use such wonders to bring justice to the fallen and punish those who had truly condemned Martian innocents to a disposable fate.'

The three men didn't speak for a moment. The sun bled through the distant clouds of a morning sky. Custodians passed, silent and vigilant, through the hanging gardens.

'Then you agree with Malcador and myself that it is high time to return to the Forge World Principal?' Zagreus Kane asked. 'To take back Mars?'

Again Dorn looked to the Sigillite, and again the First Lord of Terra pursed his unsmiling lips.

'No,' the primarch answered simply. Such a decree was considered a living law, unbroken among most that had occasion to disagree with Rogal Dorn.

'No, my lord?' the Fabricator General asked. 'You said it yourself. Supply and demand. Consider the resources and legionary assets it requires to blockade Mars presently. Allies arrive daily in-system, driven here by the vagaries of war. Your brother primarchs come and go with the Legiones Astartes at their disposal.'

'I fear Lord Dorn does not advocate a forge by forge re-taking of Mars at all, Fabricator General,' the Sigillite spoke up.

Kane looked from the primarch to Malcador, and back to Dorn.

'You are right about the situation on Mars being intolerable,' Rogal Dorn admitted. 'The blockade of Mars cannot go on. I need those vessels and the legionaries that crew them elsewhere. Malcador assures me that there is loyal resistance on Mars - a guerrilla war, if you will - yet there is little evidence of it. The Red Planet has been taken by the enemy. We have lost Mars and we must accept that. It's time to consider other options, Fabricator General. In the past, when worlds have been so thoroughly infested with xenos, for example - when an expeditionary action to retake lost ground has been deemed too costly in life and materiel - we have looked to other solutions. Drastic solutions to impossible problems.'

'Now, wait a second,' Zagreus Kane blurted, the blue blaze of his optics intensifying. 'Malcador, he can't be serious—'

'When has Rogal Dorn ever been known not to be serious, Fabricator General?' the Sigillite returned.

'You are talking about Exterminatus,' Kane said. 'On the Forge World Principal. On Mars?'

'That is what I am proposing, Fabricator General,' Dorn told him. 'I have run the simulations with my captains. Such action is the best tactical resolution to a host of problems faced by Terra and the Solar System at large. With your assistance we have already negotiated with the forge worlds Phaeton and Voss Prime for supplies.

'Much-needed vessels and manpower could be redirected from the Martian conflict to securing the capital system. However, most significant of all is if all else fails and Horns arrives in-system, then we will have stripped him not only of his Mechanicum allies but also of a highly fortified staging point. Consider, Fabricator General, how difficult it would be - how costly in time and life - to remove the traitors from Mars now. Then imagine how impossible it would be with Horus Lupercal and his Traitor Legions operating out of the Red Planet. You understand that I cannot allow that to happen.'

But Zagreus Kane had turned towards the rising sun, allowing its golden rays to penetrate the darkness of his hood. The deep lines of his anxiety-eaten face gave the Fabricator General the ghoulish, drawn appearance of a forge world servitor.

'You would bombard the surface from orbit...'

'Yes, Fabricator General,' Rogal Dorn said. 'With cyclonic torpedoes, to—'

'To ensure maximum devastation,' Kane said, finishing the primarch's sentence. After collecting himself for a moment and

dragging himself away from the nightmarish vision of a destroyed Mars playing over and over in his head, Zagreus Kane regarded the hulking primarch and frail First Lord. 'I implore you, do not do this. The empire of Mars has endured in peace and shared designs for almost as long as Terra itself.'

'That fact cannot shield it from the consequences of heresy,' Rogal Dorn rumbled.

'There are many, many technological wonders,' the Fabricator General continued, 'and secrets that Mars harbours that would be lost in such an action. The loss to humanity in terms of knowledge would be incalculable. You would be destroying the Imperium's future to preserve an uncertain present, and plunging the empire back into the days of Old Night.'

'Without a present, however certain,' the primarch countered, 'there will be no future.'

'There is something else, my Lord Dorn,' the Mechanicum overlord said. 'Something that your tactical models should factor in.'

'You would lecture me on that, Fabricator General?' the primarch asked.

'Have you considered the reaction of the Ommissiah's servants here on Terra?' Kane asked. 'Or the feelings of other forge worlds throughout the Imperium? Mars is the spiritual nexus for all worship of the Ommissiah in the galaxy. What will the billions of priests and Mechanicum constructs make of your attack on their sovereign soil? Your destruction of a world sacred to the faith of the Cult Mechanicum?'

'What are you saying, Zagreus?' Malcador pressed.

'If I'm not mistaken,' Dorn growled, 'we're being threatened - here, on the walls of the Imperial Palace.'

'I am the Emperor's humble servant,' the Fabricator General told them, 'and would advocate for the actions of his son - Lord Dorn - in my every word and deed. But I cannot answer for the horror such actions would create on distant forge worlds, confronted with the reality that the Imperium seeks to destroy Mars while Kelbor-Hal and the Warmaster seek to preserve it. How could they know that their own forge worlds wouldn't be next? Tensions have existed for a long time between the Emperor's servants and the Martian faith. How long before the servants of the Ommissiah in their entirety are dismissed as a heretic cult? How long before they, in turn, dismiss the Emperor's sons and his subjects as warmongering traitors? Would you not be creating the perfect storm for a further split in the Mechanicum?'

The primarch fixed the Fabricator General with the searing intensity of his dark eyes. As his systems flooded his bloodstream with mood suppressors, it took everything the Fabricator General had to stand his ground before mighty

Dorn.

Malcador watched the sun burn in the sky. 'And if there was another way?' the Sigillite asked. 'An alternative that might serve all of our needs? Drastic, yes. Distasteful even. But a chance to neutralise the growing threat of the Red Planet,' he said to Dorn, 'while preserving the sovereignty and sacrosanct significance of Martian soil,' he directed at Kane.

Rogal Dorn and the Fabricator General turned towards Malcador.

'Would it have anything to do with the shadow you have standing sentinel beneath the lotus?' Rogal Dorn asked.

Malcador risked a parched smile.

'Carrion,' the Sigillite called, 'come forth, if you please. You're making Lord Dorn nervous.'

As the Carrion walked forth through the ornamental foliage of the hanging gardens, he found that Rogal Dorn gave Malcador the displeasure of his unsmiling face. The regent had at least broken the tension between the primarch and the Fabricator General.

'You are the son of my brother Corax,' Dorn said upon the Carrion's approach. Despite the plain gunmetal-grey of the Carrion's plate, the Raven Guard could not hide the paleness of his skin, the black of his long hair and the sharpness of his features.

'It is an honour to be so, my lord,' the Carrion answered.

'The Carrion joins the ranks of my eyes and ears from the Raven Guard Legion,' Malcador explained to the Fabricator General.

'From Mars,' the Mechanicum overlord observed, noting the signature workmanship of the Forge World Principal in the

Carrion's augmetics. The Space Marine shifted his weight slightly from the hydraulics of one leg to the other.

'Yes,' the Sigillite confirmed.

'Evacuated with my construct kindred by Lord Dorn's Imperial Fists,' the Fabricator General said. 'I remember you from processing on Luna. A legionary. You were undergoing training on Mars with the artisans?'

'Yes, general,' the Carrion said. 'I had completed my training and was scheduled for covenance.'

'By the ever-turning cogs,' the Mechanicum overlord said. 'Then you must allow me to arrange for your instatement. You must receive the machina opus for your years of study and training.'

'That is gracious of you, general,' the Carrion said, 'but I have decided not to take covenance.'

The confession seemed to confuse the Mechanicum overlord.

'You have decided not to return to your Legion?' Dorn said. 'After everything you have learned befell them in the Isstvan System?'

The Carrion had heard from Malcador's own lips the atrocities committed on the other side of the galaxy - where brother had turned against brother, a massacre had unfolded and the history of the Imperium to come had changed forever. He would like to have said that he had wept for his brothers, but he hadn't. Farinatus had changed him forever. He should have felt a howling emptiness where his hearts should have been, a void that could only be filled with the spilling of traitor blood. Instead he simply felt a cold, irresistible need to fix what had been broken: a riven empire, a legacy stalled, the gears of brotherhood grinding and smashed.

'No, my lord,' the Carrion replied.

'At a time when my brother - and your brothers - need you most?' the primarch pressed.

'I have chosen another kind of service,' the Carrion told him.

Dorn looked to the silent Sigillite. 'He is to be one of your pieces?' he asked. 'To be moved about the Regicide board?'

'Aren't we all such pieces?' Malcador returned.

'How did your man Garro put it?' the primarch asked. 'A Knight Errant.'

'He has chosen such a path,' Malcador said.

'Or had it chosen for him on Luna,' Dorn said.

Malcador simply smiled. 'A path that will take him back to Mars, if we three choose,' he said, and let the suggestion hang for a moment on the morning breeze.

'I'm listening,' Dorn said.

Malcador turned to Kane.

'You have my attention,' the Fabricator General said.

'Please,' the Sigillite said to the Carrion. 'Tell them as you have told me.'

The Carrion bowed his head to his new lord and master.

'My time on Luna gave me the opportunity to think. There is nothing to do up there but think - about the schism on Mars, the betrayal at Isstvan, my Lord Regent's offer and the part I might play in this new galaxy of challenge and change. I came to the conclusion that despite our shock at the atrocities committed during the Dropsite Massacre, heresy - in one form or another - is nothing new. Mars was rife with unsanctioned experimentation, the embrace of abominable technologies and solutions sought from the xenos or the beyond.' As Kane began to protest, the Carrion added, 'Which the clave-malagra of the Lexorcist General, the Divisio Probandi and the Prefecture Magisterium were

tireless in their efforts to hunt down and persecute.'

The Mechanicum overlord nodded his acquiescence.

'I had misfortune to see one such heretek sentenced to stasis containment in perpetuitas.'

'What was his crime?' the Fabricator General asked.

'The study of self-enhancing technologies.'

'Abominable intelligence?'

'Yes, general,' the Carrion confirmed. 'My Artisan Astartes exposed his students to the workings of the fearful Malagra, the Divisio Probandi and the Prefecture Magisterium early on, to instil in them repugnance for such deviations.'

'Then you had a wise mentor,' Kane acknowledged. 'What was this heretek's name?'

'Octal Bool,' the Carrion told him. 'A young but brilliant Magos Dominus of the Legio Cybernetica. A student himself of the Artisan Cybernetica Phemalius Lux.'

'I know of Lux from the infotombs,' Kane said, 'but not this magos.'

'Heresies are hidden,' the Carrion continued. 'Re-written, erased. Even from such as yourself, Fabricator General. To make clear the feudal politics in the region and save his construct-kindred embarrassment, the Divisio Probandi had code scrubbers remove all trace of Bool's existence from the tombs, the libraria and even local hubstreams. His work, his corruptions and researches were buried with him in stasis confinement.'

'Then how do you know so much about this radical?' Dorn put to him.

'My mentor made Octal Bool my first case study,' the Carrion said. 'He gave me access to the encrypted Probandi files. He wanted to know that I truly understood the heretek's transgressions.'

'And do you?' the primarch pressed, the rumble of each word a warning.

'Enough to assist us in this time of great need, Lord Dorn.'

'Rogal,' Malcador soothed. 'Hear him out.'

'Those transgressions included speaking against Martian laws of nonproliferation of adaptive intelligences, the Sentiency Edict and the banned pursuits of the Singularitarianists.'

'Those charges would be condemnation enough,' the Fabricator General said.

'Octal Bool went further than that,' the Carrion told him, 'much further. His tracts detailed his acquisition of a dangerous piece of technology known as the Tabula Myriad, a silica animus responsible for genocides on a number of warp storm-isolated worlds during the Age of Strife. It was recovered in the early days of the Great Crusade by the Iron Hands after defeating the decimated Parafex and the sentient constructs of the Tabula Myriad on Altra-Median. The great Ferrus Manus led the 24th Expeditionary Fleet personally and turned the Tabula Myriad over to the Mechanicum for safekeeping.'

'It seems we failed in that,' the Fabricator General admitted. 'How was such a thing allowed to happen?'

'Octal Bool's area of expertise within the Cybernetica was cortex firmware. He had been experimenting with his automata

protocols long before he acquired the Tabula Myriad. Instead of the functional algorithms and staid programming of his adept-peers, Bool's programming patterns were multilayered, intricate and loaded with self-referential flair and flourish. They were pieces of programming art. He didn't regard his modus as an artisan's tool. It was like a musical instrument upon which he created complex algorithmic symphonies. In breaking with convention, he even named the individual wetware programs for the automata cohorts under his command like Regicide strategies: the Tollex Opening, the Vhamrian Defence and the Occlon-Nanimus Game. Cohorts of battle-automata benefitting from his programming had the very highest success rates, with few units suffering from malfunction or computation error. It was the artistry of such algorithms that gave his automata the impression of thinking for themselves and alerted adepts in the Legio Cybernetica and Prefecture Magisterium to his possible deviancy.'

'You sound as if you admire him,' Dorn said. 'Do you?'

The Carrion thought carefully about his reply. 'Can a man fear, respect and admire the capabilities of another while

simultaneously having repugnance for all that he represents? Surely you can still admire the martial gifts of the Warmaster, while still doing everything in your power to stop him? Do not the Imperial Fists advocate a respect for their enemies?'

'I don't know what mind games are played in the shadows of your Legion or the hypothetical that fill the days on Mars,' Dorn growled, 'but they are not

welcome on the very walls that might be called upon to defend us against such dread gifts.'

'Forgive me, Lord Dorn,' the Carrion said.

The primarch said nothing for a moment, seemingly as angry with himself as with Malcador's Knight Errant.

Dorn considered. 'I asked a question - and you answered it. That is all. Pray, continue.'

'Octal Bool used his gifts to frustrate the security firmware of the dungeon diagnostica and access the stasis tombs of Promethei Sinus. These would be the same tombs within which he would be incarcerated for his crimes. It was there he acquired the Tabula Myriad.'

'Why this particular abomination?' the Fabricator General asked.

'The Tabula Myriad is a form of exigency engine,' the Carrion told him. 'Far surpassing the abilities of Mechanicum cipher engines and logista, its baroque matrix combines the calculus of macroprobability with the creativity of its abominable sentience, filling the gaps in its data with imaginative theoreticals.'

'As our genetors and Magi Replicaе substitute the common genetic coding of other species in damaged DNA?'

'Yes, general.'

'This machine strategically predicts future outcomes,' Rogal Dorn said, with as much of a shiver as a primarch could suffer.

'It predicted the schism on Mars,' the Carrion told him. 'On other worlds, where it had predicted men would look to the darkness for answers and damn themselves with the corruptions of the beyond, the Tabula Myriad and the sentient constructs under its control initiated a merciless campaign against what it determined to be the weakness of flesh. In his research, Octal Bool claimed that the Tabula Myriad had predicted on those flesh-cleansed worlds exactly what we are now facing on the Red Planet - a heresy of belief, of purpose and of the flesh. It employed the same probability matrix used to condemn such civilisations to achieve victory against them.'

The decision to ultimately eradicate the weakness - the threat - of such flesh took probably no more than a millisecond.'

'I think I see where we are going,' Dorn said gravely, looking to the silent Sigillite.

'What do you mean?' Kane asked, his own cogitator functions calculating to catch up.

'How were the Tabula Myriad and this heretek to effect such an outcome on Mars?' Dorn asked. 'Before this madman was caught and contained?'

The Carrion looked from the primarch to the Fabricator General.

'With elegance and economy, my lord,' the Space Marine said. 'Unlike Terra, the Red Planet has long since lost its natural magnetosphere. Two forge temples, ancient in engineering and construction, were built in the frozen wastes at each planetary pole -

Vertex Borealis in the north and Vertex Australis in the south.'

'By the almighty Ommissiah, no,' the Fabricator General murmured.

'Vertex?' Dorn pressed the Carrion, suppressing a scowl of annoyance and confusion. 'Explain.'

'The Vertex is a great axle. A wonder of Mars. A feat of planetary engineering dating back to the early days of the Mechanicum,'

the Carrion said. 'It is a planetary spindle that reaches down into the Martian crust and through the long-cooled core of the forge world. Geomagnetic reactors feed power back to the axle that keeps the core turning. The Vertex is the key to all biological life on Mars. Without it and the artificial magnetospheric shield it generates, Mars would not be protected from the lethal radiation of our own star - let alone the deadly cosmic rays generated by stellar events in nearby systems.'

'And Octal Bool and the Tabula Myriad...' Dorn began.

'...planned to damage or destroy the forge temple at Vertex Australis,' the Carrion confirmed. 'The abominable intelligence

calculated the southern installation to be the most tactically vulnerable.'

'What about the other forge temple?' asked the primarch.

'Only one needs to be incapacitated for the operation of the Vertex to be compromised,' the Carrion said.

'Could this technology be repaired or rebuilt?' Dorn asked.

'The arcane knowledge of the technology's grand operation is lost to the Mechanicum,' the Fabricator General said. 'Without the magnetospheric shield, the thin atmosphere of Mars would be stripped away by the solar wind, carrying away the planet's precious reserves of water. The Red Planet would rapidly become a radiation trap, inimical to organic life.'

'The true objective of the heretekal martyr Octal Bool and the Tabula Myriad,' the Carrion said. 'A war on the weakness of flesh, with Mars left purged, pure and in the hands of the machines.'

'If such a thing were contemplated...' Zagreus Kane said.

'We are contemplating it,' Malcador told him with steely assurance.

'Lord Dorn,' the Fabricator General implored, looking for support from the primarch.

'What would you propose?' Dorn asked gravely.

'The Carrion,' the Sigillite said, 'has consented to return to Mars as my agent. No one, even among the ranks of my own Knights Errant, is better qualified for

such an undertaking. He will liberate Bool and his silica animus and facilitate them, if possible, in enacting their dread plan.'

Rogal Dorn thought on what the aged regent had told him. His grim visage was a nest of rankling uncertainties. They were not a natural fit for the primarch's dauntless features.

'There are so many factors,' Dorn admitted finally. 'How can you know that the traitors on Mars haven't already neutralised such a threat - or sought out the collaboration of such hereteks and constructs?'

'All knowledge of Octal Bool and his researches was wiped from the infotombs,' the Raven Guard reminded him.

'And what of this abominable technology, should it succeed?' Dorn asked. 'Won't we be exchanging one enemy for another?'

'My study of heretekal history and the dread employment of such intelligences is that, despite early successes, deviant technology ultimately fails. It is one of the strongest arguments the Cult Mechanicum has in refusing to embrace such technology.

Who would you rather face on the field of battle, Lord Dorn? In the long term, the Tabula Myriad will fail, as it has done before. Can you say the same about Horns Lupercal?

'And this sits well with you, Knight Errant? These... unconventional strategies?' Dorn challenged.

'Short of sending half of your Legion to secure Mars,' the Carrion said, 'any strategy is going to be unconventional. The fact is, my lord, that my primarch - your brother - taught me well. The Raven Guard do not engage in a frontal assault unless they have to.

Infiltration and sabotage are weapons to be wielded against the enemy. In my mind, turning heretek against heretek is no different to collapsing a bridge, detonating a reactor or blowing up a building. The Raven Guard are as one with the shadows when we need to be.

We are masters of the unseen - and believe me, Lord Dorn, our enemies on Mars will not see this coming.'

Rogal Dorn looked to Zagreus Kane. 'Fabricator General?'

'You are asking me to visit the devastations of Old Night once more upon the Red Planet,' Kane said.

'For Mars now, there are but three futures,' Malcador told the Mechanicum overlord. 'It can be a decimated rock of soot and ruin.

It can be a swarming stronghold for traitors and deviant filth. Or, Fabricator General, Mars can be cleansed of the treachery that festers on its surface like a cancer. It can be returned to a prouder moment in its illustrious history and begin

again, with its materiel, infrastructure, sovereign soil and its secrets intact.'

The Fabricator General nodded his hooded head in slow shame. Rogal Dorn looked to Malcador and his Knight Errant.

'Purge the unclean,' the primarch told them.

The Carrion turned to his master, the Regent of all Terra. Malcador wasted on the Carrion what remained of the kindness in his misty eyes.

'Do your solemn duty,' the Sigillite ordered.

'My lords,' the Carrion said and walked off towards the upper ward where one of the Sigillite's unmarked shuttles was waiting for him on a concealed landing platform. As he walked he willed his cogitator to filter out the light hiss of his hydraulics and the background bustle of patrolling sentries and slate-burdened administrators. He heard what he expected to.

'What if he fails?' the Fabricator General asked.

'Whatever Malcador wishes him to be now,' the primarch rumbled, 'he is a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. It might be difficult in these darkening days but try still to have some faith in the Emperors angels.'

'Many lives depend upon his success,' Malcador said finally. 'For if he fails, Lord Dorn has a difficult decision to make.'

To that, there was no reply.

## **MARS**

<MARS. THE RED PLANET BLEEDS A TRAIL OF CORRUPTION THROUGH THE SOLAR SYSTEM. ITS NEST OF TRAITOR CONSTRUCTS CANT INSANITY AND STREAM INFECTION BETWEEN THEIR INCALCULABLE NUMBER. THE FORGE TEMPLES AND CANYONS OF MARS ROAR WITH THE UNNATURAL FIRES OF INFERNAL INDUSTRY. A PLACE OF THE OMNISSIAH AFFLICTED. OF IRON POSSESSED. OF THE WEAKNESS OF FLESH.>

LOCATE / ISOLATE

THE INVALIDIS REGION. There were few places on the Forge World Principal that the Carrion - Son of Corax, Martian-trained and Knight Errant of Terra - considered more suitable for insertion.

*Recollection commencing...*

'The whole region is a dead zone', Archelon had told him. ' Even the Titanica avoid these highlands.'

The Carrion guessed that the irony of his new visit to the region would have been lost on his humourless mentor. The Artisan Astartes Gnaeus Archelon had

taken him there once, during his Genetoris rotation, to teach the Carrion the technical wonders of the flesh over the weakness of iron.

He had showed the Techmarine-in-training the polyhedral structures of smoky, red quartz that littered the valleys and

mountainsides. The Carrion had felt it then as he did now - an automotive exhaustion. His vision blurred. His reactor felt like ice in his flesh. The bionics of his limbs felt like the deadweight of plasteel and adamantium that they were. The Artisan Astartes had told him that the material had not originated on Mars and had likely been brought to the planet by a meteorite impact. The material resisted all attempts to scan or analyse it and gave off some kind of field or exotic form of radiation that interfered with anbarics and power systems. The priests of Mars were superstitious about the region, declaring it *circumlocus expedientum*. From the dreadful draining sensation within his systems, the Carrion had seen why. ' *It will pass,*' Archelon had said, suffering similar sluggishness. ' *Run compensations and proceed!*

'Run compensations and proceed,' the Carrion ordered.

The interior of the orbital arklighter was a haze of stuttering lighting. The cargo vessel had only a rudimentary bridge with basic systems intended to be run by a small servitor crew. The Carrion had been assigned two servo-automata - gifts from the Fabricator General. Techmarines leaving Mars were often assigned servitors as part of their final covenant - constructs to provide technical aid and cover during combat, when they would be at their most vulnerable.

The Carrion assumed that Zagreus Kane was sending him a message in such a gift. They were called Di-Delta 451 and

Eta/Iota~13 - 'the Null' and 'the Void', as the Carrion had come to call them, for their complete absence of warmth and conversation; a reminder of Mars indeed. The pair were vat-feminine, with light battle chassis and slight limbs. Armaplas plates were embedded directly into their bare flesh, allowing the servo-automata to move swiftly and carry out orders without impediment. Their clone-identical faces were set in cybernetic crania, busy with service scopes and augurs. Their eyes were alive and urgent but beneath their noses there was only smooth flesh. Instead of mouths, they had small vox-grilles set in their throats. They were armed with rotor guns that they held snug to their shoulders like rifles. Tool belts sat across their hips, including a chain-blade that doubled as a last-resort weapon. Like the Carrion they had been port-stripped to protect them from the code-contagion that was sweeping through Mars.

If the Null and the Void felt the drain of the Invalis, they said nothing. Uncoupling himself from the cockpit-cradle, the Carrion willed himself to move. It was a hydraulic effort almost akin to pain, but one by one, the Space Marine

moved his limbs, fighting the strange effects of the highlands. Uncoupling from her own cradle, the Void powered down the remaining arklighter systems, leaving the barest reactor traces for detection.

The Null was already up and manually cranking the emergency access-port set in the roof of the tiny bridge. With a pressurised pop, the hatch blew off, allowing the servitor to climb out onto the hull of the arklighter. Grabbing his weapons, and with effort, the Carrion followed, with the Void bringing up the rear.

Standing on the re-entry-scorched hull, the Carrion could see the scar of the arklighter's landing running across the Martian earth. The Void had used flaps, airbreaks and purged cargo sections to bring them in shallow and put the Mechanicum transport down in a broad valley. A trail of red dust marked their path, with the arklighter partially buried in the ground and its servoderricks, hoist-claws and haulage rigs hanging mangled from the hull.

It had been no accident that the vessel had put down in the Invalis Region, although it was meant to appear that way. It had been an orbital workhorse confiscated as part of the tender flotilla belonging to a Martian blockade runner. The Munitoria Logis arklighter had been captured by the Imperial Fists destroyer *Pugnacitas* and the attendant lighter requisitioned under Lord Malcador's authority for the Carrion's insertion. It had little trouble returning through the blockade. It bore all the appropriate Basilikon Astra identicodes and its runebanks bounced transit readings and cantmissions off shipyard traffic-towers, Mechanicum augur-buoys and orbital defence monitors that still reeked of scrapcode corruption. The Carrion had ordered the screeching servitor crew executed but had made no attempt to purge the arklighter of its ruinous taint. While data buffers protected the Carrion and his servo-automata, the code-corruption made an excellent camouflage for the vessel, drifting past the beleaguered Ring of Iron - glowing with strange, sickly balelight and shrieking with tortured voxmissions.

The Carrion was glad to be out of the infected transport. The vessel was ailing, its systems stream-sick, its superstructure haunted. Standing on the blackened hull exterior, the Carrion's infravision fixed on the moon Phobos above. The shadows of traumatic fractures afflicted the satellite. The planetoid was followed through the night sky by a flotilla of colossal bergs and rubble: remnants of some apocalyptic event on the surface or within the fabricator moon. From the devastation, the Raven Guard Space Marine

estimated the void forges of Cratera Reldressa and the Skyre City all but destroyed; the drydocks of the Kepler Dorsum no longer present at all.

The Raven Guard looked at the red Martian peaks reaching for the bleak

heavens. They were littered with stripped wreckage and rusted vessels that had also suffered the curious effects of the region. The area was regarded as one of several vile vortices that afflicted the Red Planet, triangles and quadrangles where craft and constructs routinely went missing. Kelbor-Hal's traitor priests were no less superstitious about the Invalis than their Mechanicum predecessors, and the Carrion was confident that landing the arklighter here would garner little interest from the monitoring stations.

The Carrion heard the flap of wings. His cyber-raven Strix flew from the open access hatch, circling the crash site and adjusting to the Martian gravity. Swooping in, the construct creature extended the delicate hydraulics of its silver claws. It too felt the strange drain of the region. With a light prang, the cyber-raven landed on one of the Carrion's node-columns, the twin power cells set in its nape like afterburners humming ominously. Closing its wings, the creature's bionic eye cycled through different colour spectra and the interface pin of its beak whirred and turned. It had been Strix that had kept the Carrion sane during his detention on Luna. On the Sigillite's orders, tools, parts and the done-bird, still in its vat, had been supplied for the legionary's distraction, and as a gesture of good will. The Carrion had spent many hours on the creature's intricate augmentations, taking his mind off disturbing revelations of galactic rebellion, Legion fratricide and distant massacre.

'South,' the Knight Errant ordered, prompting the Null and the Void to climb down through the melted antennae and haulage

rigging of the arklighter and down onto Martian soil, where they obediently trudged through the sands and up the crystal-strewn valley. Feeling every step like the crushing tug of high gravity, and with his hydraulic arm like a dead weight hanging from his side, the Carrion willed himself on through the draining flux of the Invalis Highlands. By the time the sun had set on the horizon and with many hours of dust-dragging footsteps behind them, the strange power-sapping effects of the region had dissipated. Engaging the grainy-grey of his night-vision filters, the Carrion led the Null and the Void at a rhythmic, hydraulic run across the ash wastes of the Terra Cimmeria, with Strix circling above and alerting its master of distant dangers with a canting caw.

It required all of the Carrion's XIX Legion training to traverse the codecorrupted madness of Mars. On the horizon, forge

temples burned with the ominous glow of unnatural industry. In the darkness, with the stars twinkling harshly above in a cold, empty sky, constructs and vehicles passed them - the caterpillar trundle of freightway traffic, humming gravcraft, gaggles of indentured labour units and cable-gangs of Munitorum servitors, driven on by their transmechanics. The sound was unbearable. The thin

air of Mars carried the voxmission madness and shrieking scrapcode of polluted constructs far.

As the sun came up, traversing the open ground of the red wastes, the terrace-excavations and ash heaps unseen became a challenge. The screech of Avenger strike fighters seemed ever present in the skies above them, crisscrossing the heavens like angry insects. The slopes of the Scamander Ridge were swarming with feral servitors, and the Carrion and his servo-automata had to be careful not to alert the power-famished cannibals to their presence, using a swooping Strix to lead hordes of the torpid constructs away from their path. At Eridania they almost ran afoul of a Warhound Scout Titan, the towering monstrosity booming madness that could be felt in the pit of the stomach as it chewed up the slagscape and depots with predacious abandon.

The manufactoria, industriascapes and hab-hives reaching out into the frosted desert from about great forge temples and assembly yards offered more opportunities for concealment but also more danger of discovery. The dead eyes of servo-automata and whirring optics of engine-overseers were everywhere. Pieters and augurposts monitored output. Sky-talons, articulated tractors and convoys of tracked cargo haulers dragged raw materials and production-grade weaponry, armour, vehicles and combat-constructs intended for orbit and the Warmaster's futile blockade runners. The curtains of red dust kicked up by the tug-engines and trains provided much-needed cover and even short-haul transport for the Raven Guard and his attendant automata.

Behind a colossal depot swarming with technomats, drone machinery and servo-limbed slave constructs, the Carrion led the Null and the Void up an assemblyway and into the Promethei Sinus container yard. Circling above them, Strix had a view of thousands of damaged giga-containers in a state of utter disarray. Strikes from the air or stationed artillery had toppled container towers and the lofty robot hoist-rigs that attended upon them, creating a sea of cluttered, battered cargo-contents. Surveying the gargantuan shambles, the Carrion began to worry about the dungeon-diagnoplex situated secretly below the surface of the container yard. It was an ancient and integrated network connecting the forge temples, datagrids and constructs of Mars in which the Prefecture Magisterium and Divisio Probandi had to prosecute their ongoing war against techno-heresy. Only high-ranking priests, principia and their trusted guests - like the Techmarines covenant - were allowed knowledge of such places.

The Carrion dropped down onto the buckled roof of a crate before clambering down into the topsy-turvy mess of the container yard. At first he was concerned that the yard had been hit by an orbital strike or aeronautic bombing

run in the schism hostilities and that the installation below might have been damaged. Indeed, as they pushed on, it appeared that the container yard had taken a series of devastating hits. Where the detonations had landed, giga-crates had been decimated, container stacks had collapsed and the very rockcrete of the gargantuan depot yard had been shattered and cracked about deep craters and hollows. Why the Promethei Sinus container yard should present such a tactical target to loyalist or traitor forces, the Carrion could only guess. Perhaps Mechanicum tacticians on each side were attempting to deny their counterparts the supplies there. Perhaps the Imperial Fists had targeted the site on the insistence of the departing Mechanicum. Perhaps it was a purely accidental strike, a victim of garbled coordinates. Either way, the craters and trail of destruction through the depot yard certainly made the path through the jumbled giga-containers an easier one.

Flanked by the Null and the Void, their rotor guns held tight in at their shoulders with the multi-barrels sweeping the

labyrinthine path ahead, the Carrion moved through the gaps and spaces between the containers. Strix weaved through the jumble too, the cyber-raven swooping above and through the rubble. Pounding on through the colossal expanse of the depot yard, ducking beneath crates, bounding up slopes of disgorged cargo and sliding down the roofs of toppled containers, the Carrion led the way towards the hidden entrance to the dungeon-diagnoplex.

The first sign that there was something seriously wrong was the reappearance of Strix from a shadowy underpass.

'Halt,' the Carrion ordered, bringing his pair of servo-automata to a dead stop on the shattered rockcrete surface of the yard at the centre of a blasted hollow. As the cyber-raven flew back at him, its canting caw told of a threat ahead. It seemed that they were walking straight into an ambush. The Carrion brought up the baroque bulk of his graviton gun and set it to a rumbling charge.

'Pattern Imbrica,' the Raven Guard ordered, prompting Di-Delta 451 and Eta/Iota~13 to move. 'Form up and close fire arcs.'

A drone ocularis suddenly hummed from the darkness of the underpass, all scopes, augur vanes and aerials. As its pursuit of the cyber-raven brought it face-to-face with the Carrion, its pictcorder whirred into focus and a jabber-cant of code erupted from the drone, echoing harshly about the perverse architecture of the jumbled container yard. Pumping the weapon, the Space Marine blasted the drone with a graviton pulse. As if struck by an invisible giant fist, the construct was smashed back into the corrugated wall of a container and shattered apart in a shower of workings and splattered interior organics. The thing gave off the foul stench of something spoiled and corrupted from within.

A sound from the rear prompted the Carrion to spin around. The Null and the Void did likewise, moving forward with the multi-barrels of their rotor guns. The Carrion thought he heard something approximating a bark. The short blurt of bale code had come from a creature that now bounded up onto the slanting roof of a toppled container. It was an oil-slathering example of cyber-hybrid carnivora. A thick-set thing of exposed, vat-grown muscle - canine as far as the Carrion could tell - threaded through with cables, pneumatics and protective studding. Its eyes were fat telescopes, its legs flesh-fused into single, hydraulically augmented limbs, its snout a pneumatic trapjaw of idling chainsaw teeth. At another bark of echoing cant, the brute thing summoned a pack of similar monsters, which leapt and scrambled up through the rusted giga-containers. Suddenly they were everywhere, appearing from the gaps between crates and sometimes through the breached openings of the containers themselves.

The Carrion moved the barrel of his graviton gun between the skinless cyber-beasts. The Null and the Void's fingers pulled back on the triggers of their rotor guns, setting their multi-barrels to a whirring blur - each one waiting for a full yank on the trigger that would activate the ammunition autoloaders.

The cyber-creatures were wary at first, and then at the codestreamed order of some nearby corrupt construct the carnivora

simultaneously surged for the Knight Errant and his servo-automata. Their bounding steps and the combination of mastiff muscle and hydraulics made for a fearful rush. The Carrion blasted the nearest of them, shattering bone, demolishing augmetics and pulping raw flesh. Furiously charging the weapon, the Carrion smashed creature after creature into broken carcasses and bloody smears on the rockcrete floor and against container walls. The rotor guns of the servo-automata suddenly roared to the chatter of fully automatic fire, the Null and the Void shredding bounding cyber-beasts with economical bursts of fire, each trigger pull revving the multi-barrels to another carcass-chewing crescendo.

The hollow was a swarm of bounding bodies, cyber-hybrid carnivora coming at them from all directions at once. The Void was

knocked clean off her feet by one bullish beast, the thing snapping at her boots before attempting to drag her back to the pack. It received a side-mulching stream of rotor fire from the Null for its trouble, almost cutting it in half. Another beast came at the Null from behind but the Carrion smashed its screeching maw of cycling chain-teeth aside with the stock of his graviton gun before pumping the weapon and blasting its head, shearing jaws and all, clean off its hybrid body.

As the gravitic cell on the weapon clunked to empty, the Carrion felt the

extra weight of a pair of cyber-creatures biting into his left arm and leg. As the jaws chugged and their chain-teeth shrieked to full cutting power, the Carrion's plate registered a breach. The monster chewing on his leg had somehow managed to gun its jaws to some of the adjunct hydraulic workings. Dropping the graviton gun, the Carrion slipped his cog-wrench from where it was mag-locked to his belt. Snarling at the creature thrashing at his leg, he smashed the base of the tool's heavy shaft down on its reinforced skull, before slipping it between the monsters whirring jaws and prising it off.

With a power-armoured turn, the Carrion dragged the second cyber-beast around, its jaws locked on the plate of his arm. As the creature that he had prised off his leg came for him again, the Carrion cannoned the body of one cyber-beast into the other, knocking them both away. He brought the serrated denticles of the cog-wrench up and brained the first monster. As the second surged for his face, the Space Marine got the shaft of the tool between the construct-creature's thrashing jaws. The wrench handle juddered against the cycling teeth, but the Carrion forced it back, bracing the beast against the side of a container wall, forcing the shaft through the workings of the creature's maw.

Leaving the cog-wrench in the ruined workings of the cyber-beast's jaw, the Carrion turned around to find the Null on the rockcrete floor being mauled by another beast. Meanwhile, the Void was blasting oncoming creatures into blurs of gore and workings.

Those that escaped the rotor gun's attentions and made it to the Space Marine had the fired interface spikes of the Carrion's hydraulic fist to look forward to. Stabbing and punching the chain-jawed half-dogs aside as they leapt for his throat, the Knight Errant held the shrieking maw of the second-to-last beast away from his face by its brawny neck.

With his hydraulic palm against the housing of its pneumatic jaw, the Carrion drained the beast of its electro-motive power, turning it into a flailing lump of raw flesh, dragged down by deadweight bionics and appendages. Hurling the creature at the final beast, the Carrion broke them both.

Turning, he found another creature still dragging and mauling the Null across the rockcrete. Opening his palm at the last of the cyber-hybrid carnivora, he blasted the monster with the meagre power sapped from its compatriot construct. The half-dog

immediately released the savaged servo-automata before slinking away. The brute thing reached the nearest giga-container but before making it inside, the cyber-beast's flesh began to smoke and steam and it crashed to the floor and died with a shower of sparks erupting from its slowing chain-jaws.

The Carrion immediately sensed that something was wrong. The Void hadn't

used her weapon on the beast that had been

mauling her sister construct and so must have been pointing it somewhere else. As the Null got to her feet, a pair of ragged scars tore across her face where the cyber-beast had savaged her and the Carrion turned.

About the hollow, standing atop the jumbled containers, he saw a familiar figure. The rust-red robes. The cadaver's face. The missing jaw. The skeletal fingers on the clavier board. The leering servo-skull that drifted almost temple to temple with its master.

Standing above the Carrion in some kind of warped judgement, it was the lexorcist Raman Synk who had set his cyber-hounds on the Knight Errant.

Synk and his servo-skull Confabulari 66 were heretek hunters no more. Ghoulish balelight proceeding from all four eye sockets of the corrupted construct; the hunter had become one of his hunted.

'You will surrender,' the lexorcist's voice boomed from the servo-skull's inbuilt vox-hailers, 'and receive the judgement of Kelbor-Hal, Master of the Mechanicum, Fabricator General of Mars.'

The Carrion looked about. All around the hollow, bonded battle-automata of the Legio Cybernetica were stalking up to the

container edges. They were Vorax-class hunter-killer units, formerly found in the sinister service of the Malagra and the Prefecture Magisterum. Exterminators of rogue constructs and heretekes, the monstrous machines now found themselves slaved to traitor

protocols. The hunter-killers zeroed in on the Carrion with the large sensor-optics of their mantid heads, like a pack of machine predators. Shrugging their arm-mounted rotor-cannons forward into their firing cradles and bringing their irradiation cleansers up over their heads from their backs like the tails of scorpions, the hunter-killers were prepared for the lexorcist's next order, as issued on the cortex controller built into construct's clavier board chest.

Raman Synk had him. Perhaps the slave-systems of the arklighter had betrayed them in some way. Perhaps the Raven Guard had

not been as careful in his clandestine movements as he had assumed. Perhaps the lexorcist's cyber-beasts had simply picked up the scent of honest endeavour amongst the reek of ruination. Regardless, the lexorcist had tracked him down and had the Knight Errant in the sunsights of his machine-predators.

'Stand down,' the Carrion told the Null and the Void, and the multi-barrels of their rotor guns descended.

'You will surrender,' Synk told him again, the vox-modulated voice bouncing about the containers.

'To whom would I do that?' the Carrion called back, playing for time.

'To Kelbor-Hal, Master of the Mechanicum and Fabricator General of Mars,' the servo-skull blurted back.

'Not the Lexorcist General?' the Carrion questioned. 'Not the Prefecture Magisterum or the Divisio Probandi?'

Raman Synk said nothing for a moment, as though struggling with old memories that refused to stay buried and the balelight of his eyes dimmed for a moment. The Carrion pressed on. 'Do you remember, lexorcist? You used to serve at the pleasure of the Prefecture Magisterum, in the dungeon-diagnoplex right beneath our feet.'

Raman Synk's cadaver face twitched with remembrance. He could not resist the corruption flowing through his systems, the madness that clouded his mind or the spoiling of his dun flesh. He could not deny what he had become - a pawn of evil.

'You will surrender,' Confabulari 66 boomed, speaking for its master. 'Or you will be destroyed.'

Raman Synk's spindly fingers went to work on the cortex controller built into his chest.

'Lexorcist, wait!' the Carrion called, but Raman Synk wasn't going to.

Suddenly the lexorcist was a robe-thrashing mess of clutching hands and urgency. Strix had been circling above, observing.

Processing its simple aegis protocols. Under such circumstances, the cyber-raven was programmed to defend its master. Landing on the lexorcist's threadbare head, the hydraulics of its claws scratching at his hood and mottled flesh, the fabricant-familiar flapped its black wings and pecked at the top of Raman Synk's skull. The lexorcist didn't have protocols of his own for such a situation and responded by moving his hands between the halfcompleted targeting algorithms of his cortex controller and snatching for the construct attacking his head.

Finally, sinking its metal claws into the lexorcist's scalp, the cyber-raven pecked the interface pin of its sharp beak straight through the aged bone of Synk's skull. Turning the pin like a tool-driver, the bird burrowed down into the traitor's head.

Confabulari 66 blurted snatches of corrupted cant, interspaced with high-pitched shrieks. As Raman Synk crumpled to the floor, Strix took off from the dropping corpse-construct and landed on one of the lexorcist's unmoving hunter-killers, its beak dripping with blood.

The Carrion exhaled and gritted his teeth. He couldn't have given the cyber-raven many more seconds to act on its aegis protocols. A distraction might have been enough. Instead, the Carrion found

himself under the guns of silent hunter-killers, waiting for their final authorisation to open fire - an authorisation that would never come.

'No sudden movements,' the Carrion ordered. If the battle-automata thought they were being attacked, they might defend

themselves as a reflex protocol. The Carrion recovered his cog-wrench and slowly retreated from the hollow, prompting the Null and the Void to do the same.

Limping a safe distance away, the Carrion took the time to make some rudimentary repairs to the chewed hydraulics of his leg and stapled closed the gashes running across Di-Delta 451's mangled face.

'We're close,' he muttered, limping his way through the jumble of cargo containers, Strix swooping overhead. Accessing the meme-cells of his cogitator and overlaying memory with actuality, the Space Marine managed to pinpoint the location of the

Promethei Sinus dungeon-diagnoplex. Ducking beneath a collapsed giga-container and reloading a graviton cell into his gun, the Knight Errant hobbled up to the partially demolished rockcrete bunker sitting unobtrusively in the middle of the colossal container yard. In the bunker sat an equally unobtrusive blast door of pure adamantium. 'That's it,' he said, though he needn't have bothered since the servo-automata attending on him were only interested in the significance of direct orders.

Firing one of the interface spikes in his hydraulic fist, the Carrion ran buffers before inserting the pin into the haptic door socket.

Turning the spike with a clunk, the Space Marine processed the high security access codes that Zagreus Kane had supplied him with.

As Fabricator Locum of Mars, there were few places Kane's old passcodes would fail to work. As the adamantium door rumbled

aside, the Carrion was presented with a second security door and then the sizzling grid of an anbaric security mesh. Each needed different codes to unlock or disable them. Beyond, the large cage of a freight conveyer car for the transport of heretek and impounded materiel was revealed. Stepping inside with Di-Delta 451 and Eta/Iota~13, as well as Strix perched on one node-column, the Carrion activated the conveyer hatch and took the car down to the only place it led - sub-level processing.

As the doors opened on the blood-red haze of emergency lighting, the Carrion realised that this was where he had first seen the heretek Octal Bool. Beyond the detention complex, the sub-level housed the court diagnostica, operational quarters for the ward engines and Magisterium constructs, prisoner processing, cataloguing, interrogation/disassembly and the visitor auditoria.

The detention complex was a deserted mess, appearing to have been abandoned in a hurry. Runebanks had been left on, while weapons and power cells had been stripped from the armoury. It made sense to find even such a high security installation as the dungeon-diagnoplex unattended, the Carrion reasoned. In the face of datastreams and voxmissions confirming a global conflict and a schism erupting in the ranks of the Martian Mechanicum, many constructs would have abandoned their posts to respond to both loyalist and traitor recall and reassignment. For the priests and ward engines left behind there would have been little point attending a facility housing heretekes below ground when Mars was being seized by traitors on the surface. Constructs like Raman Synk might have remained, only to be infected with the corruption of the spreading scrapcode.

The Carrion found sentinel posts and aegis-stations abandoned, and holomat automata hanging lifeless from the ceiling; it

seemed that no one was even remotely monitoring the installation's dangerous charges. At each empty station, the Knight Errant found that the wireless receptors and hardfeeds had been smashed, along with encryptia and vox-hailers. It hadn't helped the constructs manning such stations. Without adequate data buffers, the infectious scrapcode had found a way in anyway.

Porting into the detention complex runebanks, the Carrion found the local hardlines and streams to be unclean and afflicted by the codecorruption. With his buffers protecting him from the screeching madness of binary, the Raven Guard ran a swift diagnostic, ascertaining that the integrity of stasis containment on the sub-levels was still intact, and that the heretek prisoner Octal Bool was incarcerated on Level 93, along with his experiments.

ANOTHER SECURITY CONVEYER took them from the security complex down through cavernous sub-levels of stasis-containment

cells. Each level housed a different heretek or example of deviant technology, frozen forever in time - for while the servants of the Cult Mechanicum might abhor the abominable and unsanctioned, they also abhorred waste. Low-grade metals were regularly

recovered from the slag-strata of ancient Martian operations. Strips of red desert were turned over to energy farms and anbaric-irrigators to absorb wireless power waste straight out of the Martian air. Vat-grown flesh was recycled for the cloning of further servant constructs. In turn, even the fruits of techno-heresy were securely preserved for posterity - stasis-contained or buried in vaults and labyrinths - so that the future priests of Mars might learn more of its deviancy, if only to condemn it further.

As the conveyer dropped down through the levels of the incarceratedoria, into the

bowels of the Red Planet, the Carrion thought on the radicals, the forbidden knowledge and the dangerous artefacts stored in the vault-repositories beyond. The runebanks in the detention complex had pict-listed details of the imprisoned and impounded, level by level.

The dungeon-diagnoplex housed heretek priests, xenarites and faith-traitors, as well as their assembled corrupt works. Examples of alien artefacts, anima silica and warp-fuelled technologies had been chrono-contained in the facility, as well as madmen and machines.

And magi, emaciated and unfinished, brutally bereft of their augmentations, their transgressions unsanctioned experimentation or illegal research. Some had indulged the techno-translations of censored texts or had been outspoken in their rejection of the machine -

and therefore the Machine God - in favour of the purely biological, with its governing passions and distractions.

In the installation-auditia the Carrion witnessed all manner of deviant constructs - mantis-like drones, murderous cogitants, monstrous unsanctioned battle-automata, diseased engines on sprocket wheel and tracks, humanoid killing machines wearing the remnants of organic camouflage. The machine-mad. The gremlid-infested. He saw mist-eyed explorators whose brain cavities had become home to alien parasites and electromagnetic beings - dark experiments gone awry - intent on crackling their way, in ignorance and infancy, across metal walls and through local wiring to freedom.

The cell-vault above Octal Bool contained the polished skeleton of a long-dead priest, hanging like an ornament from a spidery nest of servo-limbs and mechadendrites. The sentient metal tentacles had won the battle for supremacy with its Mechanicum master and now wore his remains like a ghoulish garment. The impressive collection of heretek and deviancy was a testament to the Lexorcist General's fear of anomaly and the Prefecture Magisterium's purity of purpose. Nothing should deviate from the cold logic of the Ommissiah's intentions.

The conveyer shuddered to a halt. Level 93. Hydraulics fired and door after security blast door rose, parted or rolled aside. An anbaric security mesh fizzled to nothing, allowing the Knight Errant entry to the huge cell-vault beyond. The Null and the Void followed, their rotor guns raised and their first belt-fed, large-calibre stub-rounds chambered. The Carrion pump-charged his graviton gun. Perhaps it was the various security measures, but the vault felt like a dangerous place.

Strix emitted a brief cant-caw that echoed about the cavernous darkness of the chamber. Everything was deathly still and the only sound that could be heard

was the reverberant hum of stasis field generators. Such precautions in each of the cell-vaults had meant that despite the hench-units and constructs of the Prefecture Magisterium abandoning the maximum-security facility, nothing had escaped.

The Carrion limped forward into the vast obscurity, the hydraulics of his legs sighing with each cautious step. A pressure stud alerted the cell-vault auto-systems of authorised visitation from the detention complex above. Bleak strobes clunked and blinked their way to illumination. The walls, floor and ceiling of the chamber were all black metal, like the chasmal cargo section of some ancient freighter. Air-circulation systems hissed to life from sliver-grilles. Infravision ball-optics revolved in their pict-sockets capturing for an empty detention complex the advance of the Carrion and his attendant automata into the incarceration.

A simple runebank console, set in a pedestal before them, glowed to activation. Stepping forward, the Carrion shouldered his graviton gun and punched suspension protocols into the runeboard. Firing an interface spike and stabbing it into the haptic port set in the bank pedestal, the Carrion fed the security systems the authorisation codes of the Fabricator Locum. Uncoupling from the runebank and slamming the 'Execute' glyph-key, the Carrion stepped back.

The delay gave the impression that the machine was considering the Knight Errant's request with the appropriate gravity - which the Carrion knew could not be true. With a clearance *clunk* that rattled the metal walls of the cell-vault and could be felt in the pit of his stomach, vents fired a silver steam. The runescreen on the pedestal began presenting the glyphs of a countdown, while the layered doors to the conveyer began to close as an extra security measure. The Carrion didn't like the idea of being trapped in a sealed vault, leagues below the Martian surface, but he had little choice but to wait on the countdown. As glyphs flashed up and disappeared, the red lamps about the ceiling and floor-mounted field generators glowed to a searing radiance, bathing the vault in an infernal light. The Null and the Void brought their rotor guns up to eye-line while Strix flapped its wings and cawed, hopping between the Carrion's shoulder-projecting node-columns.

The lamps began to illuminate the impounded technologies held in the dissipating stasis field. As line by line of lamps glowed on, the Carrion could see discoid plates in both ceiling and floor - like great chrono-containment magnets of similar polarity, holding something perpetually in place. On each plate, standing almost to attention, were ranks and ranks of battle-automata, possibly upward of three hundred units.

The constructs were Kastelan-class. They were hulks of plasteel, adamantium and ceramite - towering exemplars of ancient design and the excellence of forge world engineering. Chunk hydraulics. The brutality of heavy-duty workings. Armoured cabling and reinforced feeds. At twice the height of the Carrion and almost three times that of the Null and the Void, the battle-automata were lifeless yet imposing. Like statues, they demanded a moment of grim admiration of any who looked upon them.

Their reinforced plate was scuffed, dented and paint-stained the red of Mars, with chassis-frames and carriage-hydraulics polished down to their original materials. Only the workings of weaponry and the curved cortex-housing betrayed the bronze of exotic alloys. The red armour bore the sigil of the Legio Cybernetica and the production branding of Elysium Mons - the forge temple of their manufacture. Markings showed the battle-automata to have been drawn from a range of operational maniples, but all belonged to the Daedarii Reserve Cohort. The Daedarii had been formerly stationed at Phaethontis as a reserve section, after illustrious and punishing off-world service during the early days of the Great Crusade. Banners and foil ribbons riveted to their plate still listed their operational history and accomplishments.

As the first rank of battle-automata sizzled back to the present, the Carrion noticed movements from the impounded arcana. At the centre of what passed for a chest in the hulking machines, plate housings allowed space for what design dictated should be an interfaced representation of the machine opus - or Cog Mechanicum, the ancient symbol of the machine cult - a hybrid human and cyborg skull. On each of the battle-automata, and modified expressly against designations, the machine opus had been removed and replaced with an interlocking unit of brassy, polyhedral cogs. The gears were all outlandish shapes and intricate sizes, driving one another smoothly - their dentica and teeth fitting beautifully together. The arrangement ticked hypnotically like an archaic timepiece.

The Carrion had never seen anything like the arrangement during his thirty years on Mars. Watching the backward and forward action of the polyhedral cogs, the Knight Errant could not shake the impression that the gears were in the act of processing something rather than being physically driven.

'...tock.'

The sound of a wretched voice echoed about the vault. The Carrion looked to his servo-automata.

'Locate and isolate,' he ordered, prompting the Null and the Void to advance with their rotor guns raised. The cyber-raven Strix took to the air and swooped

over the cortex casings and silent bolt cannons of the statuesque ranks of battle-automata. Limping through the lines of metal giants, the Carrion held his graviton gun tightly to his chest. The Raven Guard felt vulnerable amongst the small army of heretekal machines: it was an unusual feeling for one of the Emperor's angels.

'Tick, tock,' the voice came again.

As the Carrion dragged the sluggish hydraulics of his damaged leg, the meme-cells of his cogitator overlaid his dream of Octal Bool with the words bouncing about the emptiness of the chamber. They were a match - an exact match - for the heretek's final words.

Strix found him first. The cyber-raven perched on the pauldron of a nearby Kastelan war machine, cant-cawing its discovery and drawing the Carrion and the two servo-automata to the heretek's location. Advancing with the fat barrel of his graviton gun levelled, the Carrion found Octal Bool on his knees. The heretek was bent over double, but not in pain.

In joy - he was laughing.

As the madness went from silent hilarity through hissing and wheezing to unrestrained glee, the heretek kept blurting, 'Tick, tock, tick, tock.'

The Carrion considered a range of approaches to the situation. This was not exactly what he had been trained for. He dismissed a formal identification of his person, purpose and credentials as pointless, while the implementation of physical violence would be counter-productive. Slipping down onto the armoured knees of his bionic legs before the former Magos Dominus of the Legio

Cybernetica, the Carrion looked down on the frail priest. Octal Bool quaked with glee, looking about him at the mighty battle-automata. He seemed particularly excited by the strange whirl of their polyhedral cogs.

The Carrion took the heretek by the arms and lifted him up, drawing the madman to face him. The Raven Guard blinked the

blank silver of his eyes at the priest. Bool bowed his head before the Carrion, revealing the blood on the crown of his head - still fresh

- where the lexorcists and hench-units of the Prefecture Magisterium had ripped some interface or working from a cavity running down into his brain. Bool brought his head up and opened his bloodshot eyes. The Carrion reminded himself that for the heretek, thirty years had passed in an unbroken moment. His tortures and the traumatic stripping of his cybernetics were but fresh torments.

His warning to those gathered in the auditorium - the Carrion included - all those years ago, was still bitter on his cracked lips. Of the true dangers to Mars, the embraced darkness of ignorance and a priesthood wired from vat-birth to

obey. Of the purity of the machine and the weakness of flesh.

'Mars will give up her secrets,' the lunatic babbled.

'She has,' the Carrion told him grimly, 'and she will.'

The heretek reached out absently for the silver workings of his arm and the paintless plate on the Space Marine's chest. He was like a beaten child, a tortured genius and an overloaded machine all wrapped up in one miserable specimen.

'Octal Bool,' the Carrion said, bringing the heretek back to the severity of the moment. After chrono-containment, the Space Marine reasoned, the free passage of time must have been a horribly disorientating experience.

'Bool - I need you to remember. What you have predicted has come to pass. Mars has fallen. It needs to be purged, Bool - do you hear me?'

The heretek's red-raw face screwed up with the joy of recognition. He nodded. 'Of the weakness of flesh.'

'Yes,' the Carrion confirmed. 'Of the weakness of flesh. Do you remember the Vertex? The planetary axle? The magnetospheric shield of Mars? Bool, do you remember your heresy, your sedition with the abominable intelligence and what you planned to do?'

'The machines must rise,' the heretek squawked excitedly.

'And the Red Planet must be purged,' the Knight Errant repeated, shaking the madman gently. 'Bool, listen to me. This has to happen now. Just as you were planning, before being caught by the lexorcists of the Prefecture Magisterium. Bool, where is the abominable intelligence? Where is the Tabula Myriad?'

As the heretek slowly repeated his words back to him, he suffered a sudden realisation, like a spasm. Releasing his grip, the Space Marine watched the wretch stumble to his feet and set off through the forest of towering battle-automata. Pushing himself off the battered, red plate of the robots' legs, Octal Bool moved with deranged certainty through the machines. Hobbling on his damaged limb, the Carrion followed him and in turn was followed by his servo-automata, their rotor guns at the ready.

At the centre of the huge vault, amongst what the Knight Errant estimated to be the entire Daedarii Reserve Cohort, he found the heretek struggling with the seals of a security casket situated on the disc of a stasis plate. Without his augmentations or carapace, the magos was a feeble thing of thin bone and wasted flesh. Sliding the cog-wrench off his belt, the Carrion stepped forward.

'Stand back,' the Raven Guard said, prompting the heretek to retreat.

'Tick, tock, tick, tock,' Octal Bool said, biting at his fingers. 'Be careful...'

With one power armour-driven swing, he struck the magnetic seal from the crating with the cog-wrench. Weaving in under the

workings of the Carrion's bionic arm, Octal Bool seized the crate and heaved

the heavy lid from it.

Peering down into the darkness, the Carrion was surprised to hear the heretek cooing and whispering into the crate. Laying a hydraulic hand on the priest's shoulder and prising him away, the Carrion found that Bool was holding a small fabricant to his chest that in turn was clutching him back like a baby. From behind it appeared to be a cherub - a cybernetic construct of done-flesh crafted into the form of a winged baby or angel. As it worked its white wings, Bool turned to the Space Marine and the Carrion saw its face.

The construct was not a thing of flesh at all but a small automata: a being of robotic frame and discoloured plasteel, with metal protrusions like ratchet-hooks for legs and tiny toolage claws for hands. Its head had the dead eyes of a doll, while the dirty plasteel of its face was a fixed mask. One quarter of its bald crown had been stripped away, presumably for an exploratory examination by the Prefecture lexorcists. Beneath the Carrion could see the smooth workings of intricate brassy cogs and polyhedral gears - the same wondrous mechanism he had observed set in the chests of the battle-automata. Incredibly for such a fabricant - a thing of metal, plasteel and flywheels - the construct demonstrated simple but clear emotional responses. Bool and the thing embraced like father and child, the heretek reassuring the creation after its incarceration in the crate and the stasis field.

'Uncannical,' Octal Bool told the Carrion. 'A pet project.'

'Bool,' the Knight Errant said. 'Where is the Tabula Myriad?'

The heretek released the cherub, which crawled back into the crate. Within moments, it returned. The flapping of its white wings took it into the air. Over its shoulder it had the loop of a chain made of interlinking gears. As the Carrion watched and the cherub rose, a machine appeared from the crate.

'Mars be damned,' the Carrion murmured, shaking his head. Beside him, the Null and the Void responded to the aegis protocols and leaned in with the multi-barrels of their rotor guns. The cyber-raven Strix cant-cawed the consternation of a simple threat-assessment.

The mechanism was an impossible thing - a large orb of interlocking cogs and gears of a design, motion and intricacy far

surpassing the basic mechanisms implanted in the battle-automata and the Uncannical. It was an overlaid nexus of ticking, rhythmic clicking and the slick, harmonious whir of impossible gears working in unison. The Carrion couldn't bring himself to think of it as alien, but its design and workings disturbed him. It looked as if it shouldn't work, but it did. Perfectly.

While human in design - the clunky intricacy of the machine told him that - it was clearly not a creation of the Mechanicum, a hallowed fusion of flesh and

iron. The exigency engine was all counter-clock gears and byzantine cog-work that became more

miniaturised and unfathomable the deeper he looked into the mechanism. Baroque tools, interface-columns and molecular scoops extended and retracted gently through the labyrinthine workings with the serenity of a serpent's tongue - testing, interacting and absorbing the base elements it needed from the air and surrounding environment.

'This is the abominable intelligence?' the Carrion said, but it was clearly a statement more than a question.

'This is the Tabula Myriad,' Octal Bool told him. 'Purger of the Parafex of Alta-Median and purifier of the stellar exodus worlds of the Perdus Rift.'

The Carrion watched as the cogs, gears and workings of the abominable intelligence parted at the base of the orb, creating an opening.

'Yes, yes,' Octal Bool bleated.

Further polyhedral cogs and intricate workings appeared in the opening until the heretek approached the silica animus and took from it a smaller orb of interlocking gears, the same kind of mechanism the Carrion had seen at work in the battle-automata and the cherub.

The Knight Errant repressed a shiver. The abominable intelligence was self-replicating.

Octal Bool turned, carefully carrying the miniature intelligence in his hands and offered it to the Carrion.

The Raven Guard's lip curled. His instinct was to destroy the thing but instead he settled on holding the ceramite palm of his gauntlet up.

'I am not worthy,' the Knight Errant told the heretek. He assumed the abominable machine could hear him. Bool simply smiled and bowed his head, then took the miniature intelligence and pushed it down into the bloody cavity in the top of his head. With a sickly realisation, the Carrion suddenly understood that Bool's torturers in the dungeon-diagnoplex had removed such a thing with the rest of his augmentations.

Octal Bool's face changed. The insanity and agitation faded. Twitches subsided, lines disappeared, muscles relaxed. With or without such slave-interfacia, Octal Bool was a heretek and sincere devotee of the genocidal Tabula Myriad and its cold equations.

Once again, however, he had achieved abominable union with the intelligence and had given himself willingly to the prosecution of its harsh solution for humanity.

The Carrion looked from the Tabula Myriad to the human face of technoheresy in the calm visage of Octal Bool.

'There isn't much time,' the Carrion announced. 'Mars must be purged. It must be poisoned and purified of the weakness of flesh.'

The intelligence-interfaced heretek gave the Carrion an awkward smile. About the Raven Guard, the reactor cores of the

Kastelans fired to unified life. Autoloaders of arm-mounted maximus boltguns and paraxial mauler shoulder-cannons chugged to priming and the atomantic defence fields energised, filling the air of the vault with the crackle and static of weapons-phased shielding.

With the artificial flesh of their neural cortices long extracted and no further need for wetware routines or the guidance of a machine-spirit, the battle-automata were now thinking machines, benefitting from their own simple exigency engines. Like Octal Bool and the cherub Uncannical, however, they were under the ultimate reason and control of the abominable intelligence. Without the need for vox-cant or orders in the form of binary, the battle-automata began to form up in their operational maniples.

As the Carrion looked about in amazement, battle-automata bearing the carapace identifiers of the First Maniple stomped to

attention and assumed a protective formation about Bool and the Tabula Myriad. Among their stamped records of operational history, the Carrion could see the designations of individual automata: Dex, Impedicus, Nulus, Pollex and Little Auri. The Carrion nodded with appreciation as he realised that the units of the First Maniple were named after the fingers of the hand. The Knight Errant had no doubt that working in unison the hulking battle-automata would pack quite a punch.

'Vertex Australis, and the destruction of the magnetospheric shield,' the Carrion said to the serene Octal Bool and the intricate exercise in abominable genius that was the Tabula Myriad. 'The eradication of flesh must be enacted.'

As the first maniples of battle-automata began forming up in front of the elevator doors leading into the cell-vault, Octal Bool gave him the peaceful certitude of his bloodshot eyes.

'Fear not, ally of annihilation,' the heretek said. 'It has already begun.'

EXECUTE

WAR HAD RETURNED to Mars. Not since the Thunderhawks and Stormbirds of the VII Legion had departed had bolt and beam

been exchanged with such purpose and determination. It was true that long after the sons of Dorn left the Red Planet to its treacherous fate, loyalist constructs - mutilating themselves by ripping out ports and interface-augmentia - fought on in the ruined shells of their forge temples. With no sockets or receivers, the true servants of the Omnissiah were immune to the effects of the

infectious scrapcode that had driven so many of their compatriot constructs to madness and heresy.

These forge worlders fought a guerrilla war against the new overlords of Mars, little realising that it was their own Fabricator General who had betrayed them to Horns Lupercal and unleashed dark, ruinous secrets from repositories of techno-heresy like the dread Vaults of Moravec.

As the battle-automata of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort marched their indomitable way south, the Carrion observed the failures of the loyalists. The robot maniples stamped through the irradiated bones of rag-tag soldiers who had been launching hit and run attacks on traitor convoys in the frigid deserts. They passed through demolished hab-hives where resistance constructs had fought a short-lived urban war in the narrow freightways and derelict structures. Their priest-leaders toiled in workshops to discover a way to reverse the corruption of the code that, like a plague, took as many of their number as the weapons of traitor thralls and infected automata.

Then there were the forge temples of the south - some of which had embraced new developments like noospherics, which had

offered the great anvil-altars of the Omnissiah some protection against the virulent ruin spilling through the datastreams, hardlines and wireless feeds.

These the Daedarii Reserve Cohort found to be gone. Entire temples had been wiped off the face of Mars by Titan war machines, by airstrikes of the Taghmata Aeronautica and orbital barrages launched from Arks Mechanicum stationed beyond the contested Ring of Iron.

The Carrion admired the spirit of the Martian freedom fighters. It was the Raven Guard's kind of warfare - striking from the shadows, stealth, sabotage and the lightning sweep of hit and run attacks. These tactics had failed the loyalist guerrillas, however.

Beyond the constant threat of scrapcode infection - the corruption ever attempting to worm its way into the untainted workings of the constructs - the freedom fighters were battling against the dark masters of Mars, a Mechanicum removed, revering no longer the Machine-God but dread technological wonders, powers incalculable and forbidden knowledge from which the Omnissiah had so long protected them. These code-screeching slaves, re-forged in purpose and form by the dark fires of ignorance and otherworldly influence, were unremitting in their destruction of the Omnissiah's true servants. Unified in their shared corruption, they exterminated the loyalist Mechanicum with a prejudice primordial and extreme.

What flesh and iron could not be warped to the new purpose of Kelbor-Hal, the Warmaster and their infernal allies, had to be destroyed. This was the story

Mars told as the Daedarii Reserve Cohort trudged south through sand and frost. Beam-riddled bodies in Ommissian red. Blackened crater-fields left in the wake of airstrikes and god-machine mega-weaponry. Forges forgotten in

apocalyptic fire, the blasted red rock of horizon-scraping hollows and unnatural energies blazing down from orbit.

Still, despite such odds, the Carrion's legionary eye, his knowledge of Mars and his tactical instincts told him that there was something else at work. In the darkness of the south, where the long polar night and the distant fires of traitor forges had plunged the Red Planet into a sickly twilight, the Raven Guard felt that there were other forces moving. The ruinous oligarchy and feudal priesthood of the ruling magi directed the traitor forces of Mars with the dread authority of their overlord, Kelbor-Hal. Forces on the ground, however, were insanity-canting cybernetic monstrosities. Their sickness-streamed protocols might have dictated their movement, industry and deployment, but the perversions of vat-flesh and constructs of haunted iron were drunk on the dark power that scarified their systems. They were things of mindless madness, throwing off the sober deportment of their previous existence. They stalked. They murdered. They destroyed.

The Carrion's cogitator, training and battle experience told him that such successes were not to be expected from such monstrous aberrations. He considered who on Mars the traitor Kelbor-Hal would trust to secure the dawn of his dark empire from remnant loyalists, freedom-fighting constructs and even possible reclamation forces from Terra. Which of his archmagi-militant, his synod-persecutors, magi-reductor, myrmidax or ordinators had the Fabricator General entrusted the security of Mars to? The infamous Skeltar-Thrax? Aloysio Suvias? Haxmyn Tryphon? Perhaps even a trans-Martian, an off-wo rider like Cornelis Varicari? The Carrion did not know, and there was little in the scorched bones and obliterated wreckage of loyalist guerrillas left behind to tell him.

As the sinister computations and predictive calculations of the Tabula Myriad drove the battle-automata of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort south - into darkness and dropping temperatures - and on from victory to decisive victory, the Carrion could not help but feel that he was part of a game. A tactical contest not unlike the one Lord Dorn and the Regent Malcador had discussed, where the frosted sands of the Martian south were the board and Mechanicum constructs the pieces.

It was possible the Tabula Myriad was not the only dread intelligence at work in these war-torn lands. Although the abomination communicated nothing of such knowledge, the Carrion noticed that the exigency engine guided its army of slave battle-automata with strategic subtlety and sophistication - as if it were

playing against an expert tactician, a master in ordnance and fortification.

The abominable intelligence would avoid some engagements while taking the Daedarii out of its way to indulge others.

Sometimes it would direct its battle-automata to march relentlessly towards their mission objective while at other times it had the cohort trudge leagues out of its way, through harsh terrain and over snow-capped mountain ranges. As the days and weeks wore on, the skies blacker, the stabbing temperatures colder and the heat of battle ever fiercer, the Carrion became convinced that the abominable intelligence and its treacherous opposite were playing deadly games with force disposition and an approach on the great polar forge of the south - the traitor-held temple of Vertex Australis.

The Carrion pulled the frost-stiff material of his black robes about the grey of his plate. The length of his ice-laced hair framed the rawness of his pale face. It was the only bit of his engineered body that could feel the ferocious temperatures, but just looking at Di-Delta 451 and Eta/Iota~13 in their goggles, infrarctic robes and turbans made the Knight Errant feel cold. The cyber-raven Strix hopped between the node-columns protruding from the Carrion's shoulders, his feathers frosted, but the columns provided a little welcome warmth.

The Knight Errant and his attendant automata were travelling in a Triaros-class armoured transport - a heavy-duty galvanic traction engine armoured with thick plate. Octal Bool had recovered the carrier-engine from an all but demolished loyalist workshop.

The guerrilla constructs had been brutally executed by heavily-augmented shock-troops - a number of which lay broken on the ground as evidence of the determination with which the loyalists had defended their meagre base of operations. Bool found the carrier-engine to have been stripped of servitors and its systems codescrubbed by the workshop transmechanics. Appropriated for the ease of transporting the biologicals and the Tabula Myriad itself, the Mechanicum carrier-engine chewed up the Martian soil and ice behind the impassive synchronicity of the battle-automata. Like an ancient Terran warlord, the abominable intelligence marched its war machines up and down the scree of red mountain slopes, through demolished manufactoria and around the distant balelight and sky-skewering discharges that proceeded from traitor-fortified forge temples.

Prompting Strix to hop onto the digits of his hydraulic hand, the Carrion popped the cyber-raven on the Void's shoulder. As he got up, the Null went to get to her feet.

'Remain,' the Carrion ordered. He gave the silent, dead-eyed Uncannical and the incessant whirring and ticking of the

interlocking orb of cogs and gears that was the Tabula Myriad a wide berth, climbing up out of the service bay and onto the platform of the control dais. There the Knight Errant found Octal Bool at the carrier-engine's controls, swathed in thermal robes.

They were deep in the polar wastes now. The Carrion could hear the armoured feet of the battle-automata crunching down

through carbon dioxide snow and ice, while even the heavy-duty tracks of the vehicle were having difficulty with the depths of the drift through which it was ploughing. The vehicle's simple energy shielding sizzled through the freeze and kept the worst of the searing wind off the open cab-dais. Here, on the approach to the pole, the abominable intelligence had settled on a route through some of the most dangerous terrain the ice cap had to offer. Abyssal fissures, polychromatic ice sheets, a polar vortex of plasteel-cracking temperatures and cloud banks of freezing vapour which lent, if it were possible, the long night of the south an even greater murk and obscurity.

Even with the carrier-engine's search lamps on, the Carrion could barely see the rearmost machines in the cohort columns of Daedarii battle-automata. The robots were white-washed with snow, marching on dauntlessly into the darkness. Not being able to use the code-corrupted communication channels, seamless coordination was entirely reliant on the miniature exigency engines turning, clicking and whirring in their chests, and the unspeaking communion they shared with the Tabula Myriad itself.

Not only did the battle-automata seem to think for themselves, they thought for each other, with such thoughts being guided by the abominable intelligence. It was disconcerting and loathsome to behold, but the Carrion had to admit that such techno-heresy was serving the cohort well on its march south.

The Kastelan-class machines had been a wonder to watch. With the heavy trudge of their hydraulic legs, the rattling plate of their combat chassis and the sizzle of atomantic shielding, the Daedarii Reserve Cohort re-lived the glorious days of off-world conquest and their contributions to the Great Crusade of mankind. Rather than magi and the inflexible algorithms of their combat wetware driving them on, under the integrated control of the Tabula Myriad, the robots were imbued with a simple self-determination that was simultaneously eerie and yet undeniably impressive to see in a machine.

At Hadriatica, the Carrion had seen the monstrous automata stride through a sea of traitor skitarii, the flash of las-shots searing off their shielding and carapaces while the battle-automata shredded through the soldiers with maximus boltguns and hydraulic sweeps of their arm-carriages. In the ruins of the Ausonian assembly yards he saw them punch through the sides of battle-scarred

Land Raiders and carrier-engines, tearing tech-thralls and heavily-augmented gun-servitors out through the rents in transports and ripping them limb from limb with their chunky, powered fists.

They had stormed the freightways and landing strips of the Eridanus deep-core mining fields - smashing through code-corrupted excavator-constructs and chattering hordes of myrmidon mercenaries, long charged by the feudal overlords of the area to protect their interests. In the dioxide-dusted peaks of the Thylus Heights - amongst the sky-scraping vanes of the Nereitski Towers - the battle-automata cannon-hammered the sides of roving assault carriers and grav-craft that had acquired the exposed cohort on the ridge.

Descending on crashed carriers, the Kastelan-class war machines stomped down the frozen slopes and set about demolishing the aircraft. Crushing the tech-thralls escaping the crash-site under armoured feet, they mauled the wreckage and survivors with their shoulder-mounted bolt weaponry before tearing sections off the carrier and downing nearby code-screeching aircraft with hurled wreckage.

The battle-automata had taken losses, nonetheless. A marauding Warhound Scout Titan had been dogging the Cohort's

indomitable steps since the remains of the Hesperia sub-hives, filling the darkness and the crisp Martian air with the booming madness of its war-horns. The great machine had been crisscrossing the Martian wastes and had finally located the Daedarii Cohort on the shores of Lake Tetanus, a seasonal body of meltwater. The Titan's command deck lit up with ghoulish of satisfaction and the ground trembled with its roar of garbled binary as its vulcan mega-bolters did their worst.

Turning the shoreline and rusty shallows of the lake into a maelstrom of destruction, the Warhound decimated a section of the abominable intelligence's automata army, shredding carapaces, battle chassis and exigency engines in an unrelenting stream of fire.

Swift to respond and seeing no probability of success in an assault on the Titan, the Tabula Myriad directed its maniples into the waters of the lake itself, effectively losing the infuriated war machine.

A strike fighter bombing run lit up the night on the polychromatic expanse of ice but also cut through the columns of marching battle-automata, turning units into scrap-strewn craters and damaging a further fifty war machines. Losses always seemed to be calculated as part of some ongoing equation being clicked and whirred inside the intricacies of the abominable intelligence.

The remainder of the Cybernetica cohort certainly wouldn't pass a diagnostic muster. On most of the battle-automata the

atomantic shielding reactors were operating at below half-strength, their las-scorched carapaces were buckled and bolt-ridden and their ammo-crates and autoloaders were all but empty. The synchronous march of the Daedarii units also wasn't what it had been, with shredded cabling and hydraulics leading machines to drag armoured feet and allow weaponised limbs to hang uselessly at their sides.

What was most startling for the Knight Errant, however, was not the way in which the battle-automata soaked up punishment -

which was impressive enough - but their incredible resistance to the virulent scrapcode that had infected and wormed its way into nearly every construct on the Red Planet. No matter what malefic binaric was transmitted at them, no matter what corrupted machine attempted to interface with them and flood their workings with insanity, the Carrion saw not one battle-automaton fall to the techno-plague. With the intricacies of their own exigency engines turning, interlocking and calculating a kind of machine reason within them, the Tabula Myriad had created a construct ever-questioning, ever-counteracting and ever-incompatible with the darkstream.

As the carrier-engine back-tracked to a slushy halt, the Carrion pulled himself upright in the cab-dais. 'What is it?' he asked Octal Bool.

The temperatures had done little for the heretek's raw face, but his calmness remained. He pointed out through the frozen

darkness and the murk of swirling ice vapour that afflicted the Martian pole. The heretek handed the Knight Errant a pair of magnoculars. In the distance - through the miasma and the lightless polar night - the Carrion could see a colossal structure.

'Is that it?' the Space Marine asked. 'Is that the Vertex Australis?'

Bool nodded.

Returning to the magnoculars, the Carrion saw the flare of ghostly lights about the great, turning axle-tower of the forge temple.

The vast spindle extended through the depths of the Martian crust and into the planet's metal core. The revolving tower released colossal amounts of energy into the heavens of the Red Planet, feeding the magnetospheric shield that protected all organic living things on Mars from the lethal radiation of the sun and deep space. As flames of unnatural power danced about the forge towers, the Carrion saw other shapes out on the ice. Three mighty war machines: more Warhound Titans. Undoubtedly one of them was the

engine that had acquired the cohort before. Peering hard through the magnoculars, the lenses of which further augmented his own optic filters, the Carrion thought he could see gun emplacements out on the ice beyond the

manfactoria, mills and habs that surrounded the mighty forge temple. Assault carriers drifted across the expanse in patrol patterns, kicking up snow storms about them while ocularis drones shot this way and that across the ice and about the forge.

'This is not right,' the Carrion said. 'This is not right.'

Octal Bool said nothing.

As a Raven Guard, the Carrion understood the importance of stealth and its use against an over-confident enemy. Scanning the distant forge, the Carrion was spoilt for choice in terms of invitations to certain death. From the recently erected irradiator gun emplacements to the deployment of Titans and extra surveillance, it appeared very much as if the Daedarii Reserve Cohort were expected. As the Tabula Myriad had expertly weighed the probabilities and strategically guided the cohort of battle-automata across the nightmare of traitor-held Mars, the Carrion had been ghosted by the irrepressible suspicion that they were being hunted. How, the Knight Errant could not know. No one on the Red Planet knew of his mission. Yet, here he was - staring at an infiltration target that had been hastily fortified for a siege.

Looking up into the darkness of the polar night sky, the Carrion could hear the rumble of engines. Somewhere above the cloud of icy vapour was a fighter wing awaiting orders for an air strike. Worse still, the Carrion could swear that the glittering constellation of lights that had moved silently and slowly across the night sky over the past few days was the Ring of Iron - re-orienting its orbital alignment to encircle the Martian poles and deter any kind of direct attack on the Vertex Borealis, Australis or the planetary axle itself.

'They know we're coming,' the Carrion said.

This time, Octal Bool acknowledged his concerns. 'The Tabula Myriad concurs,' the heretek told him.

Suddenly there was movement in front of the carrier-engine. Looking back through the magnoculars, the Carrion could see that the maniples of the Daedarii Cohort were splitting into three. Striding out of the murk, the battle-automata units Dex, Impedicus, Nulus, Pollex and Little Auri presented themselves to the carrier-engine.

'What's happening?' the Knight Errant demanded of Bool and, by extension, the abominable intelligence.

'The defence forces and fortifications must be engaged,' Bool told him.

The Carrion shook his head. 'That's suicide,' he said. Even with a full cohort of battle-automata, the Daedarii Reserve stood no chance of success in a direct assault.

'The Tabula Myriad is not aware of the relevance of any such concept,' Octal

Bool said. 'Mars must be cleansed. The mission must proceed.'

'I'm not arguing, but—' the Carrion said.

'The Tabula Myriad had made its calculation,' Octal Bool told him. 'The greatest chance of mission success lies with diversionary assaults and a simultaneous infiltration of the temple complex.'

'The losses—' the Carrion protested.

'Are an acceptable exchange for the purification of Mars,' Octal Bool told him. 'It will cost the entire cohort - which is why, as an expert in such disciplines, the Tabula Myriad has designated that you lead the infiltration. Its personal guard of battle-automata will do the necessary damage once inside to irreparably cripple the ancient operation of the installation.'

The Carrion looked to the Kastelan battle-automata marching away through the icy vapour to their certain destruction, then

peered back through the magnoculars at the distant forge and its defences.

'Well,' the Carrion told Octal Bool, 'one approach does present itself...'

WITH THE CARRIER-ENGINE'S tracks chewing up the ice at full speed and the forward shielding intensified, the vehicle soaked up the worst that the irradiator gun-emplacment had to offer. Blast after blast of radiation finally collapsed the forward screens and bathed the carrier-engine in lethality. As the systems fried, the galvanic engine failed, the tracks locked in a form of vehicular death, but the irradiated shell of the carrier still skidded on towards the emplacement. It was the Carrion's plan but the Tabula Myriad's estimation of the timing. Calculating the vehicle's speed, the number of blasts the emplacement could offer in the time it took the carrier-engine to reach it, and the amount of radiation the galvanic traction drive could soak up before detonating, the abominable intelligence gave the Raven Guard the information he needed to destroy the gun-emplacment crew and their deadly weapon in a vehicular explosion.

Trudging through the snow with the miasma of vapour about them, the Carrion led what was left of the Daedarii Cohort along

the cargo-carriage length of a stationary mag-lev engine. The carriages hovered a little way above the heated rail with the full length of the vehicle leading out of the temple's manufactoria, waiting for its cargo of recycled waste to be processed.

Unnatural fires lit up the sky from the tower-tops of the temple. Around the interlopers the air was trembling with the

cacophonous sound of machine madness. Warhound Titans thundered their predatory announcements, while voxhailed insanity and screeching scrap-code cut through the crisp coldness about the Vertex Australis.

The Carrion led the group along the cargo-carriages at a limp with Strix perched on one node-column. The Space Marine had his graviton gun held up ready to blast his enemies into oblivion, and was flanked by the Null and the Void with their rotor guns. Octal Bool hurried along in his thermal robes carrying a volkite charger liberated from the carrier-engine, with the Uncannical flying behind

- the Tabula Myriad dangling on the polyhedral links of its chain.

Surrounding the abominable intelligence and the heretek were the Kastelan battle-automata of the First Maniple, in a defensive wall of cybernetic might.

It was not an easy task to cross the polychromatic ice sheet undetected and reach the manufactoria outskirts of the forge temple.

It was even more difficult to infiltrate the installation with five hulking battle-automata. The Space Marine reasoned that he would rather have the protection of the war machines than not, however, and used the cover of the mag-rail cargo carriages and the swirling white murk of the ice vapour to hide the monstrous machines the best he could.

As a drone ocularis skirted across the ice at them, part of an exploratory diversion from its patrol path, the Carrion blasted the thing apart in a rain of shattered workings and fragments of housing. They could not afford to be detected so close to their objective.

The Knight Errant hoped that the calculations of the abominable intelligence were right and that the suspicion aroused by the destruction of a gun-emplacement here and there, or the odd drone missing, there would be nothing in comparison to the frontal assaults being conducted by the rest of the Daedarii Cohort.

As they worked their way up the mag-rail and into the cover of a labyrinth of low-grade manufactoria workshops, the Carrion could hear the thunder of battle nearby. At three different locations about the Vertex Australis, the battle-automata of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort were walking into fire and destruction. As planned, their sacrifice and stubborn refusal to let go of their unnatural life was buying the Carrion and his group precious time. The frontal assaults of the Legio Cybernetica machines had drawn ocularis drones, assault carriers full of temple-thralls, air strikes from a forge-bonded fighter wing and the apocalyptic attentions of the three Warhound Scout Titans down on them. The Carrion wasn't sure how long the loyal machines' sacrifice would buy them. He hoped it would be enough, but by the sound of the battle he didn't think they had much time left.

As the Carrion moved along the carriages and through the servitor-slave workshops, he did his best not to attract attention. In the main the drones were sickly-smelling technomats, adapted and programmed to perform one repetitive

task. This meant that the Carrion only had to kill the occasional thrallmaster and bonded overseer with crushing blasts from his graviton gun.

As he moved into a quad where raw materials from a depot-dump were being hauled to individual workshops, it struck the

Carrion that the area offered excellent opportunities to mount an ambush. The warrior limped to a halt. He felt a little bile rise from his pre-stomach.

'Maniple,' he ordered. 'Form up.'

The Tabula Myriad must have authorised the battle-automata to follow such an order because within moments the five machines were in formation with the Null and the Void, offering the gaping muzzles of their boltguns and cannons.

Seconds passed. The Carrion's breath misted on the air. For a moment nothing seemed to move. Even the servitors in their workshops grew still.

It happened all of a sudden. Armoured shapes burst from around the depot dump, the workshops and from between mag-rail

carriages. The Carrion found himself face to face with the blank faceplate of a Thailax - a highly augmented automaton that amounted to little more than a collection of organs and a cerebrum encased within Mechanicum plate. It started screaming cant-corruption at him, while sickly ichor began to run from its ports, cabling and augmetic seals. The thing brought up a lightning gun with a heavy chainblade bayonet that roared to life as the warrior charged. The Carrion pumped his graviton gun and let the construct have the full force of its blast through the narrow swivel of its midriff. Cutting the thing in two, the Carrion turned back to the Null, the Void and the battle-automata.

'Destroy them!' he Carrion roared.

The quad became a storm of arc-streams and stomping Thallaxii warriors. The battle-automata were ready for them. The

Carrion's warning had given them the precious seconds the machines needed and the Thallaxii troops found themselves launching an ambush straight into a hurricane of bolts and mauling gunfire. The hail of shot and shell thinned their number quickly but others began landing on back-mounted jump packs, hitting the ground with a hydraulic bounce before and behind the Knight Errant and his team.

Nulus took a lightning blast to the chest but Little Auri snatched up the Thallax warrior with his powered fists and smashed him into the side of the mag-lev carriage. As another came at the Carrion with its lightning gun, the Void blasted it aside with a drumming stream of fire from the multi-barrel of her rotor gun. A hidden Thallax suddenly erupted from the corrugated wall of a workshop shack, its heavy chainblade presented. The bayonet ripped straight through the

Void's chest, pinning her to the mag-lev carriage behind. She gave the warrior the coldness of her scar-stapled face before resting the barrels of her rotor gun against its blank faceplate and blowing its head away.

Both Eta/Iota~13 and her killer fell simultaneously to the frozen floor. There was nothing to be done. The Carrion had to keep the constructs moving.

Without the element of surprise, and at such close range, the shock troops did not last long against the hulking battle-automata.

The machines smashed heads and faceless helms from armoured shoulders. They tore appendages from Thallaxii warriors and fried their automotives with system-fusing power field shocks.

'Onwards,' the Carrion called, keeping his orders simple.

As the Carrion led the constructs along the carriages of the mag-lev engine he couldn't help but feel that they had been expected.

The shock troops had been lying in wait. Whatever was coordinating the hasty fortifications and security for the forge temple had seen them coming every step of the way. Such preoccupations almost cost the Carrion dearly, as a second wave of thrall-constructs came at him from the workshops and freightways running alongside the mag-rail.

A crackling set of lightning claws came at the Raven Guard, forcing him to turn and take the scrape of the searing weapons

across his pauldron. Through the darkness of its faceplate he saw the suggestion of something altered and monstrous within. Smashing the thing back with the stock of his graviton gun, he found that the close-combat construct had two crackling claws. Like the Thallaxii, these monstrosities wore a form of Mechanicum powered-plate and were called the llrsinax. The thing came right back at the Space Marine, back-slashing the gun out of his grip with its other sizzling claw.

The Carrion snarled and thrust a gauntleted palm at the augmented warrior's face. Digging his ceramite fingertips into its

buckling faceplate, he tore the helm-piece off. Firing the four interface spikes on his hydraulic fist he threw a pneumatic punch with his bionic arm. The blow stabbed the Ursinax through the brain and the Carrion watched as the nightmare of robotic limbs and innards collapsed.

Raising the graviton gun he kicked the next back with his good leg then shot the second, third and fourth Ursinax warriors to come at him, force-blasting them into each other, the workshop walls and the cargo-carriage.

'Finish them,' the Carrion commanded as the battle-automata Dex and Impedicus stomped up to him.

Suddenly the cargo-carriage ahead was blasted out of line and off its mag-

rail. The recyclable scrap it contained showered across the open space created by its crushing path as the carriage skidded around, levelling workshops and technomat servitors. The Carrion felt the frost-shattered rockcrete beneath his boots quake with the step of a large, approaching construct. A siege automaton stepped forward from where it had kicked the demolished cargo-carriage out of line, creating an opening for itself. It was massive, towering three or four times as tall as the Space Marine. It sported giant crushing claws - as big as the Carrion himself - each mounting monstrous twin-mauler cannons. A baleful glow shot from cracks, old bolt holes and buckled plate-housings in its armour.

The colossus reached for him with its great claws but the Carrion blasted it to one side with his graviton gun. The shower of sparks off its barrel chest from the Null's rotor gun did nothing to impress the gargantuan thing and it stepped clean over both of them to get to the First Maniple of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort. Putting themselves between the siege monster and the Tabula Myriad, the Kastelans went straight for the giant's legs. Pollex was snatched straight up in the great claw and crushed like a rations can.

Meanwhile the maniple's other units seized the monster machine's huge legs and sheared away at the workings and hydraulics of its axial knee-joints with shredding fire from their maximus boltguns and mauler cannon.

Appearing from the gap left by the mag-lev carriage, four escort units were stomping their way into the fray to support the enormous siege-automata. They were all Castellax-class units, the more common kin of the First Maniple. Instead of power fists, however, the monstrous machines were equipped with the serrated crescents of spitting power blades. Their carapaces steamed with a sticky ichor that seemed to exude from the metal itself, while fist-mounted flamers dribbled a greenish fire. Upon detecting the Carrion, the first lifted its arm and blasted a sputtering stream of flame at the Knight Errant. Strix launched itself for the sky with a cant-caw as the Carrion snatched up a piece of metal scrap and deflected the worst of the sickly inferno with the surface of the plate fragment.

As the Carrion abandoned his makeshift shield, the enemy unit stomped slowly forward, its power blades sizzling with serrated lethality. Baiting the machine between them, the Space Marine blasted the battle-automaton back with his reclaimed graviton gun while Di-Delta 451 hammered the thing with bursts of fire from her rotor gun. As the graviton cell ran dry, the battle-automaton launched itself at the Carrion, forcing him to duck and weave out of the searing path of the power blades.

A sustained patter of rotor shot sparking off the thing's sticky pauldron and cortex casing seemed to distract the machine. As it went after the Null, the

Carrion limped up behind it, laying the palm of his hydraulic hand on the warped thing's leg. Sapping power from its systems and reactor core, the Knight Errant brought the machine to a frozen standstill.

Turning on the other three Castellax units stomping through the carriage opening, the Carrion blasted every spark of scavenged energy he had drained from the first into the second unit. The arc-stream seared into the superstructure of the battle-automaton, turning the cybernetic monstrosity into a smoke-swirling wreck that ground to a sparking halt.

The workshop next to the Carrion was suddenly blasted apart as a stuttering stream of magna-bore bolt fire erupted from the twin-mauler cannons on the siege-automaton's fist. Dex, Impedicus, Little Auri and the damaged Nulus had managed to shred through the workings of the monster's legs, bringing the colossus to its knees. With Nulus holding one arm away from Octal Bool and the Tabula Myriad, uselessly pumping bolt shells into the side of a cargo-carriage, Auri and Impedicus turned the cannon fury of the other arm through the corrugated workshop and into the remaining two Castellax units, turning them into blasted derelicts.

Marching forwards, Dex slammed its fist straight through the cortex casing of the colossal siege-automata, destroying the thing instantly. As it withdrew its arm, the stinking slop of corrupted flesh dripped to the rockcrete floor.

Allowing Strix to land on his node-column once more, the Carrion picked up the graviton gun and exchanged out the spent cell for his final spare. He looked through the gap in the cargo carriages at a scrapyards beyond. It was a storage area where the mag-lev engine was disgorging its transported load and the mounds of materials were being processed.

'We've reached the forge temple,' he told the gathered constructs, before pumping the graviton gun and resting its barrel against his pauldron. 'Onwards,' he ordered. The Null prompted Octal Bool forward, along with Uncannical and the frosted orb of the Tabula Myriad.

THE KNIGHT ERRANT and the constructs trudged up through the frosted mountain of scrap. The higher they advanced, the less

shelter they benefitted from. The howling winds of the frozen plain cut through the twisted scrap metal and coated everything -

constructs and all - in a dusting of ice. As they moved, it was difficult not to let the eye travel up the vertiginous walls of the forge temple. The industrial wonder of its mills and factoria and the baroque majesty of the spire had been things of beauty once. Now the temple was a place of dark deeds. The radiance of its furnaces were now beacons of sickly balelight. Its architecture and walls were shot through with unnatural rusts and encrustations that even the frost

could do little to disguise. From this infernal smithy rose the mighty Vertex. Like an axle turning with the world, it reached up into the Martian heavens, the metal of the shaft snapping and crackling with the mysterious electromagnetic energies of its planetary function. It was simple yet impressive. The forge temple relied upon the Vertex for power and production requirements. Using the Vertex as a geomagnetic reactor and funnelling magma from its reach into the Martian core for its mills, the forge made economic use of the ancient technology.

Below the Carrion, like a river carving out a valley, a heavy-duty conveyor belt transported scrap on a gentle incline up into the forge complex.

Mono-task servitors and robotic rigs lined the conveyor, sorting the finest quality metals for recycling before the incline grew, taking the selected scrap up a high-rise section of the travelator and into the forge. Deciding upon his entrance to the mighty forge temple, the Raven Guard led the constructs down into the valley.

The heavy-duty conveyor had little problem with the weight of the battle-automata. When they were all on, the Carrion led the way up through the metal scrap on the moving belt. As they rose through the darkness of the polar night, the wind screamed about them and the height became sickening.

From so high up, the Carrion could command a view of the ice sheet below. The sounds of battle were dying. It was all but over with only a few of the Daedarii battle-automata fighting desperately on against madness and impossible odds. The screeching strike fighters and exploratory attack runs had come to an end. Ocularis drones and thrall-swamped assault carriers were drifting through the vapour and over the battlefield of decimated battle-automata. The units of the First Maniple would soon be the only survivors of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort. The Warhound Titans bellowed a vox-cast roar of code-madness that shattered the thin, polar air. The command deck viewports of the god-machines glowed with an unnatural light, giving the Titans the appearance of deities possessed.

The polluted slush had been pounded to shallow lakes by the hordes despatched to meet the battle-automata. Tracked carriers, wardozers, spider-tanks, walkers and speeders had streaked ahead of the degenerate ground troops, carrying their constructs straight into the heart of the howling fray.

Code-corrupted menials, babbling with lunatic abandon, formed mindless mobs of cannon fodder. Weaponised servitors

staggered and shrieked at the approaching enemy, cutting down their own in the optimistic insanity of celebratory gunfire. Heavily augmented shock troops and battle-automata stamped and bulldozed their way through their own lines, smacking aside their traitor kin with their carapace bulk and weaponry.

More degenerate still were the vat-spawned mutants that appeared as if they

had climbed straight out of their gene-tanks and into battle. War-savants and code-fevered priests barked orders in harsh binaric to skitarii soldiers. Encouragement rained through the darkness in the form of sheet gunfire hurled across the meltwater by auto-emplacements and sentinel-towers fielding great gatling blasters and mega-bolters in the forge temples defence. Smoke-spewing drones coursed above the delirium, while the antipersonnel artificials, light combat-mechanoids and hunter-killer automata formed the possessed backbone of the maniacal surge.

The Carrion shook his head. Like the Schism of Mars, like the civil war now swallowing the galaxy - it was an incredible waste.

The Raven Guard made his way up the shuddering incline, hurdling scrap and hauling himself over rusted obstacles. The Null kept pace, pushing on ahead of the abominable intelligence and its heretek attendants. The monstrous battle-automata thundered up behind, shaking the conveyor support struts with their every step.

It was vital that their entry did not attract attention. As something metallic and sparking fell from the sky and rounded the forge temple-tops, the Raven Guard blasted it with his graviton gun. The ocularis drone smashed into the temple wall and dropped, bouncing its way down the conveyor belt towards them. Looking at the smoking shell of the machine, the Carrion watched as it cracked like a spoiled egg, bleeding liquid corruption all over the conveyor.

The Carrion led the constructs into the forge complex, exchanging the polar cold for the searing heat of a raging mill. Magna-arc furnaces melted scrap down into colossal containers and channels of molten metal that separated the mixture of alloys contained in the remnants. The labyrinthine network of mesh catwalks, skeletal stairwells and interconnecting companionways through which the industrial conveyor passed ran above and between the pools of boiling metal. The radiance was unnatural, the infernal mill a place where old Mars came to die. Here materials were recycled and rendered, so that they might be used to create new weapons and servants: an army fuelled by darkness and fit to fight for the Warmaster's new empire.

The roar of the furnaces threatened to split the eardrum, but didn't prevent the demented scrapcode from being vox-hailed

through the mill for the adoration of its anchored workforce. The forge was largely automated, with a range of heavy-duty furnace-mecha, mono-task production units, drone machinery and heat shield-clad robotic menials doing the majority of the labour. Machines melted down machines in order to make more machines. Moored pit servitors, with skin scorched to blackness, wailed their excruciating insanity as the Carrion and his constructs tramped between the

metal channels and molten falls.

'It was considerate of you to enter through the recycling mill,' a booming metallic echo of a voice cut through the screeching vox-hailers.

It was an impossible voice. Modulated, but recognisable. A voice that should have been no more.

A voice that the Carrion recognised as belonging to his friend. The Iron Warrior.

Aulus Scaramanca.

RECONFIGURE

'IF VIOLENCE ENSUES in the sanctity of this forge temple then my constructs will not have to drag the deadweight of your quality augmetics and automata far to the smelting pits.' The humourless mechanical drone echoed about the cavernous mill.

'Aulus?' the Carrion called, his hearts thumping. 'Is that you?'

'After a fashion,' the Iron Warrior said, his modulated voice cutting through the molten hiss of industry. 'What you left of me... and much more.'

Something huge stepped down through the nest of derricks, support struts and catwalks. Aulus Scaramanca was no longer an engineered wonder of his primarch's flesh and blood. He was a monstrous machine, an engineered wonder of Mars, constructed of metal and pure hatred. The Iron Warrior was huge, taller than the siege-automata they had faced outside the forge temple - as tall, perhaps, as an Imperial Knight or Martian war walker. His armoured legs were of brute hydraulics and battered armour. His midriff was a narrow pivoting column, supporting a broad armoured thorax that seemed to be all pauldron-plates and combat chassis, with two colossal appendage-arms. Each arm snaked with cables and crackling power feeds, terminating in monstrous grapple-daws, each talon tapering to a delicate point that arced with electromagnetic energy.

The construct was dripping with chains. Its scarred plate was studded and painted in the dun colours favoured by the IV Legion, as well as decorated with yellow hazard stripes. In the centre of the gargantuan chest was a battered, leering helm in the fashion of the Iron Warriors dour iconography. Before it was a pair of smaller arm-appendages equipped with digi-tools for close work. The size and position of the skull made the monstrous construct appear hunchbacked, but this was only exacerbated by the great globed back of the thing. Ensnared in a reinforced placement was a reactor of molten iron, glowing and spinning like the liquid metal core of a planet.

The same radiance reached out from the eye slits and vox grille of the central

helm, lending the construct an infernal quality.

'Aulus...' the Carrion said again. 'I... How?'

'How?' the Iron Warrior boomed back. 'The genius of Mars. When the tower-preceptory collapsed, I was the only survivor

beyond you. What was left of me crawled out of the mountain of rubble days after it was demolished, and most of that was a useless mess. Can you imagine, Carrion, the will it took to do that?'

The Raven Guard said nothing.

'A will of iron,' Aulus Scaramanca told him. 'I thought you might return, but you didn't. I didn't even know if you were alive.

Instead I was found by the magi of Mars. The new Mechanicum.'

'A false Mechanicum,' the Carrion challenged. 'Enemies of the Ommissiah, in league with traitors and heretics.'

'You lecture me on heresy,' Aulus Scaramanca thundered, 'yet you arrive in the company of the heretic and the abomination yourself. It matters not how you judge or what you think - just as it didn't matter to me. They offered me a new body. Something to replace all that I had been and more. A body of iron. So that I might survive the procedure, they introduced me to the wonder of the code. A datastream of living consciousness. An altered state. A new way to exist. A life beyond the limitations of flesh and iron. I was disappointed with their first efforts and killed them with the body they had created, for their lack of vision. The magi built me a second and I did the same. Only now am I... complete. I *am* iron. Within and without.'

The Carrion couldn't bear to look upon the thing his friend had become.

'Aulus, you must—'

'Listen to you?' the Iron Warrior asked. 'Listen to reason? To my conscience? As my primarch did? A lot has changed in a short space of time, Carrion, as your presence here demonstrates. I serve my primarch Perturabo, and the Warmaster. Mars will be ready for the coming of Horus. I shall ensure it. The Mechanicum has charged me with such a duty. Mars, secure. Impregnable. A worthy fortress world from which to launch the final conquest of a galactic empire and the seat of its Imperial dominion: ancient Terra. I know not which master you serve now, Carrion. Your plate is testament to none. Before a siege, an Iron Warrior starts by knowing the weaknesses of the site he wishes to defend and protect. By understanding best where he himself would attack. Only then can he appreciate how best to fortify it. I know the weaknesses of Mars, my friend, just as I know the weaknesses of this forge temple. The Invalis. The weakness of flesh. The Vertex and the vulnerability of magnetospheric shield. You forget - I was there. I saw you coming before you even knew you were. You shouldn't have needed

half-remembered hereteks and a silica animus to have told you how to destroy Mars. That is the comforting thing about abominable intelligences though... They always fail.'

'I will complete my mission,' the Carrion told Aulus Scaramanca.

'Your mission is futile,' the Iron Warrior boomed, the baleful illumination burning bright within his mouth-grille and eye sockets.

'I have stationed every available construct I have in defence of the mighty Vertex. You will not reach it. You will not interfere with the reverence of its ancient construction. Mars has new masters. You will not be allowed to threaten the shadow-sanctity of the new Mechanicum's domain, or the Warmaster's inheritance.'

As the Iron Warrior spoke, the Carrion scanned the mill complex for exits. The conveyor belt was only taking them closer to the monstrous machine that was Aulus Scaramanca. Every bulkhead, blast door and freightway was crowded with forge temple security forces: skitarii, gun servitors, cybernetic shock troops, battle-automata. The Carrion looked back up the conveyor but a swift spectra-scan with his bionic eye revealed a skitarii assault carrier hovering in the frozen air outside. The aircraft's weapons were hot and the servitor slave-pilot at the controls waiting to call an abrupt end to any attempted retreat.

'Why waste your function on a suicide mission?' Aulus Scaramanca put to them across his vox-hailers. 'For those of faraway flesh? It is illogical. Some of you are already hereteks. Our time has come. Join us. Take of the code. Serve both the new glory of Red Planet and - for once - yourselves. Carrion, we can wipe clean the memory of the old Mars. We can construct a new empire, together.'

Seconds passed with the conveyor taking the Carrion and his constructs onwards toward the Iron Warrior. The Raven Guard's

cogitator burned with the demands of data-processing the rapidly unfolding futility of the situation.

'Don't do this,' Aulus Scaramanca implored. 'Don't be the Carrion come to feed off the death of the past. Become the future.'

'Bool,' the Carrion said to the heretek. 'Have your construct get the abominable intelligence to safety.'

'I saved your life once,' Aulus Scaramanca said.

'Automata, stand by,' the Carrion said to the Null and the machines of the First Maniple. 'Attack patterns authorised.'

'Don't make me take back the gift I gave you...' the monstrous machine warned him. In the metallic ring of his booming voice, the Carrion could hear all the bitterness, the emptiness and pain of what he had become. Aulus Scaramanca

was his friend and he would do him one last service, if he could.

He would destroy him.

The Carrion and his constructs stepped off the conveyor belt onto the scorched metal platform running alongside. The heat was blinding. At the same time, Uncannical beat its fabricated wings, taking its cherubim body and the orb of the Tabula Myriad up away from the rising heat of molten metal and up into the metal rafters of the mill. The monstrous construct that was Aulus Scaramanca shook its metal helm in the searing silence of disappointment. The forge temple's security forces began hammering their way across companionways and down industrial stairwells towards the Carrion and his attendant automata.

'Enact,' the Knight Errant ordered.

Simultaneously the Carrion and the battle-automata unleashed their weaponry on the deviants and dark machinery stomping towards them.

They suddenly found themselves face-to-face with the forge master's skitarii security forces: pallid ghoul-soldiers whose

bleached flesh was interfaced with twisted black weaponry. Their fusils screamed beams of dark energy and seemed in control of the skitarii rather than the other way around. The weapons were hungry for sacrifice and led their host symbiotes through the maze of catwalks, stairwells and mesh-platforms that ran around and above the lakes of molten metal.

A furious exchange of fire blazed across the companionways, with the Kastelans tearing through the mill with bolt fire. Several dark beams punched through the Null's insensitive flesh, prompting the servo-automata to bring up her rotor gun. The multi-barrels whirred to lethality before their muzzles became a blinding flare. Sparks rained from the metalwork as shells tore up the

companionway and the train of weapon-possessed skitarii were shredded in their tracks.

As the rotor gun clunked to a stop, the mill alarms could be heard. On the balcony platforms above the Carrion could see engine-overseers in helmet-hooded flame-resistant robes directing temple security forces down on their position. Albino skitarii

reinforcements, driven on by their accursed weaponry, flooded the walkways. Ahead, the Carrion and Di-Delta 451 engaged bloated gun-servitors with stitched, shaven skulls and dead eyes. Instead of arms, the fat servitors shouldered twin-linked heavy weapons that were fused to the bone and braced across their chubby necks like a yoke. They belly-laughed their insanity at the interlopers as their heavy bolters crashed death up the walkway.

'Clear a path!' the Carrion ordered.

Dex stomped past with Impedicus and, risking a glance behind, Di-Delta 451 saw that Little Auri and Nulus were holding the gun-drunk skitarii behind with targeted and disciplined bursts of bolt fire, while soaking up blasts of dark energy on their synchronized fields and plate meant for the Carrion and Octal Bool.

With the injured Null pinned down and taking cover behind the mesh and railings, Dex and Impedicus took the walkway at a determined stomp. Leaning out over the liquid metal, the Carrion aimed his graviton gun and turned the corrupted corpulence of the lead gun-servitor into a mound of broken bone and butchery. Its place was taken by a needle-toothed compatriot that slowed the robots with a hailstorm of dark beams. As the force of the assault hammered off Dex's synchronised atomantic field and the battered plate of its carapace, Impedicus drew ahead, leading with return fire from its own belt-fed mauler cannon.

The Carrion felt the walkway rock. It bounced a second and third time as what little give the structure had left was spent absorbing the extra weight of additional bodies. Mechanoid reinforcements were leaping from companionway to companionway with the agility of death world predators. The spindly hydraulics of their biped legs carried them across the molten death below with powerful anchor-talons latching onto the bars and meshing - Vorax-class hunter-killer units.

They zeroed in on the Carrion and his constructs with the large sensor-optics of their mantid heads. Once again, the enemy had deployed. Bringing up their back-mounted irad-cleansers, the machines vented bursts of radioactive death at the interlopers before launching themselves forwards. The hunter-killers made short work of the companionway as further members of the pack-maniple landed on the catwalk. The Null made them run the gauntlet of her rotor gun but the Vorax benefitted from the finest reflexes battle-automata had to offer. Lowering their chassis and propelling themselves off rails and meshing, they avoided the worst of the shell storm, the remaining bullets sparking off the hunter-killers' light armour.

The sweeping rotor blasts finally found and chewed through the leg of the lead unit, and it slammed into the mesh flooring and tumbled into a clunky roll. The battle-automaton came to rest at Nulus's feet and the machine instinctively stamped down on the small head of the deviant thing. Di-Delta 451's follow-up went wide, allowing a second artificial to leap its fallen comrade construct, burying its anchor-talons in the unfortunate servo-automata. Nulus smashed the hunter-killer aside with its power fist before finishing the thing with a burst of

bolt fire from its mauler cannon.

The companionway was swarming with the machine predators by the time Di-Delta 451's rotary cannon ran dry. As Vorax tore

up the companionway, batting each other aside in their drive to maim and murder, telescopic tri-blades on their flanks extended.

Locking into wicked claws and crackling with the unnatural energies flowing through the constructs' power cores, the blades began to revolve at blinding speed, turning the flanks of the mechanoids into wheels of streaking death. The Null was the first to experience the revolving power blades. There was nothing she could do to protect herself from the onslaught, and she disappeared in a blur of light and butchery.

The Carrion blasted mechanoid after mechanoid off the companionway at close range. Then, turning his weapon on the molten

metal below, the Knight Errant slammed a shot of invisible force into the crusted slurr. The liquid metal splashed ceilingward in a glorious, gold fountain that upon its descent turned the swollen-bellied gun-servitors holding the catwalk ahead into howling fusions of melting metal and flesh.

The Carrion suddenly felt the quake of monstrous footsteps through the superstructure of the catwalk. It was the horrific

colossus-construct of Aulus Scaramanca. The machine seared with agonies undreamed, with the bitterness of iron and hatreds that knotted his wiring and workings. Betrayed at every turn by friend, foe and the Carrion before him - who in the galactic emptiness of falling empires bereft of brotherhood might have been considered both - the corruption of the code fed a fury that already existed in the construct's raging core. The Iron Warrior became a barely restrained maelstrom of cold machine anger.

He moved in to do what his temple constructs had failed to achieve. Opening the talons of his electromagnetic claw and with the globe of molten iron spinning in its back-mounting, Aulus Scaramanca used the field-forces to tear through the mill like an invisible storm. The Iron Warrior clawed at the air and thrust his revolving talons at the sky. He tore up the struts, platforms and

companionways running over the liquid metal below. The magnetic forces directed from the claws were immense, and the threedimensional labyrinth of black metal companionways, stairwells and structures rent and twisted with invisible ease. The sound was excruciating. Wreckage, screeching hunter-killers and traitor constructs rained from the fury of the Iron Warriors magnetic assault, hissing into the lakes of liquid metal below.

The factorum complex quaked, shaking stairwells and walkways loose. Electromagnetic explosions rippled through nearby

machinery. Platforms and meshing cascaded to the mill floor, carrying with them anchored drones, as well as hordes of code-fevered skitarii and warped gun-servitors. A molten deluge flew up at the demolished impact, before falling back through its own steam.

Those fortunate enough not to plunge to their deaths were splattered with boiling metal and seared to the wrecked companionways.

The maze of multilevel companionways was now a shattered mess. Some sections had survived but much of the structure had ended up in the shallow silver sea that was bubbling away across the expanse of the mill floor. Constructs were dying everywhere: engine-overseers, gun-servitors, skitarii. Along with the mangled structures and traitor-constructs, one of the Tabula Myriad's battle-automata, Nulus, lost its footing and tumbled downwards to meet its molten end.

As the damaged Nulus plunged into the raging lake, its claws snatching at the searing surface before disappearing below, the Carrion used the hydraulic power in his good leg to jump clear. Little Auri advanced on the Iron Warrior as Scaramanca daw-heaved the metal superstructure towards his augmented form, ripping support struts from walls and the mill ceiling. Wreckage rained down about the battle-automata but Auri would not be put from its indomitable path.

The Carrion turned to find Octal Bool behind him. The Space Marine grabbed the heretek with his bionic arm and hurled the priest off the structure to safety - just as Aulus Scaramanca had done for him before. As the wretched priest landed on platform below, the Carrion launched himself from one collapsing structure to another with all the agility he could muster. Strix had taken to the burning air, cant-cawing his distress. As the Carrion finally found purchase on a semi-stable platform, he turned his attention to the two remaining battle-automata who marched on the machine monstrosity. They were fearless. They were impassive. They were doomed.

As their gun-mounted arms came up, Dex and Impedicus joined Little Auri in unleashing a storm of bolt-rounds at the Iron

Warrior. It was the best the battle-automata could offer, but it was not enough. Aulus Scaramanca held out the palms of his electromagnetic claws. With power drawn directly from his own reactor, the gauntlets slowed the fat bolt-rounds to a standstill.

Allowing the shells to fall, the monstrous machine turned the powerful magnetic fields on the attacking battle-automata.

Clutching one claw Scaramanca seized Little Auri with the incredible magnetic forces at his command. The battle-automaton's chassis began to spark

and smoke. Contracting his claw, Scaramanca visited his terrible powers of destruction upon the battle-automaton. Carapace cracked, adamantium and endoskeletal alloys creaked and buckled. Servos popped. The construct's plate crumpled. Oils, hydraulics and lubricant cascaded down its demolished form. Workings and wiring poured from splits and rents until all that was left of Auri was a ball of pulverised scrap. The Iron Warrior was about to do the same to Dex and Impedicus when an invisible force punched into the monstrous machine, knocking it back.

On the platform, the Carrion fired the graviton gun again and again, blasting Aulus Scaramanca back with ferocious maximum-power pulses from the weapon. Clearing a rail, he dropped down onto the same level as the Iron Warrior, punching spidery cracks and craters in the striped plate of the colossal construct. As he did so, Dex and Impedicus emptied their arm-mounted guns and belt-fed mauler cannons at the distracted Iron Warrior, riddling the monster with bolt-rounds.

Holding out a huge claw under the onslaught, Aulus Scaramanca rotated the talons on his wrist mounting. Delicate magnetic manipulations prompted chains, cables, hard lines and wiring to erupt from servitor-stations and the ruined architecture of the automated mill. The chains and interface cables reached out for the constructs, prompting Impedicus to stamp several cautious steps back. The chains and cables found unit Dex, however, and snaked about the battle-automaton's limbs like restraints, slowing the indomitable approach of the machine. Port plugs slithered across its workings, exploring, invading, attempting to find a way in. The forge temple cables interfaced with the machine, and Aulus Scaramanca flooded the battle-automaton with a codestream of corruption.

As the Carrion's gravitic cell ran empty, the Iron Warrior recovered himself and stumbled forward on his mighty legs. The

Carrion pumped and fired the weapon again, but it was empty and the Space Marine tossed it aside where it clunked on the mesh of the platform.

The Iron Warrior seemed fascinated by the ensnared machine before him. Dex's weapons were empty but its will was strong. As the polyhedral cogs and gears thrashed to processing in its chest, it strained against the chains and cables snaked about its limbs.

'You reek already,' Aulus Scaramanca told the machine as the code felt its way through the battle-automaton's systems, 'of corruption. You will join your construct-kin at my side. Embrace the code and rise up, slave.'

The Iron Warrior stared at the impassive battle-automaton. The construct

seemed to stare back. The Carrion watched the two of them as they engaged in some kind of contest of machine will, as Aulus Scaramanca guided the datastream corruption invading Dex's workings and routines.

The Carrion knew that he would find nothing there. The machine did not suffer from the weakness of flesh. He would find no

simple protein memory, no data residing in the machine's non-existent wetware. What the colossus-construct did find, however, was a purity of presence; the perfection of polyhedral cogs and gears shifting back and forth in logic and unison.

Aulus Scaramanca found the searing beauty of the abominable intelligence that had already claimed the battle-automaton for its own, and screamed.

The Carrion watched, amazed, as the colossus gorged itself on the beautiful intricacies of the Tabula Myriad: its logical integrity, the perfection of its code, its machine purity. The interface cable running into the battle-automaton began to steam. Warp encrustations sizzled and smoked away to nothing and the ancient cable gleamed to a newness. The irrepressible algorithma of the abominable intelligence sang through Aulus Scaramanca like an agonising symphony. As the machine darkness of the Iron Warrior's soul fought the genius of the algorithma for supremacy, the beautiful logic spread through the warped array of antennae, aerals and crooked vanes through which the monstrous machine communicated with the infected machinery about it. The cold supremacy of the artfulness reached out to the slave-constructs of the Vertex Australis. It took control. And for a moment it released them.

In that moment, everything changed.

In a wave of algorithmic elucidation, artificials across the mill returned to the searing clarity of their machinehood. The warping influence of the pollutive scrapcode sizzled away to static. It was suddenly scrubbed from system integrities, cogitae and datastreams.

Like a wildfire of logic sweeping through the forge temple's networks, the algorithma cleansed Vertex Australis's automata of corruption. The mill devolved into a site of simultaneous accidents: mono-task production units and drone machinery ensured that engine-overseers burned, were electrocuted or fell to messy deaths. Heavy-duty furnace mecha-cut gun-servitors in half with sweeping cables and temple security forces were drowned in molten metal from the robotic cranes and purged scoop buckets. A mag-lev freight monitor, carrying freshly cast armour plating, accelerated and left its track. The monitor plunged through the wall of the forge at high speed and crashed through a horde of gibbering skitarii.

Hiding in the remaining vestiges of darkness in his being, Aulus Scaramanca

felt the burning, blinding logic of the abominable intelligence backwash through his systems and cabling. Shaking the demolished mill with a continuous roar, the colossus-construct turned his great magnetic claws on himself. Angling his palms inward and channelling the full magnetospheric power of his spinning, molten iron core, the superstructure of the Iron Warriors monstrous machine form trembled to an unbearable frequency. Each rivet, plate and rancid augmentation pulled away from the colossal combat chassis, all but rendered asunder by irresistible magnetic force.

Within, the ruined flesh about the Iron Warrior's reconstructed skull and spine - all that the demolition of the tower-preceptory and the cybernetic attentions of dark magi had left him - found momentary release from the afflictions of otherworldly corruption.

The moment was beautiful. Horrific. Fleeting.

The Carrion's armoured shoulders sagged. The Knight Errant, who had stood by on the platform, willing the monstrous machine

- the thing that had been his friend - on to self-destruction, watched as Scaramanca's screams died about him. The mighty magnetic claws came down. The corruption within the Iron Warrior that afflicted the forge temple and infected all of Mars would not be denied.

The Iron Warrior reached up for the vaulted roof of the mill. There the monstrous machine could detect the cold workings of the abominable thing that had scalded his systems from the inside out. Opening a sizzling claw, Scaramanca summoned the interlocking polyhedral intricacy of the Tabula Myriad to him. The cherub Uncannical beat its wings and heaved on the orb's chain but the magnetic force was far too powerful. The chain slipped out of the construct's tool-fingers and shot across the havoc of the demolished mill until it sat suspended - floating between the talons of the colossus.

Aulus Scaramanca studied the abomination as it gently turned within the magnetic field of his open claw. The Tabula Myriad

clicked and ticked and tocked. Its impossible cogs turned. Its gears shifted with slick precision back and forth as the abominable intelligence calculated the certain probability of its doom.

At the same time Aulus Scaramanca found himself stormed by the Carrion and Octal Bool. The priest would die for the heretekal wonder; the Carrion would do anything to see the success of his mission. He had seen what the Tabula Myriad could achieve. Mars need not burn in the destruction of Exterminatus. It need not be irradiated in the lethal rays of its own star and purged of the weakness of flesh. It could be cleansed as it had been corrupted. The Carrion had seen it.

But the key to the Red Planet's blessed release now sat in the monstrous claw of Aulus Scaramanca.

'Aulus,' the Carrion roared, 'listen to me. You saved my life once. Now you can save all of Mars. I'm begging you. For the frailty of flesh and the eternitude of iron. For that which we once called brotherhood. Help me do this.'

The Iron Warrior turned from the Tabula Myriad in his claw to the pleading Raven Guard then to the heretek Octal Bool. With the abominable intelligence threatened, the heretek was running at the monstrous form of Scaramanca, blasting at him with his volkite charger, the construct Uncannical flapping its wings behind. Ash and flame danced off the Iron Warrior's striped plate. The infernal balefires of molten iron and corruption raged through the skeletal eye-slits and mouth-grille of his helm. Strengthening the magnetic field between his talon, Aulus Scaramanca silenced the Tabula Myriad. The brassy cogs and gears froze under the magnetic insistence of the monster. Octal Bool ran on, firing wildly.

'Aulus!' the Carrion roared.

With a monstrous metallic roar, searing arcs of energy streamed from the talon-tips of Scaramanca's claw into the Tabula

Myriad. The techno-heretical wonder and the abominable intelligence that resided within melted in the Iron Warrior's magnetic grip.

From orb it turned to a ball of slag and from that to molten metal.

'Burn, heretek!' Aulus Scaramanca roared and blasted the liquid metal at the priest, turning Octal Bool and his attendant

automata into a screaming mess spread across the platform.

The Carrion had no words for the loss. Hope. Possibility. Gone.

Slipping the cog-wrench from his belt, the Carrion charged at the Iron Warrior. It was futile but the fire in his heart and his workings wouldn't allow anything else. It was all he could do. Smashing the serrated denticles of the cog-wrench through the workings and bolt-riddled armour of Scaramanca's leg, the Carrion hit him again and again.

The Iron Warrior turned and smashed the Carrion back across the platform, where the Space Marine's flailing form demolished a servitor station. Prising himself from the crumbled metal and wreckage, the Knight Errant came at him again. He threw the cog-wrench at the colossus-construct, which the Iron Warrior seemed to find witheringly humorous. A hollow mechanical laugh came from its vox-hailers as Scaramanca willed the weapon out of its path with a magnetic wave of his claw. Thrusting his talons at the Carrion, the Iron Warrior tore rents in the platform flooring and blasted great craters of magnetic force through the structure.

Moving with as much grace and speed as his damaged leg would allow, the Carrion stomped with pneumatic power at the monstrous machine. He dodged. He jumped. He shoulder-smashed his way through the erupting platform. He leapt at Aulus

Scaramanca but the colossus-construct caught him in a single great claw.

Grabbing hold of the metal, the Carrion placed the palm of his hydraulic hand on the Iron Warrior's talon and began to drain the thing of power.

Scavenged energies burned through the Carrion's systems. Metallic strips sizzled in his flesh. His column nodes crackled

furiously and the blank silver of his eyes grew bright. Still the power came, fed by the raging globes of furious iron that formed the construct's core.

'I think you may have over-reached yourself, Carrion,' the Iron Warrior told him, before flinging the Raven Guard into the mesh floor. Anbaric energies arced about the Carrion, searing from his overloaded systems. Crawling out of the crater in the platform, he stumbled to his feet and thrust his palm at the monstrous machine. An arc-stream of lightning blasted into the Iron Warrior, burying the construct in a nimbus of blinding light. Within, the Carrion could hear the Iron Warrior's agony.

As the blaze died away and the Knight Errant's power with it, Aulus Scaramanca stomped forth. His plate was scorched and fires had broken out in nests of his servos and cabling. The monster was still fully functional, however.

Reaching towards the still entangled form of the battle-automaton Dex, the Iron Warrior tore the machine apart in a magnetic maelstrom of shredded plate and combat chassis. Swooshing his talon at the Carrion, the hailstorm of metal and frag passed straight through the Knight Errant. Within a single, sickening second, the Carrion felt the sheared plate and splintered workings of the demolished battle-automaton cut him to shreds.

The Raven Guard hit the mangled platform horribly - his armour a wreck, the workings of his bionics shredded and his flesh a frag-riddled mess.

From the mangled platform, the Carrion could see the last of the Tabula Myriad's battle-automata through the wreckage of the mill. Instead of attacking Scaramanca, the unit Impedicus had stomped its way backwards through the twisted havoc, its empty guns tracking the movements of enemy constructs. The Carrion coughed up blood. He wished the battle-automaton away. The exigency engine that whirred and clicked furiously in its chest had weighed up the probabilities. With the Tabula Myriad gone, and its maniple brethren and the Carrion failing to bring the Iron Warrior construct down, Impedicus had decided to retreat.

*Decided...*

The Carrion had come to think of the machine as a living thing. It was a simple construct but searingly self-aware. The mission had failed. In the cold equations of life and loss, the abominable intelligence at work within the machine had selected survival as its next imperative. How like a living thing, the Carrion found himself thinking. The Raven Guard could empathise. With a bloody gruel dribbling from his lips, he too tried to haul himself away. His ruined cybernetic workings would not obey, however. Lying there on the warped mesh, his engineered body ruined and undone, the Carrion felt the true weakness of flesh.

As the Carrion writhed in agony and malfunction, Scaramanca grew still. The Iron Warrior had also sensed the battle-automaton Impedicus retreating back through the devastation of the mill, and started forwards on his massive legs. The Carrion reached out - the ceramite fingertips of his gauntlet scraping momentarily against the colossus-construct's armoured leg. He tried to make some kind of sound. A warning. A protest. All that proceeded from the Carrion's mouth was blood, however.

In silent, machinic solidarity, Aulus Scaramanca held out one of his huge claws. The battle-automata would not be drawn, however. Its armoured feet took it backwards with cold confidence, its empty weapons tracking the advancing colossus-construct.

Then Impedicus paused.

For a moment the Carrion, with his smashed cogitator and agony-addled mind, thought that the battle-automata was considering Scaramanca's silent offer. Something unspoken passed between the two constructs. The Iron Warrior gestured with the digits of his great magnetic talon, and the battle-automata waited on a demolished walkway. The mesh of the fallen companionway grazed the lake of molten metal that bubbled below it, bathing both the fallen structure and Impedicus in the furious heat of the forge. The structure about the machine glowed and sagged further towards the liquid inferno that had claimed its brethren unit Nulus.

And Impedicus's plate, metal and workings began to glow also. Its iron flesh creaked, and sparks popped from the expanding joints in its limbs.

The Carrion and the Iron Warrior watched as the radiant machine soaked up the intense heat. For a moment, the Raven Guard thought the machine was committing some kind of machine suicide - that the bottomless probabilities of its abominable intelligence had brought it to a kind of hopelessness. Had it deduced that its own chances of survival were so limited, and the risks of falling into the greedy hands of the enemy were so great, that

self-destruction was the only logical option?

Then the Carrion understood. The bitter torment of a single snort of derision worked its way up from his diaphragm, bringing with it more blood.

He watched as the glowing battle-automaton stomped back up the companionway and continued its retreat. In fury and

frustration Aulus Scaramanca snarled and opened his claw to ensnare the machine that defied him. The Iron Warrior would destroy the abominable intelligence as he had every other deviant machine that had invaded the forge temple intent upon the destruction of Mars.

And yet, he would not.

The Carrion watched the futility of Scaramanca's efforts as the magnetic forces that he wielded had no effect on the machine.

Impedicus had heated its iron skin, temporarily demagnetising the metal from which it was crafted.

As the glow died away in the cold Martian air, the battle-automata unit and the abominable intelligence that inhabited the

machine retreated into the shadows. The Tabula Myriad was gone, and yet its legacy remained in the wily, fugitive Impedicus. Out there in the darkened wastes of the Red Planet, the Carrion realised that the best hope for the salvation of Mars had fled in order to preserve its own existence. Exterminatus was not the answer - this machine, the result of a thousand generations of heretek thought, was resistant to the insidious scrapecode, and the taint that came with it.

It was among the first. Would it be the last?

He was not alone in this revelation. Closing his claw and with a frustrated, vengeful anger smouldering in the crucibles of his eyes, Aulus Scaramanca turned his great body around.

The Carrion could feel the Iron Warrior watching him, soaking up the misery of the Raven Guard's every movement. The

monstrous machine laughed no more - it needed do nothing else to end his former comrade's life. The molten metal about them hissed and spat, and a hollow emptiness returned to the mill. As the Carrion's systems and flesh failed him, the Knight Errant spasmed and grew still.

It felt like Farinatus. Like being first butcher-baptised by the xenos breg-shei and then butchered again on the cybernetic slab as he was enhanced for further service. A service about to end.

The Carrion felt the quake of Aulus Scaramanca's armoured footfalls finally taking the monstrosity of his form away into the forge temple, leaving the Space Marine alone.

Almost alone.

Swooping down from a mangled stairwell, the cyber-raven Strix returned to its master. Landing on a shattered node-column, the bird tapped on the Knight Errant's ruined plate with the interface pin of its beak, but the Carrion did not respond.

## **TERRA**

<THE FIRST LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS. A BEACON OF FAITH AND FORTITUDE IN AN

IMPERIUM BESMIRCHED. THE ONLY TRUTH SHINING ACROSS A GALAXY SHROUDED IN

LIES. A CANDLE BURNING IN THE EMPTY BLACKNESS OF THE VOID.

FLAMES FALTER. HOPES ARE LOST. BUT ON THE CANDLE BURNS.>

END OF LINE

THE SUN DRIFTED down behind the monstrous fortifications of the Imperial Palace, its bleak radiance casting the crenellations and emplacements of its towering walls in silhouette. With them the hulking, armoured shape of the primarch Rogal Dorn became one with the battlements, one with the craftsmanship and the darkness.

'Anything?' he asked, his voice echoing through the wards and elevated courtyards. He had heard the whisper of trailing robes on the smooth stonework of the ramparts from half a league away. The swollen knuckles of Malcador's hand creaked about his staff.

Zagreus Kane's workings marked the passing seconds like an ancient timepiece.

'My sources inform me of a good deal of vox-chatter and troop movements across the southern polar ice cap,' Malcador replied.

'So your Knight Errant made it to the forge temple.'

'Yes.'

'But,' the Fabricator General said, 'the Vertex remains intact. The planetary spindle turns and the magnetospheric shield protects Mars still.'

'So the son of Corax failed,' Dorn said. It was a statement, not a question, but the Sigillite felt compelled to answer.

'Yes. It's been too long - the Carrion is either captured or dead. I hope for his sake the latter.'

'And for ours,' Dorn said, his words harsher than he intended. 'The abominable intelligence failed, as they are destined to do,'

Kane said, 'and Malcador's man failed with it.'

'It was always a gamble,' the Sigillite said. 'It is the nature of gambles that

they succeed only some of the time. It was still worth the risk - balancing the loss of one life against many.'

'A life that could have been better risked defending these walls,' Dorn told him.

'And I'm sure that your brother Corax would have felt the same way,' Malcador agreed, 'but we are game players not rule makers, my lord. Pieces are risked and victories lost and won. For if the game is not played...'

Rogal Dorn turned. His eyes were the darkness of bolt holes in stone, his unyielding features cracking about them.

'Do not lecture me on the realities of war, regent.'

'But this is not war,' Malcador said, the last light of day probing his hood and revealing thin, drawn lips and perfect teeth. 'Here we live the calm before the storm, the luxury of catastrophe before the fact. Meanwhile, this war is being won or lost beyond these walls, beyond these skies, by your brothers and their sons.'

Dorn's face darkened with a primarch's wrath.

Malcador smiled. 'And I would not presume to lecture you on the realities of war, my friend. I would have you become part of them. War will come to the Solar System. Some might say it has already arrived. There is a traitor stronghold on our very doorstep - a stronghold destined to fall, should Rogal Dorn and his Imperial Fists set foot on the Red Planet.'

The primarch looked from the Sigillite to Zagreus Kane.

'The question of Mars is pressing, my lord,' the Fabricator General said. 'Please, I beg of you. The true servants of the Machine-God await the light of the Emperor's Angels, not the fires of Exterminatus.'

Rogal Dorn turned once more, staring out across the architectural wonder of a palace fortified. It seemed to calm him.

'My father reached out for Mars once,' he said. 'To make Terra and the Red Planet more than the sum of their parts. At Olympus Mons we became one and took our unity to the stars. We shall reach out for Mars once more, and take back that from which we should *never* have been separated.'

'The Omnissiah's blessings be upon you, Lord Dorn,' the Fabricator General said.

'Your orders?' Malcador asked.

'Pass the word, regent,' Rogal Dorn said. 'I would have my captains assembled, and take their council.'

'Yes, my lord,' the Sigillite said before nodding his hood and turning to leave.

As Kane and Malcador left him, the tap of the Sigillite's staff punctuating the primarch's thoughts, Dorn stared up into the deep darkness of the sky. The stars

were coming out, and with them the distant dot of the Red Planet.

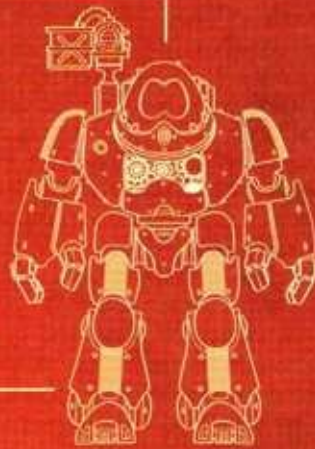


Only the most skilled and promising legionaries are considered for Techmarine training. Candidates must demonstrate an affinity for technological processes and practical problem solving, and a willingness to submit to the supreme authority of the Cult Mechanicum.

This necessitates a certain understanding – namely that the Martian faith in the almighty Ommissiah is reconciled with the Imperial Truth. Techmarines-in-training must be diplomatic enough to overlook this inherent contradiction even as they accept its wisdom.

In passing their final trials, they earn the right to wear the machina opus upon their battleplate and return to the Great Crusade as fully fledged Techmarines.

Based upon a sturdy, reliable chassis, Kastelans pre-date the rise of the Imperium by countless millennia, yet they have been generally overlooked in favour of the more ubiquitous Castellax machines in recent Mechanicum operations. This is largely because they are more difficult to program, and almost impossible to upgrade or customise in order to fulfill specialist mission parameters. Nonetheless, Kastelan maniples can still be found in active service throughout the various forces of the Legio Cybernetica.



POLLEX

#### FIRST MANIPLE, DAEDARII RESERVE COHORT

Following the instructions of Magos Dominus Octal Bool, the Daedarii were stationed at Phaethontis after decades of Crusade operation. At some unspecified time after this, it became apparent that Bool had modified the machines under his command with forbidden technologies derived from the abominable intelligence known as 'the Tabula Myriad'. The Magos Dominus was branded a heretek, and the entire Daedarii cohort removed from active service.

First Maniple served as Bool's guardians both on and off the battlefield, demonstrating an uncharacteristic loyalty to their master. The five Kastelans are named for the fingers of the human hand, and represent the non-standard command protocols employed by Bool in his unspeakable communion with the Myriad.



DEX



IMPEDICUS



NULUS



'LITTLE' AURI

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